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**PROTEST MUSIC IN RESPONSE TO THE UNITED STATES' OPPRESSIVE  
POLITICAL CULTURE: AN ANALYSIS OF BEYONCÉ'S "FREEDOM" AND  
JANELLE MONÁE'S "AMERICANS"**

by

**JESSICA CAROL TORREY**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC IN PARTIAL  
FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF SCIENCE AT HARVEY  
MUDD COLLEGE**

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PROFESSOR YOUYOUNG KANG**

**MAY 10, 2021**

## Abstract

This paper aims to study a popular musical artist's responsibility towards the empowerment of marginalized communities in the United States through an analysis of the songs "Freedom" by Beyoncé and "Americans" by Janelle Monáe. These songs will be analyzed in conjunction with the political climate during the time of their fabrication and release as well as the political climates discussed in the songs themselves. This paper presents a thorough analysis of the lyrical and musical components of both songs as well as an analysis of a specific performance of both songs. These analyses will be presented in conversation with many scholars and authors who have studied and written about the effects of music on various social movements. Insights into these components of "Freedom" and "Americans" will exhibit many ways in which both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe have successfully used their platforms as talented and popular musical artists to address social and political climates that oppress marginalized communities, to take action against oppression and to empower those with marginalized identities.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor and first reader, Professor Charles W. Kamm. Thank you for your continuous support throughout this difficult semester. I thoroughly enjoyed all of our thesis meetings and our discussions about my research.

I would also like to thank my second reader, Professor YouYoung Kang. Thank you for being flexible with the timeline of my thesis and for reading my work.

I would like to thank my partner, Thomas Fleming, for talking through ideas with me, proofreading my thesis and supporting me throughout the writing process. Thank you for being a major source of inspiration and stress relief.

I would like to thank my family for exposing me to so much music throughout my life. I would like to thank my parents for allowing me to discover the power of music and social justice at school as well as at home. I would like to thank my sister for being there for me and playing music with me ever since we were kids.

I would like to thank New Roads School for giving me the drive and commitment towards creating social change. For 13 years, you let me grow up in a supportive environment that constantly emphasized the importance of activism and art.

I would like to thank my dogs, Molly and Lily, for being such a wonderful source of comfort and happiness in my life. Molly, I will miss you forever.

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## Introduction

*Music as a Long-standing Source of Solidarity in Politicized Social Movements and Protests: A*

*Musical Artist's Responsibility Towards the Empowerment of Marginalized Communities*

I decided to study the social effects of modern protest music because, as a musician, I wanted to learn about the ways in which I can use my voice to create positive social change. I wanted to equip myself with further information about how musicians have used their sound to address the world around them in a socially conscious and impactful manner. It takes practice, care and an ongoing desire to learn to effectively address important, yet complex topics related to creating real social change. I wanted to learn from artists who have taken the time and energy, used their resources and power and thought critically enough about the world around them to create something beautifully personal and socially impactful. While there are many ways that social change can be implemented and music can be enjoyed, I found the intersection between music and social justice to be particularly intriguing. Growing up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I have lived through countless injustices occurring around me and have been consistently exposed to protest music in response to these injustices. While protest music is and has been a common response to social unrest throughout history, I wanted to study music that specifically addressed the social and political climate I have experienced from a new perspective. I wanted to learn about what artists have accomplished and what artists are still doing today in hopes to better understand my responsibility as an active member of the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and as a musician.

Music is a powerful tool that can be used to combat oppression. It creates change and raises awareness of past and present-day systemic problems in the United States. As we have seen time and time again, there are huge systemic inequalities that go unaddressed, which can be incredibly detrimental to those experiencing injustices in our society. Studying the ways

movements for social change have used music to make a difference is very enlightening because it shows what can be done to help support a movement. Actively becoming involved in the pursuit to create social change is necessary to stopping injustice. Learning about protest music has brought to light the countless ways people can get involved and avoid being complacent towards issues that matter. Music can raise awareness of movements that aim to work towards social change, can drive political protests aimed to create solidarity between those who experience injustices and to raise awareness of the harm done by those injustices. My analysis of the ways in which music is a source of solidarity during politicized social movements and protests as well as an artist's social responsibility is largely based on the following texts: *Music and Social Movements* by William Danaher, *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection* by Stephanie Shonekan, *Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* by Jodie Taylora, *Fighting The Power: The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics* by John Street and *Sound System: The Political Power of Music* by Dave Randall.

In the text, *Music and Social Movements* by William Danaher, Danaher writes the following:

Music is a part of everyday life; people listen to music of their choosing as well as 'muzak' in stores to malls to doctors' offices. Traditional social movements were able to tap into the 'music of the folk' to their advantage. Current social movements need to do the same, using popular music, today's music of the folk, as a way to create, or tap into, a shared history... Social movement culture that makes good use of popular culture, uses or creates free spaces for activists to come together, kindles emotions ...will come closer to achieving wide-spread change in society. (Danaher 9)

In the United States, it is practically impossible to go a day without being exposed to music in some form. While this exposure might not be conscious or even register in people's minds, music is present and has an active role in our lives. Social movements are able to use this to their advantage. In order to analyze the various aspects of music in social movements, I will address three main components of music in relation to social movements mentioned in the previous quote: the ways in which "traditional social movements were able to tap into 'music of the folk'" or, in other words, the historical significance of protest music; the ways in which "popular music" can be used to "create, or tap into, a shared history," or, in other words, build solidarity within marginalized communities; and the ways in which "social movement culture... makes good use of popular culture, uses or creates free spaces for activists to come together, kindles emotions" and more, or, in other words, the ways in which music addresses the current political climate during active physical protests. These three aspects of protest music have been an important jumping off point in my pursuit to learn more about the social impact of modern popular songs and will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

As mentioned in the previous quote, music has served as a historical means to communicate progressive messages or demand social change. There has been extensive research on the effects of music on political movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the feminist movements, movements for equal pay, workers' rights movements, LGBTQ+ rights movements and more. Some songs that have had an ongoing presence during civil rights protests over the past century are still popular and celebrated today. Below are a few of the countless examples of the documented history of music's correlation to social movements. In the book *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection*, Stephanie Shonekan writes:



[O]nce [soul music] emerged from the underground, it accompanied the Civil Rights Movement almost step by step, its success directly reflecting the giant strides that integration was making (1986, 2). (Shonekan 19)

In Danaher's text discussed previously, he writes:

The women's movement has historically relied on popular music to bring attention to its cause. (Danaher 9)

And in *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making*, Jodie Taylor writes:

Remnants of musically mediated sexual anxieties are littered throughout the history of Western popular musics too. Jazz, for example, induced moral panic due to its supposed 'primitive' sexuality... and provocation of interracial sex and immorality. (Taylor)

It is clear that music has been emerging from a place of social necessity for a while now because the themes addressed within protest music directly correspond to the very specific and visible ways in which marginalized communities were actively oppressed when certain songs were written. These songs were and are used to create solidarity and a sense of community between people experiencing similar types of oppression. At a time when technology was not as widespread, music acted as a form of communication between groups of people with similar marginalized identities and progressive goals.

The previous examples of music's contribution to ongoing social work of the past century may be directly paralleled with the current way that music is being used to create spaces in which marginalized identities can be celebrated. Music actively acts as a source of empowerment throughout protests and events aimed towards supporting the current Black Lives Matter, feminist movements, LGBTQ+ movements and more. Below, in the following paragraph, are

three modern parallel examples of the ways in which music is currently used to create a space which fosters the creativity of social movements.

Shonekan's text discusses the achievements of student activists at Missouri State who protested their school's administration's lack of a response to racially based macro- and microaggressions on campus. They used music as a source of strength and community. When these activists "were resting or not in strategy meetings,... their headphones were always on their heads..." (Shonekan 23). They also used music as a way to create community. "[S]ingers at the camp on the quad filled the space with the beautiful melody... and the rest of the circle of at least a hundred people sang along" (Shonekan 21). In Dave Randall's text, he writes:

The branding of the [Afropunk] festivals, which promote new black music on both sides of the Atlantic, reflect a growing awareness of the intersectional nature of oppression. (Randall 179)

In Danaher's text, the following is written in reference to current women's rights movements:

In the feminist movements, festivals open up space for musical performance to help participants become part of the group and aid long-standing members in socializing new ones. (Danaher 8)

In Jodie Taylor's book, she writes the following:

[M]usic production and consumption as a resource for doing queer identity work and as a catalyst for queer scene-building and world-making. (Taylor 39)

Music can provide a platform for young people of color to make their voices heard. Music can encourage young woman and people of any gender identity to recognize their worth and their power within feminist movements. Music can build identities and create world in which queer

voices are centralized. The power of music is immeasurable. The use of music has been a constant throughout everchanging social environments and fights for social change.

One reason why music is so commonly used throughout social movements is because of its ability to transmit messages to and educate those who want to be an active participant in these social movements. In Danaher's previously mentioned book, the author discusses how "music can act to transcend differences and bridge the gap between disparate groups and generations around a common cause" (Danaher 2) and how "music helps diffuse culture across societies and acts as a platform to establish social movement allies" (Danaher 9). Music can be used as a platform to educate those with privileged identities who are not able to completely understand the hardships of marginalized communities, but can better use their undeserved power to support marginalized communities when they are more informed. Music can also be used as a form of individual solidarity with one's own identity. It is often easier to appreciate and celebrate marginalized aspects of one's own identity when these same aspects of someone else's identity are being publicly celebrated through music. In these ways, music is used as a source of empowerment with regards to an individual's relationship with their own identity, a source of solidarity between individuals within marginalized communities and a form of solidarity between allies and marginalized communities. These highly impactful aspects of music will be discussed in more detail in the proceeding paragraphs.

As mentioned previously, a song may address pride in an identity that someone might be feeling insecure about due to external pressures and prejudices. This may allow people with marginalized identities to better understand themselves and appreciate their own identities. As Jodie Taylor writes, referencing DeNora's research: "Musical materials provide terms and templates for elaborating self-identity – for identity's identification" (DeNora 2000, p. 68)"

(Taylor 42). Appreciating and loving one's own identity is an important part of protesting bigotry that is aimed towards hurting these identities. While it can be extremely difficult for an individual to love and accept the marginalized aspects of their identities in a world that constantly tells marginalized groups that they do not belong, music can act as a way to fight against the notion that these identities should not be valued and celebrated

While music's impact on an individual's relationship with their own identities is an important part of what makes music so powerful, music also serves as a way to cultivate a "shared history," as mentioned in the initial excerpt presented from William Danaher's text. Creating a "shared history" between individuals within marginalized communities is a huge aspect of why protest music is so important and can enact so much social change. Popular music can act as a powerful force that brings people together and creates a sense of community among people who all agree with or can relate to the sentiments being communicated in the lyrics of a song. This is especially true during physical protests. Protests allow marginalized groups of people and allies to physically come together and vocally express their disdain of specific social injustices. Many authors, including Stephanie Shonekan, Jodie Taylor and William Danaher, who have extensively studied the effects of music on social movements, have commented on the power that music has in creating a "collective identity" during protests:

[Music's] cultural significance is as powerful as ever... music certainly appeared to be a soundtrack for both the collective and the individuals. (Shonekan 18)

[M]arginalized and discontented groups of people generate connectedness and collective distinction via the meaning they imbue within popular music forms and associated extra-musical texts. (Taylor 52)

Collective identity often arises from ritual events where music can create new meaning or maintain old ones (Taylor and Whittier 1995). Music in the form of song is important in developing a shared identity because singing can bring people together.

(Danaher 2)

It has been found, time and time again, that music allows people to come together as a collective throughout protests. People connect song lyrics to their own experiences as a collective during protests, which creates a shared experience of recognition of one another's hardships as well as strengths.

When groups sing along to the words to a popular song that is blasting over a loudspeaker during a protest, this creates a fun, energized and inclusive space for people to celebrate their identities. The same authors mentioned previously have also discussed the positive atmosphere that music is able to create during protests:

The music calms me and I know the lyrics to most of the songs, so I can sing along, which is a self-soothing tactic. (Abigail Hollis qtd. by Shonekan 26)

[T]he relaxed atmosphere created through music can attract participants who might otherwise demure. (Danaher 5)

The participation in musical performance and rhythm of the music can result in emotional reactions among participants and lead to group identity... Speed and repetition of the rhythm may also contribute to more intense interactions and increased bonding among participants (Gramsci 2000; Lipsitz 1994). (Danaher 3)

Actively and physically protesting against injustices can be mentally, physically and emotionally exhausting. Music may act as a source of encouragement, relaxation and pride during difficult times. Using popular music as a source of inspiration during protests may also encourage more

people to join the fight. It can be intimidating to join a protest, especially when surrounded by strangers. However, playing music may serve as a way to mitigate discomfort and allow activists who are new to a scene to feel comfortable in the space that has been created during a protest. Encouraging people to sing along to popular music may allow people to feel like they belong in their space and are valued. Even if someone does not know the lyrics of a song being enjoyed by surrounding protesters, they may still be able to respond to the rhythmic components of music being played. The synchronization of physical movements through rhythmic music allows people to connect on a generally unconscious physical level. Physical proximity to others with shared values allow safe spaces to be built around the values of a particular movement.

While music does create solidarity within inclusive spaces that allow activists to come together, it also “serves as an important mechanism for solidarity when participants move beyond free spaces to more contested ones... music provides a means for solidarity around shared causes and resistance from those who prefer the status quo” (Danaher 1). Music serves as a way to disrupt the status quo as a collective. The spaces in which protest music enters are not always safe. Protest music is largely unwanted and unwelcomed among those with bigoted values who benefit from the injustices placed onto marginalized groups. However, even if protest music is unwelcomed, it still may start a dialogue about progressive ideas among those with bigoted values or between marginalized groups and those who contest the celebration of marginalized identities. As Dave Randall writes, “whether or not people agree, you will at least start a discussion” (Randall 177).

While protests do create a space in which marginalized identities are celebrated, this space is often created in opposition to a larger surrounding community or system of oppression. It is important to recognize that music is often used in celebration of marginalized identities, but

these celebrations are in response to a generally exclusive or hostile environment. Attending a protest can provide a source of joy and purpose, but these protests are in response to immense amounts of intergenerational pain and suffering. Historical pain and suffering cannot be repaired through music and may never be able to be repaired at all. The progressive nature of protest music does not erase past injustices that have oppressed marginalized communities.

Despite the hard work that has gone into fighting for human rights for all and advocating for a diverse, inclusive environment, there still exists many long-lasting inequities throughout the culture of the United States. All of the authors that I am basing my research off of address many inequities throughout U.S. culture that have long standing histories. None of them ignore the ongoing nature of oppression or the oppressive state of U.S. politics today, even though positive change in some aspects of U.S. culture has been made. For instance, in *A Rhetorical Analysis of Beyoncé's "Freedom": An Examination of Black College Women's Experiences at Predominately White Institutions*, Phelps-Ward, Allen and Howard write:

Despite legislation and institutional policies that have led to desegregated institutions, affirmative action, and programs designed to promote equality and equity for all, inequity, racism, and sexism persist. (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 5)

And in *In Sound System: The Political Power of Music*, Dave Randall writes:

Significant barriers remain to any semblance of democratic participation in culture: unequal access to resources, long hours worked by low-paid workers, inadequate childcare provision, sexism and racial prejudice, to name a few. (Randall 171)

The fight for social justice is ongoing. Many historical injustices are still in full effect today and even though there have been systemic initiatives to offset injustices in the form of reparations, the repercussions of these injustices still prevail throughout the culture of the United States.

Along with the recognition of ongoing social injustices, it is also important to note that, in the same way that music can create and build spaces where marginalized communities feel celebrated, the use of music that promotes bigoted values or ignores a history of bigotry can cause profound harm. For instance, the national anthem is often performed or played at a wide array of community organized events. While this song is celebrated by many U.S. Americans, its racist lyrics often create a hostile space in which people of color may feel unsafe or marginalized. In Stephanie Shonekan's text, she writes: "[V]aried positions on the national anthem are logical in a country where the embers of segregation and Jim Crow still glow, with the potential at every turn to spark up into a furnace." It is no surprise that "activists... turn away from national songs like these. Yet songs and their messages of empowerment and pride remain a critical part of the movement" (Shonekan 23). Even though I will be celebrating music for its influential power throughout my thesis, it must be noted that music can also be used to promote bigotry and as a source of hate. Music's power and influence can be used in a multitude of ways. However, as mentioned in the previous quote, empowering music still remains a "critical part" of social movements.

Prior to presenting my thoughts throughout the body of my thesis, it is also important to recognize that, while music does promote environments in which activists may thrive, there are countless other important components of protests and social movements besides music. The study of the work that activists perform is incredibly complex and cannot be fully understood solely through an analysis of protest music. It is not just music that gets activists and marginalized communities through difficult times. Also, there are countless ways in which musicians can use their voices and their talents to implement change. The information provided



throughout my thesis is only a small part of the ways in which musicians can use their voices to create positive social change.

That being said, many scholars, activists and musicians do agree that music embodies political values and can be an insightful way of studying a nation's political climate. In *Fighting the Power: The Politics of Music and the Music of Politics*, John Street writes:

[M]usic *embodies* political values and experiences, and *organizes* our response to society as political thought and action. Music does not just provide a vehicle of political expression, it *is* that expression (Street 1).

Music is a powerful force that can be used to organize social movements as well as learn about the history of previous or ongoing social movements. I chose to analyze protest music due to its ability to embody and express the ever-changing political values found within a nation's culture. Throughout the writing of my thesis, I hope to learn more about ongoing injustices that have been creatively addressed by current musical artists as well as about the way musical artists go about addressing these injustices.

Now, I will circle back to part of the first quote presented in the beginning of this paper: "social movement culture that makes good use of popular culture... will come closer to achieving wide-spread change in society" (Danaher 9). Social movements are able to make exceptionally good use of popular culture when popular culture addresses topics that coincide with the goals of particular social movements. This is where the role of the popular musical artist comes in. Countless injustices exist and prevail throughout the United States. Popular musicians in the United States have a unique platform in which they can influence the nation's culture. In a world where information about the current state of social injustices is so readily available, artists have a choice. They can choose to isolate their endeavors to the creation of sound, or they can

choose to stay informed, educate themselves and use their voices as musicians to actively mitigate potential harm and advocate for social justice. As discussed previously, even though music is commonly used to advocate for social justice, it is important to recognize that a song may consciously or unconsciously support oppressive values and may be used in movements that aim to diminish the rights of marginalized communities. Popular musical artists have a responsibility to consciously, carefully and creatively use the power of music and the platform they have been given to actively advocate for social justice and lift the voices of marginalized communities.

While it is certainly possible for musical artists to be superficially or financially successful in their careers without being socially conscious, I argue that popular musical artists cannot be truly successful unless they use their music and/or their platform as a musician in attempts to benefit marginalized communities and promote progressive social change. In the chapter of *Sound System: The Political Power of Music* entitled “Rebel Music Manifesto,” Dave Randall writes:

[S]ociety needs the artist and it has the right to demand of [them] that [they] should be conscious of [their] social function. This right was never doubted in any rising, as opposed to decaying, society. It was the ambition of the artist full of the ideas and experiences of [their] time not only to represent reality but to shape it. (Randall 176)

Famous artists have immense amounts of power in popular culture and it is not unreasonable to expect them to be conscious of this power.

A musician’s words, both within their lyrics and in their interactions in the public eye, are highlighted and passed down through generations. Because of this, it is an artist’s responsibility

to choose their words with care. Because their words have so much power, they are more easily able to influence the political realm. Dave Randall also writes:

[W]e need to consider how we can use music to open minds and give confidence to people in our communities and political movements... to argue that “politics should be left to the politicians” is to argue for things to remain as they are. (Randall 176)

Popular musicians must use their voices to express their beliefs beyond the musical realm. While this takes active work and consistent critical thought, which can be difficult at times, they have been given a platform in which they are able to influence others and they have the responsibility to use that platform to the advantage of marginalized communities. Desiring more popularity among audiences and individuals who do not care about supporting marginalized voices is not an excuse to cater to bigoted voices.

Musicians must always be consciously examining the ways in which their voice could have or has caused harm and could either avoid perpetuating this harm or repair the harm caused. Dave Randall also writes: "We must feed our creativity with our experiences of political struggle and vice-versa" (Randall 186). The relationship between music and “political struggle” is a two-way street. Oppressive political climates stimulate creative responses and these creative responses, in turn, affect political climates. Musicians must join the fight in advocating for any type of social justice they are equipped and able to fight for. A musician's beliefs and their response to abusive political environments will be apparent in their lyrics, music, performances and their general social impact. Dave Randall also writes: “Even when music isn’t directly political, we can still engage in the battle for context – for the perceived values of the musicians who create it” (Randall 178). Even if a musician’s lyrics are not directly political, their perceived values and beliefs are often spread throughout the culture they are a part of whether they want

their views to be public or not. Because of this, it is a popular musician's responsibility to actively state their views and beliefs.

I will discuss music's cultural significance in social movements through the analysis of two songs written by two women of color in the past five years in response to the United States' toxic political climate: "Freedom" from Beyoncé's album, *Lemonade*, and "Americans" from Janelle Monáe's album, *Dirty Computer*. I have addressed music's place in the history of political protests, introduced motivating factors behind creating songs like "Freedom" and "Americans," discussed music as a form of solidarity and examined the political responsibility of highly publicized musical artists. In the body of my thesis, I will use these concepts and related literature to provide an extensive analysis of the lyrics and musical components of both "Freedom" and "Americans" as well as an analysis of a specific performance of both these songs and their impact on the culture of the United States. The lyrics of "Freedom" and "Americans" can be found in the appendix of this paper, the songs themselves can be found on most music streaming services and videos of performances of these pieces can be found online and in links provided in the bibliography.

Music is a powerful artform that must be created and displayed with purpose and care. Music by popular artists has the ability to create social change and positively impact the lives of people with marginalized identities. As American artists both born in the 1980s and popularized in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe's music has impacted and continues to impact the lives of people across the nation. By promoting solidarity during social movements that aim to raise the voices of marginalized communities, by critically addressing the political climate they are living in and by recognizing artists who broke barriers before them through their music,

I argue that they have successfully used their platform as popular modern musical artists to create positive social change.

*Introducing Beyoncé's "Freedom" and Janelle Monáe's "Americans"*

"Freedom" was released in April 2016, preceding the 2016 presidential election.

"Freedom" and Beyoncé's entire album, *Lemonade*, brought the voices of women of color to the forefront of U.S. popular culture at a time where both women and people of color were constantly being silenced. While people of color, woman and other marginalized groups have been silenced by people in power throughout the history of the United States, during the 2016 presidential campaign and election, marginalized groups experienced further publicized acts of discrimination. Acts of prejudice being backed by a popular presidential candidate at the time, Donald Trump, falsely and nationally justified racist, sexist, homophobic and classist values. The consistent and public encouragement of violence aimed towards harming people of color and woman from a nationally recognized figure incited further bigoted acts from both individuals and institutions.

Songs like "Freedom" actively protest and oppose racism, while also acknowledging the long history of hard work put in by people of color to create a more equitable society. In an article using "Freedom" to analyze Black women's experiences at predominately white institutions, Phelps-Ward, Allen and Howard agree that common themes throughout "Freedom" include "unity, frustration, resistance and resilience, struggle, and disposability" (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 9). "Freedom" includes a discussion of the importance of political protest, a recognition of the long history of slavery in the United States and its repercussions, a creative analysis of the word 'freedom' itself, a criticism of present-day racially charged stereotypes, a

recognition of the ongoing prevalence of police brutality in the United States, a creative critique of the prison industrial system as well as themes relating to resilience in the face of racism and sexism. “Freedom” also makes references to and samples other noteworthy songs that contribute to the discussion of the aforementioned themes. The way this piece was performed, specifically at the 2016 BET awards, gives further insight into the symbolism contained throughout the song. This performance also created a new platform in which “Freedom” can be accessed and celebrated. These lyrical themes, musical references and Beyoncé’s 2016 BET awards performance will be analyzed throughout the body of this paper, along with the overwhelmingly positive impact that the creation of “Freedom” has had on marginalized groups in the United States.

The bridge of “Freedom” is sung by Kendrick Lamar, a prominent musical figure and vocal supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement. He used his platform to write songs about institutionalized racism throughout his 2015 album, “To Pimp A Butterfly.” He is a well-known advocate for freedom for people of color in the United States. Featuring him on the bridge of this track adds further meaning to the song due to his long history of supporting marginalized communities through music. Kendrick Lamar’s song, “Alright” in the aforementioned album has become one of the most influential anthems used to create solidarity throughout the Black Lives Matter movement. When interviewing college students, Stephanie Shonekan found that some view “Alright” as “the black activist national anthem” (Shonekan 25). She also interviewed a student named Asha Bashir that stated the following:

Whenever I was feeling down throughout this difficult time, I resorted to playing [“Alright”]. It never failed to uplift my spirits and would constantly remind me that with

solidarity and support for and from my people that we could and would never lose” (qtd. in Shonekan 25).

Kendrick Lamar consistently addresses modern social and political landscapes in the United States in his music. Beyoncé’s collaboration with Kendrick Lamar in this track is notable because she is adding another voice to the conversation. While music is often collaborative, musicians do not always seek the physical voice of another musician specifically due to this musician's commitment to addressing systemic racism throughout their music. As Dave Randall writes, “good music relies on successful collaboration. It is the result of people working together to express shared feelings” (Randall 174). It is clear that Beyoncé’s choice to collaborate with Kendrick Lamar was in direct response to his social consciousness and the care with which he goes about writing and performing music. They are singing of their shared feelings in response to the ongoing racism that has surrounded them throughout their lives. The sense of support and solidarity provided by the lyrics, music, music videos and performances of musicians who address institutionalized racism have allowed people of color to find strength and empowerment through indulging in and appreciating these art forms. Both the audiences of Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar as well as Janelle Monáe have found great strength in their music during times of stress, social unrest, injustice and oppression.

Almost exactly two years after the release of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, Janelle Monáe released *Dirty Computer*. As a pansexual woman of color, Janelle Monáe is able to personally address the oppression placed upon people of color, woman and the queer community in the United States. The concluding track of this album, “Americans,” shines light on injustices related to the wage gap, homophobia, workforce inequalities, police brutality, the racist history of the Pledge of Allegiance, the sexist nature of gender roles, the intergenerational spread of bigoted

values, socioeconomic inequalities, immigration policies and more. “Americans” also addresses themes of empowerment, such as the importance of solidarity and the value of confidence in one’s own identity despite the prevalence of bigotry. “Americans” includes powerful and noteworthy samples of Pastor Sean McMillan’s voice speaking of some of the aforementioned injustice as well as many musical themes inspired by Prince. These musical elements both create an aesthetically and rhythmically beautiful sound, while also acknowledging people of color who have used their platform to create positive change before Janelle Monáe. Janelle Monáe’s 2018 performance of “Americans” on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert also shines a light on the ways in which a musical performance can add further meaning to an already substantive song. These lyrical themes, musical references and Janelle Monáe’s 2018 performance of “Americans” will be analyzed thoroughly in the body of this paper.

An analysis of the social impact of “Americans” in relation to LGBTQ+ representation will also be presented along with a discussion of its general nationwide influence. Queer musicians have the power to create spaces in which those with queer identities feel seen and safe. In Jodie Taylor’s *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making*, Taylor writes:

[M]usic – particularly popular musics from the twentieth century onwards – has “provided an arena where marginalized voices can be heard and sexual identities shaped, challenged, and renegotiated” (2006, p. 117). ... Through music, queer bodies, subjectivities, desires and social relations are frequently constructed, affected and performed, and queer coalescence around particular musics has made space for, and temporally mapped otherness in, aggressively heteronormative cultural landscapes. (Taylor 49)



Music created by queer artists have been celebrated for decades, however, the identities of queer artists are often dismissed. Queer music that explicitly includes themes of LGBTQ+ sexualities creates a platform for people within LGBTQ+ communities to feel heard. Especially in the United States, where queer bodies are and have been subjected to ample amounts of violence and hatred and are deprived of basic human rights, music may serve as a form of external validation and recognition. Explicitly queer music also serves to dismantle heteronormative values that are constantly perpetuated throughout the media and as part of intergenerational U.S. American values. These are some of the many ways in which artists like Janelle Monáe are able to use their identities and their power as musicians to support marginalized communities. In an article entitled *LGBTQ+ Representation and Activism in the Music Industry*, Joey Tan writes the following:

For those artists who can safely be open about LGBTQ+ topics, they must use their public platform to initiate change by encouraging visibility, engaging in anti-discriminatory language and behavior, and sharing LGBTQ+ positive messages through music. (Tan 4)

Many sociologists, activists and musicians agree that artists must use their platforms to create a positive public image of the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ communities throughout the United States are constantly dismissed, undervalued and ostracized from mainstream popular culture. As mentioned in Carmiya Baskin's article, *Politics, Passion, and Pop: Janelle Monáe's "Dirty Computer,"* Janelle Monáe's representation of queer identities is extremely valuable "in a world where Trump's presidency is slowly eliminating the achievements of marginalized groups" (Baskin).

The creation and release of Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* in 2018 was in direct response to the oppressive political environment also addressed throughout *Lemonade* in 2016. In this way, both "Freedom" and "Americans" are modern political protest songs written in response to a similar, yet rapidly changing political environment. Both artists, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, have been very vocal about the detrimental impact of Donald Trump's presidency and have used their platform to speak out against discriminatory values promoted by Donald Trump through their music as well as public speeches.

In an article published by *Elle* magazine, Melissa Harris-Perry discusses Beyoncé's appearance at a concert just before the 2016 election, about a half of a year after the release of *Lemonade*: "In mid-October, she took the stage at a Tidal benefit concert and made an impassioned, intergenerational public appeal for the participation of young black people in the 2016 election" (Harris-Perry). In this article, Beyoncé is cited saying:

I know this year has been extremely hard for us. I know sometimes I've felt powerless and frustrated. There's been so much negativity and nonsense. It can be easy to feel hopeless and want to just block the world out, but doing nothing right now is not an option, y'all. I know it seems like things are bad, but if you think they can't get worse, just ask your grandparents... Remember, Barack Obama is our president. You made that happen. Young people made that happen. We are not helpless. The fire is still burning. Please go out and vote this November. So many people have died and sacrificed so much for us to have our voice. We have to use it. Get in formation. Use our voices to do something great for our children. (qtd. in Melissa Harris-Parry)

Here, Beyoncé is both addressing how tiring and difficult it is to be a person of color in the United States, while also encouraging young people of color to use their voices to create positive

change. While the responsibility of creating positive social change often falls upon people of color and this should not be ignored, the voices and votes of young people of color do have the power to make a difference. Though the public presentation of these words, she is exemplifying the very sense of strength and resilience she is promoting. Even though Donald Trump won the presidential vote, her words still rang true after the election. While it can be painstakingly difficult to stand strong in the face of a nation and a president with an active disregard for the lives of marginalized communities, she continued to use her voice, her identity and her platform to promote equity.

The release of *Dirty Computer* occurred about a year and a half into Donald Trump's presidency and its release was even sped up due to the urgency of the messages contained within the lyrics during this time. In an interview published by *Vulture* magazine, Hunter Harris cited Janelle Monáe speaking of her release of *Dirty Computer* in the following quote:

The election is when I knew it had to be done. My activism, and my job, and my purpose as an artist is to figure out how I can celebrate those who are marginalized, and who are oppressed, and I just feel like that's been my calling throughout all of my work.... How I could celebrate us during the time when the leader of the free world, and those of positions of power, made it very clear that we don't give a fuck about you. (qtd. in Harris)

Similar to Beyoncé, Janelle Monáe also used Donald Trump's presidency to fuel a creative desire to create political protest music. While as "a young, black, queer woman in America, at any moment, [she] could have [her] rights taken away from [her]," she has benefited greatly from her celebrity status. Her fame has given her "opportunities to travel and go see the world" and has allowed her to be heard more than others with those same marginalized identities (CBS

News). Janelle Monáe also holds herself accountable for the ways in which she uses her platform, while also creating music that is true to her own identity as a musician. In the same article mentioned previously, Joey Tan expresses the belief that “anyone with such an influence over people’s emotions and beliefs must use their following as a platform for advocacy” (Tan 4). Both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe seem to agree that, as artists with celebrity status and a platform that allows their voices to spread throughout the nation, they have the responsibility to use their voices to empower oppressed communities, celebrate marginalized identities and oppose bigotry in any and all forms.

Both artists continued to promote equity even after the devastating realization that Donald Trump was going to become the official president of the United States. While both “Freedom” and “Americans” were written in opposition to values associated with Donald Trump’s presidency, both albums also address the long history of racism and sexism in the United States. Both songs promote the recognition of marginalized people who have used their power to create positive change throughout history and promote the importance of using one’s own platform to create positive change.

Both album titles, *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer*, are directly related to the ways in which women of color are treated in the United States. Beyoncé’s album, *Lemonade*, was named in reference to the idiom, “when life gives you lemons, make lemonade” and the quality of life forced upon women of color in the United States. Women of color have been “served lemons” in relation to the racial and gendered oppression they have experienced. They are affected both by racism and sexism, which puts them at a large disadvantage in the United States. Despite this, Beyoncé and other women of color are still sometimes able to make their own metaphorical “lemonade,” which shows incredible resilience, strength and power.

This album title also references Beyoncé's grandmother's life as well as her actual recipe for lemonade, which Beyoncé recites in the visual album accompanying *Lemonade*. "Lemonade came with a 'visual album,' which was really a 65-minute art piece that's easily one of the decade's best films...Gutsy and gorgeous, *Lemonade* the film flouts genre, just like the R&B-rock-country-soul album" (Wilkinson). In Beyoncé's visual album, the lemonade recipe she recites is presented as follows:

Take one pint of water, add a half pound of sugar, the juice of eight lemons, the zest of half lemon. Pour the water into one, then to another several times. Strain through a clean napkin. Grandmother. The alchemist. You spun gold out of his hard life. Conjured beauty from the things I left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kitchen. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your own daughter, who then passed them down to her daughter.

(Beyoncé, 2016)

Here, Beyoncé is using the drink, lemonade, as a symbol for healing and resilience. She is comparing her grandmother to an alchemist, someone who is able to create "gold," "beauty" and "healing" in the face of constant hardships. This quote addresses the intergenerational trauma as well as intergenerational beauty that is passed down through generations upon generations of women of color. The recipe detailing how to make lemonade was passed down to Beyoncé from her grandmother, along with the strength and courage that it takes to metaphorically make lemons out of lemonade in a society that devalues the work of women of color.

Janelle Monáe named her album *Dirty Computer* in reference to the way she feels as though she is perceived as a woman of color in the United States. She feels as though she is a computer that contains "bugs." She is representing herself as an imperfect "dirty" being both

because she is perceived as such by those who promote racist, sexist and homophobic ideals, but also because she wants to promote the idea that imperfections are beautiful. In an interview on CBS News, Janelle Monáe is cited saying the following in response to being asked how she came up with the expression “dirty computer” by interviewer, Anthony Mason:

Dirty computers are inspiring to me. People say that these dirty computers, these humans, have these bugs and these viruses. The things that make them unique are looked at as negatives. But dirty computers look at their bugs and their viruses as attributes, as features, as added value to this country, to this society. It's just saying that I'm a dirty computer. But I too am American. (Janelle Monáe interviewed by Anthony Mason on CBS News)

Uniqueness seems to inspire Janelle Monáe. By listening to and analyzing the lyrics presented throughout *Dirty Computer*, it is clear that Janelle Monáe is not afraid to stand out or show off her unique identities. The aspects of Janelle Monáe's identity that those with bigoted values might see as “dirty,” such as her gender, her skin color and her sexuality, are beautiful and deserve to be celebrated. She knows that she is a valued member of the culture of the United States and is allowed to be proud of her U.S. American identity despite the hurtful labels that others have given to her in relation to her identity. She is an American no matter what anyone says. This idea ties into many themes presented throughout “Americans.”

Both “Freedom” and “Americans” are anthems that seek to celebrate marginalized identities and empower oppressed communities. Further analysis of the lyrics, musical components, performance style and social impact of these two masterpieces in the body of this paper will exemplify how meaningful and socially powerful music, specifically Beyoncé's “Freedom” and Janelle Monáe's “Americans” can be.

## Methodology

In my thesis, I chose to analyze the lyrics, music, performance and publicized social impact of Beyoncé’s “Freedom” and Janelle Monáe’s “Americans.” I analyzed these aspects of “Freedom” and “Americans” because the lyrics, music, performances, and publicized social impact of a song are some of the major components of music in general. I chose to study these two popular artists because their impact has been thoroughly documented in peer reviewed scholarly articles, publicized by well-known magazines, talk shows and concerts, and commented on in countless professional and non-professional blogs. Prior to conducting my analysis of the aforementioned pieces, I read the following pieces of literature to decide what components of a song would provide extensive insight into their social impact: *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making* by Jodie Taylor, *Music and Social Movements* by William F. Danaher and chapter eleven of *Sound System: The Political Power of Music* by Dave Randall, entitled “Rebel Music Manifesto.” These texts gave me insight into effective ways in which I could analyze modern popular music.

In Jodie Taylor’s *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making*, Taylor writes the following, quoting Lawrence Grossberg:

Popular musics in particular are intricate systems of social practice and process usually accompanied by lyrics, dance, fashion, video and other media texts, and thus popular music necessarily incorporates all of these and acknowledges that it is not only sonic, but also visual, kinetic and verbal modes of signification that make it such an appealing – and complex – social phenomenon. Popular musics, argues Lawrence Grossberg, “cannot be

studied in isolation, either from other forms and practices of popular culture or from the structures and practices of everyday life” (2002, p. 27). (Taylor 42)

While a song can be superficially enjoyed and appreciated in isolation from popular culture, a song must be analyzed in congruence with popular culture, the song’s accompanying lyrics and any visual symbolism that is published along with the music in order to get a more complete picture of the artists intentions, ideas and impact. Music is always created within some sort of context, whatever it may be, and analyzing without this context does not often provide enough information to grasp the meaning and intent behind a song. The dance moves associated with a music video or performance can allow listeners to derive further meaning from the song itself. Physical movements can be very purposeful and convey a message that might not be directly perceptible simply through the music alone. An artist’s fashion is another outlet in which an idea in a song can be expressed. There have been continued attempts by those in power to censor and control female bodies. By analyzing the appearance of popular musicians, I can discover new ways in which subtle choices related to fashion can send complex messages and communicate substantive ideas.

Lyrics are able to explicitly communicate desired messages and are accessible to the general public. Listeners have access to the lyrics of popular songs through the official recording of a song on the internet and through various streaming services. Listeners can come up with their own interpretations of each song. Both of these songs address issues that large portions of the United States population can relate to or be sympathetic to, which makes the lyrics interpretable by the general public. Because these two songs are so popular, there are many sources available that have translated these lyrics into different languages. This allows listeners who do not speak English to interpret and appreciate the meaning behind the lyrics without



needing to understand the meaning of every word being sung. “Freedom” and “Americans” are both lyrically dense. Each line conveys a new and substantial idea with an ample amount of subtext. Both songs reflect on nuances within the history of the United States. They effectively and creatively criticize the way this history has affected marginalized groups. Most of the lyrics contained in both “Freedom” and “Americans” can be thoroughly analyzed in terms of their lyricism, symbolism and cultural references.

In *Music and Social Movements*, William F. Danaher outlines how important song lyrics are when they are tied to the goals of a social movement:

Music acts as a catalyst to create and enhance... elements of social movement culture.

Lyrics often reflect the feelings underlying a particular social movement culture beyond an individual level by framing key issues, making them politically important and leading to collective consciousness (Flacks 1999; W. Gamson 1992b; Goffman 1981; Lichterman 1999; Street 2003; Mills 1939, 1940). (Danaher 7)

Lyrics, such as those present in both “Freedom” and “Americans” do reflect feelings underlying many social movements. Both songs reflect many of the goals of both the Black Lives Matter movement as well as many feminist movements. While both of these songs are predominantly sung by an individual, they incorporate themes that affect the masses. Both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe also collaborated with many other musicians during the creation of “Freedom” and “Americans,” respectively. Because their lyrics include themes that much of the nation can relate to, both pieces have become politically important in leading to collective consciousness.

I also chose to analyze the notable musical components of both “Freedom” and “Americans” because this is another main component of a song that is both able to convey

implicit messages and create an enjoyable listening experience. Both Janelle Monáe and Beyoncé are popularly considered to be talented musicians. They have created compelling musical compositions that both make use of common musical tropes and share instrumentation with historical music, while also incorporating their own unique style. This allows listeners to interact with the musical components of their songs with both ease and engagement. The sampling and musical styles used within both “Freedom” and “Americans” have compelling histories and can be a source of further exploration for listeners who enjoy creating connections between different musical artists. Because both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe have received critical acclaim for their work, their music is well known by the public and easy to find. Their music is readily available and enjoyable to listen to. Even without access to the internet or popular streaming services, people may be exposed to Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe through their music's appearance in public places, such as in stores on the radio and in protests or public events. People are able to use music, such as “Freedom” and “Americans,” to create community because their lyrics are set to music that is accessible in so many ways. People can listen to and sing these songs as a group, in solidarity with anyone who experiences the hardships discussed within the lyrics. While these songs can be vocally challenging when attempting to sing each note on pitch and the melody lines of both songs do showcase both artist's impressive vocal abilities, the melodies throughout both “Freedom” and “Americans” are catchy, repetitive and fairly simple. Their melodies can be sung by groups of people who do not have any experience singing.

Along with musical components, I also decided to analyze a specific performance of both “Freedom” and “Americans.” The way in which an artist decides to present their piece to the public can give a lot of insight into how they want their music to be interpreted and how they

interpret their own music. Artists can include visual effects and incorporate specific dance moves in their performances to emphasize a specific point or physically represent symbolism within the lyrics of their songs. Dance is often an important aspect of musical performances. By purposefully selecting certain dancers to accompany both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe in their performances of “Freedom” and “Americans,” these artists allow people with underrepresented identities to appear in mainstream media. Performances can also act as a way for a performer to showcase the songs they think are the most important to put on display. While both *Lemonade* by Beyoncé and *Dirty Computer* by Janelle Monáe contain a multitude of other songs that have been critically acclaimed, these artists chose to perform "Freedom" and "Americans," respectively, at specific highly publicized venues in order to use their platform to present ideas with high social impact.

Artists can also use their performances to showcase their style and appearance. Because Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe are both women of color and the physical appearance of women of color is so often scrutinized and criticized, these artists must be purposeful in the presentations of their physical bodies. By breaking the barriers placed on women of color and their appearances, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe are paving the way for young girls of color to be confident in expressing their own identities. In *Music and Social Movements*, William F. Danaher also writes:

The use of performance within a defined space can maintain boundaries between dominant and subordinate groups and act as a staging area where subordinate groups can present themselves to sympathetic members of the dominant group. Within these free spaces, an alternative frame presented through music may help the subordinate group define their identity (Gamson 1998; Snow and Benford 1992). (Danaher 5)

Here, Danaher is outlining the importance of performance as a method to create a public space dedicated to marginalized communities. Through their performances, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe are able present their ideas to live audiences. These audiences may contain people who act in direct opposition to the ideas addressed in the lyrics of songs like “Freedom” or “Americans.” In this case, a performance may act as a disruption of bigotry or serve as an enlightening experience that inspires someone to reassess their values. The viewing of a performance could serve as an introduction to various forms of oppression to those who do not regularly experience identity-based marginalization and/or are generally unaware of its existence.

Audiences may also include people who are unfamiliar with a performer’s music, in which case, their performance can act as a form of exposure to new music and new ideas. Their audiences may also contain people who support their work but do not necessarily take action towards preventing any of the injustices discussed in their lyrics. A physical representation of a musician’s words can emphasize the importance of the messages they are trying to convey. A performance may allow audience members to delve deeper into their interpretations of a song by educating those who may be unaware of the meaning behind certain lyrics and by inspiring people to further research the meaning behind certain lyrics after the show. A moving performance may also inspire people to take action in relation to the injustices presented in the lyrics of a song.

A performer’s audience might also include those who actively act in solidarity with groups who face the types of oppression discussed in the lyrics of a song. This is often referred to as “allyship.” Allyship is an ongoing process in which someone with identity-based privilege acts in solidarity with those who do not benefit from that same privilege. When watching a live

performance, those who participate in active allyship can still learn a lot, as allyship is a process that involves constant listening and learning. Audience members who aim to be active allies may be exposed to new ways they can act in solidarity with marginalized groups or new ways to support underserved and underrepresented communities.

While practicing ongoing allyship is an important part in supporting oppressed communities, people who act in solidarity with marginalized groups but are not a part of these groups are still unable to fully understand the hardships placed on those without the same privileges. Audiences are also full of people who can directly relate to the hardships expressed throughout the lyrics of songs like “Freedom” and “Americans.” Audience members who identify as a person of color, audience members who are not cisgender men, audience members who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community and audience members who experience socioeconomic hardships often feel empowered by songs like “Freedom” and “Americans.” As women of color, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe are able to authentically communicate the oppression placed upon women of color in U.S. culture on a personal level. They both use their platforms to celebrate their own identities and celebrate other women of color who are consistently marginalized due to the prevalence of racism and sexism in U.S. culture. As a queer woman of color, Janelle Monáe is also able to use her platform as a performer to address queer issues on a personal level. The ways in which marginalized groups interact with Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe’s music will be further discussed throughout the body of my thesis. While the preceding list of potential audience members is not extensive enough to capture the nuances of the effects a performance might have on each individual, nor is it mutually exclusive or comprehensive, these are some of the many ways that performances can have a positive social impact.

Along with a lyrical analysis, a musical analysis and a performance analysis of “Freedom” and “Americans,” I also decided to investigate the documented social impact of these songs on U.S. popular culture. While there are many sources that spread misinformation and many forms of disagreement throughout the media, finding popular opinions of artists, albums and songs has given me insight into the public’s reaction towards the lyrics, music and performances of protest music. In *Music and Social Movements*, William F. Danaher writes: “One space that is of practical importance to social movements on a macro level is the media... if a popular song highlights a social problem, this might bring attention to the issue” (Danaher 6). By addressing the media’s response to songs like “Freedom” and “Americans,” I am able to analyze the power and influence of this protest music created by well-known artists.

Art has the power to reach across social boundaries, inform allies about the experiences of those with marginalized identities and create communities between those who deal with similar struggles. In the chapter “Rebel Music Manifesto” within the book *Sound System: The Political Power of Music*, Dave Randall writes: “[art] dares to honestly communicate how the person making it feels about their experience of the world around them. When an artist does that successfully, their art will resonate and touch the lives of others” (Randall 174). Music can be an empowering tool for those who are suffering from systemic mistreatment by large institutions. People of color, queer people, women and other groups who experience identity-based oppression can find comfort and recognition through listening to music created by artists who share their marginalized identities. The overwhelmingly positive response that both “Freedom” and “Americans” received from large groups of queer women of color indicates how effective these songs are at uplifting and empowering oppressed identities.

Even though the media can be biased and is often under corporate control, getting insight from the right sources can be valuable when analyzing the social impact of songs like “Americans” and “Freedom.” Insight into the social impact of music can even be gained by news stations, websites and articles that spread self-serving and bigoted misinformation. Both Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe have been criticized for being outspoken about racism, sexism, classism, homophobia and much more. The way in which they are criticized gives insight into the power of their music. Even if listeners who actively oppress marginalized identities do not make an effort to think critically about the themes introduced in Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe's music, they are still providing public opposition to the prejudice they face.

In the chapter “Rebel Music Manifesto” within the book *Sound System: The Political Power of Music*, Dave Randall also discusses ways in which protest songs can disrupt inequitable power dynamics in U.S. culture. It has been made clear though various forms of social media that people in power are attempting to “co-op culture for their own economic and political agenda” (Randall 180). Randall writes:

Overtly political songs and campaigns make that process [of co-opting culture] far more difficult. They can help to amplify good sense at times when rulers and the mass media are peddling division, distraction or war. (Randall 180)

Popular musicians have the power to create real change. By writing protest songs, Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe are effectively using their platforms to amplify marginalized voices and disrupt the self-serving and consistent abuse of power that many so-called leaders of the United States have relied on to stay in control. For instance, Donald Trump constantly abused his power during his presidency to spread misinformation on Twitter and other forms of media. Analyzing the public's response to music like “Freedom” and “Americans” can both provide insight into the

ways that those in power scrutinize and censor marginalized voices as well as the ways in which protest music can empower marginalized voices. Researching outspoken public opinions about Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, whether they are positive or negative, has allowed me to learn more about the substantial effect that their music has on U.S culture. Overall, Looking into the ways in which lyrics, music, performances and documented social impact can be analyzed has been incredibly insightful and will be used throughout the body of my thesis.

### **“Freedom” by Beyoncé**

In “Freedom” by Beyoncé, featuring Kendrick Lamar, these two influential and talented musicians discuss the oppression they have experienced in relation to ongoing racism in the United States’ present and past. “Freedom” addresses both the current Black Lives Matter movement and institutionalized racism as well as how the history of slavery in the United States affects the lives of people of color today. The song directly, clearly and consciously discusses issues of police brutality. “Beyoncé’s ‘Freedom’ contributes to the self-defining, self-valuing, and unapologetically honest culture that Black women are (re)creating for themselves” (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 7-8). Her entire album, *Lemonade*, looks to bring racial discrimination and sexism to the forefront of her audience’s mind. Her visual album looks thoroughly at themes surrounding racism and sexism in the United States. One of the music videos “features the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and Eric Garner” (Martin 81) as well as photos of their sons, who were victims of police brutality. This shows her deep commitment to racial justice and to the individuals who have been direct victims of racial oppression.

The lyrics, music, music video, performances as well as Beyoncé’s actions surrounding the release of “Freedom” directly feed the goals of the Black Lives Movement and raise



awareness of the history and present condition of racism in the United States. *Lemonade*, which features the song “Freedom,” has been celebrated by the nation as a compilation of anthems for women of color. *Lemonade* was released in 2016 to critical acclaim and wide approval from a range of fans. The overwhelmingly positive feedback Beyoncé received for this album “represent[s] a trend reviving in popular music as these songs adeptly and unequivocally take on the most urgent issues that face this generation of black folks” (Shonekan 28-29). Popular musicians are finding ways to influence social movements through the creation of politicized music. The discussion below touches on Beyoncé’s relationship with the Black Lives Matter movement, the symbolism of the lyrics to “Freedom,” an analysis of the musical components of the song and an analysis of her 2016 performance at the BET awards.

For some background on the Black Lives Matter movement and its relationship to music and musical artists: “Black Lives Matter began on July 13, 2013, as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of the unarmed black teenager Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida, on February 26, 2012” (Martin 72). In response to the continuous hardships and oppression experienced by people of color in the United States due to systemic racism, the Black Lives Matter movement has become nationally recognized as well as criticized by those attempting to uphold racist ideals. Because of the need for large scale social change in order to allow people of color to feel safe, respected and valued in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement has had an incredibly positive influence on U.S. culture.

The large-scale support of the movement by musical artists raises awareness for issues that the movement addresses. Black Lives Matter is “an affirmation of Black folk’s contributions to society, [their] humanity, and [their] resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza 2014). Music “both affirms the humanity of the black community... and is resilience in the face of both

local and national systems of oppression” (Martin 71). The movement also centers the needs of the “most marginalized of an already marginalized community” (Martin 73). Beyoncé captures these ideals in her song, “Freedom.” The Black Lives Matter movement aims to stand up for “women, queer, trans, femmes, gender nonconforming, Muslim, formerly and currently incarcerated, cash poor and working class, disabled, undocumented, and immigrant” (Martin 73). The complex themes present in “Freedom” and Beyoncé’s music in general mirrors the multifaceted goals of the Black Lives Matter movement. As Dave Randall writes, “music best contributes to progressive political change when it arises from a broader movement” (Randall 185). Through writing songs like “Freedom,” Beyoncé is directly responding to her social environment and the social movements created to uplift the voices of Black people in the United States.

Beyoncé’s ongoing and vocal support for the Black Lives Matter movement has given it a lot of recognition and sparked controversy among people that believe and perpetuate racist ideals. Beyoncé empowers listeners by presenting the Black Lives Matter movement to the entire nation. Her influence spreads across the country due to her popularity and her performances at venues like the Super Bowl. She used her platform as a Super Bowl performer to show off the talents of young Black women as well as show her support for the Black Lives Matter movement. She used Black Power and Black Panther Party symbols in the choreography, which sparked controversy and criticisms from many right-wing politicians. Despite this, Beyoncé has immense influence in U.S. culture and uses her popularity and power to benefit those that face the kind of oppression that she does. Beyoncé does this throughout her entire 2016 album *Lemonade*, however, the song “Freedom” specifically “intersects all of these themes to provide a stand-alone anthem, giving Black women the voice to express their anger with the world that

continually ignores and dismisses them” (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 9). Beyoncé has created a piece of art that allows marginalized groups to express themselves by singing along and allows allies to join the fight for justice in a new and creative way. She also brought the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Eric Garner and Oscar Grand with her to the MTV VMA music awards in solidarity with women of color who have lost sons to police brutality. In this way, Beyoncé not only speaks out about injustice in a general sense, but she also lifts the voices of those who have been direct victims of systemic injustice and race-based hate crimes on a personal level.

Analyzing the symbolism behind the lyrics gives the song a deeper meaning. The lyrics deal both with issues surrounding the Black experience in the United States as well as the intersectional experience of being a woman of color. Beyoncé intertwines Black feminist ideals into her performance and directs this song towards women of color, the oppression they have experienced and the resilience they have needed to fight for their lives. Time and time again, sociologists find that Black feminists “celebrate and value Black women’s culture” through the “creative expression of art, music” and many other forms of expression (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 7). This song does just that and analyzing the lyrics makes this very clear.

#### *“Freedom”: Lyrical Analysis*

The song begins with a depiction of a thunderstorm representing the hardships that Beyoncé has had to face due to her identity as a woman of color in the United States. She depicts herself in a powerful way, saying that she will “rain on the thunder,” “march on the regular” and “paint white flags blue.” These lines communicate that she works to combat the hardships in her life, marches for the rights of others and does not give up. They show how capable and resilient

she and other women of color are in the face of injustice. The second verse contains lyrics such as “I’ma wade, I’ma wave though the waters. Tell the tide, ‘don’t move’” and “I’ma riot through your borders. Call me bulletproof.” This verse raises new issues of immigration when talking about “borders” and the strength that it takes to break them. She also imagines herself as a powerful being able to control the tide and withstand bullets. She gives herself this otherworldly power, which metaphorically works to emotionally empower herself and women of color facing injustice.

The words “wave through the water” may reference the transatlantic slave trade. “The Atlantic crossing of European slave ships... constituted a horrific and traumatic experience for... millions of Africans” and this “trade and the flow of people were determined largely by natural forces of winds and currents” (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation). The moving tide is what allowed slave ships to pass through the Atlantic Ocean. By saying “tell the tide, don’t move,” Beyoncé could be insinuating that she is a force of nature that has the power to stop things like the movements of the tide, the very force of nature that directly allowed slaves to be transported across the Atlantic Ocean.

The words discussing wading and waving “through the waters” may also reference a song “first published in 1901... sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers” (Sullivan) called “Wade in the Water.” This song was associated with the Underground Railroad and is thought to have been used to help slaves in the “multilayered struggle for freedom” (Jones). Spirituals often reflected the desires or needs of the people who sang them. Like many other spirituals, it expresses a very passionate desire for freedom. Beyoncé’s incorporation of this history into a modern song is an example of one way artists use their lyrics as a form of protest. This single line contains so much history within it yet could potentially be overlooked upon first glance. This lyric calls back to a

time where “abolitionists systematically deployed songs as spiritual weaponry in the fight to eradicate slavery in the United States” (Graham). Here, Beyoncé both acknowledges the work of those who came before her, while also looking towards the future of empowerment for women of color. “Black feminist intellectuals emphasize self-definition and self-valuation, recognize the interlocking nature of oppression, and value Black women’s culture” (Collins). By being a powerful and popular woman of color, she is paving the way for others of that same identity to get the recognition they deserve, while also confronting the oppression she herself has faced.

With the lines “I’ma rain on this bitter love. Tell the sweet I’m new” and “I’ma wave through your shallow love. Tell the deep I’m new” from the first and second verses, respectively, Beyoncé looks at the future of the new ideas she is able to present through her music. She is presenting herself to her audience as a resilient and powerful woman of color that can overcome the barriers being thrown at her. Many artists use their platform to affirm their own identities in an attempt to heal during times of injustice. “To be resilient is to affirm black humanity, and to affirm black humanity is a radical act of self-care that is well within the realm of both resilience and resistance” (Martin 81). In the pre-chorus, Beyoncé sings “I’m telling these tears, go and fall away, fall away. May the last one burn into flames,” affirming this resilience. She is allowed to feel hurt and emotional in times of injustice, but she turns these feelings into flames that ignite a spark in her to keep fighting. She is showing that it is okay to be vulnerable and that it is possible to express vulnerability without being weak.

In the chorus of the song, she sings of freedom. She says that she “can’t move,” wants to be “cut loose” and asks where her freedom is. It seems as though she is using the word “freedom” as a mockery of itself and its own meaning. She is telling “freedom” that she is not reaping the same benefits that it has given to others. In the United States, there is an overarching

notion that people are free and people in the United States can be whoever they want to be and succeed. However, many “freedoms” that people benefit from in the United States are only given to a certain sect of the population. As a woman of color, Beyoncé does not benefit from a lot of the same freedoms that white men do. The people who are awarded these freedoms (white people, men, straight people, cisgender people) are sometimes unaware that others are oppressed because they have never experienced the type of oppression of which others are speaking. This puts the burden on the people experiencing this oppression to educate others about their own experiences.

Beyoncé is asking where her freedoms are, but also realizes that she has to fight for her own freedom in the line “I break chains all by myself.” Movements that aim to support people of color often dismiss the needs of *women* of color while movements that aim to support women often dismiss the needs of women *of color*. People of color as well as women are often responsible for fighting for their own freedom and rights as well as the rights of other marginalized groups. Beyoncé knows she is strong enough to fight for her own freedom and can be a force of resistance but is also aware that there is only so much an individual can do to fight oppression without a systematic change in the way people of color are treated in the United States, so she still must constantly ask where her freedoms are. There is also a recognition of the women of color that have fought before her and “broken their own chains” as well as the others she herself can give more power to. This works as self-empowerment and also aims to empower the generations of women of color before her and after her. People who are not affected by the oppression of women of color are often not as active in creating change, putting people like Beyoncé in charge of paving the way for other women of color. This line also calls back to the history of slavery in the United States with the use of the notion of breaking physical chains.

There is an incredibly long history of people of color needing to fight systems of oppression in order to survive.

The last few lines of the chorus are: “Won't let my freedom rot in hell. Hey! I'ma keep running 'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves.” By ending the chorus with this particular thought, she is leaving the listener with a sense of empowerment. Beyoncé is communicating that, even when things get difficult, she does not quit. Standing up and speaking out in the face of injustice takes strength and hard work. Beyoncé is letting her listeners know that she is willing to put in this work and she encourages them to do the same.

The whole chorus of this song may be tied to the “popular chant... from the pages of the Black Panther icon Assata Shakur’s autobiography: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom/It is our duty to win/We must love each other and support each other/We have nothing to lose but our chains” (2001, 52)” (Shonekan 19). The first line of the excerpt from Assata Shakur’s autobiography, “It is our duty to fight for our freedom,” seems to be comparable to the first few lines of “Freedom’s” chorus: “Freedom, Freedom I can’t move. Freedom, cut me loose...” In both quotes, the respective author conveys the importance of freedom and freedom for all. The second line from the excerpt, “It is our duty to win” may be compared to Beyoncé’s line, “a winner don’t quit on themselves.” Both of these phrases convey a sense of urgency and responsibility in fighting for these freedoms. These freedoms are not going to come easily, but the fight is necessary. The third line from Assata Shakur’s excerpt, “we must love each other and support each other,” connects with the general themes of solidarity presented in the chorus of “Freedom” as well as the entire song. As discussed in the introduction, strength can often be found through the presence of a group or community that supports one another. Solidarity is one of the main components of protest music and social movements so it is unsurprising that both a

“Black Panther icon” and a powerful, socially conscious Black musician would emphasize its importance. The fourth line of the excerpt from Assata Shakur’s autobiography, “We have nothing to lose but our chains,” may be directly compared to the line “I break chains all by myself” from “Freedom.” Both lines include the word “chains” in reference to the physical, mental, emotional and cultural oppression that people of color have undergone throughout the history of the United states.

The line, “I break chains all by myself,” may also be tied to Beyoncé’s poetic illustration of her grandmother’s lemonade recipe discussed in the introduction of this paper. Beyoncé speaks of her grandmother, saying that she “Broke the curse with [her] own two hands.” This “curse” references the hardships her grandmother and other women of color must face. Both lines include themes of breaking out of oppressive systems with no assistance from anyone else. Because one of these lines is in reference to Beyoncé’s grandmother’s resilience and one is in reference to Beyoncé’s own resilience, a connection between these two lines illustrates how, even though progress has been made and women of color in Beyoncé’s grandmother’s generation have broken so many barriers, there are still so many more to overcome. New barriers arise and old ones prevail despite the work being done to overcome them. By making lemonade from lemons, both in the physical and metaphorical sense, Beyoncé’s grandmother as well as Beyoncé have been able to “break [curses] with [their] own two hands” and “break chains all by [themselves].”

After two choruses, each preceded by a verse, the bridge of the song begins. As mentioned in the introductory material of this paper, Kendrick Lamar wrote and is featured singing this section of “Freedom.” Kendrick Lamar addresses themes like police brutality as well as the empowerment of women of color. He counts down from ten to five in a stylistic way that



puts a new number near the beginning of each line. In the line, “Channel 9 news tell me I’m movin’ backwards,” he discusses how Fox News accused him of contributing to the racial inequity placed on people of color by looking different from “mainstream” culture and for speaking up about police brutality. This is one of countless examples of a stereotype being placed on a man of color backed by a large media corporation through the lens of the “white gaze.” “The white gaze refers to the ways in which the experiences of black people are often distorted through the racialized observances of white people” (Yancy). People of color are made to feel as though their bodies are unwelcome in this country and this idea is constantly perpetuated by the narrow-minded lens of the white gaze. This theme of police brutality is brought up again after a line about the crime in his neighborhood, a symptom caused by the lack of resources and support given to Black communities.

In the line “Six headlights wavin’ in my direction. Five-O askin’ me what’s in my possession,” he addresses racial profiling and its fatal effects on people of color. He is commenting on the clear discrepancy between the frequency at which people of color get pulled over versus the frequency that white people get stopped by the police. “Six headlights” references the headlights on a police car and “Five-O” is a term used to reference the police. In the lines “jump in the aqueducts. Fire hydrants and hazardous. Smoke alarms on the back of us,” he describes the physical danger that people of color are placed in when finding themselves in an encounter with the police and have been placed in when trying to fight for their rights through protest. There is a long history of police brutality in the United States, which Kendrick Lamar discusses in many of his songs. He makes connections between historical inequities and the way they have affected U.S. society today. The discussion of the way people of color are treated

today largely draws on the history and current state of racism in the United States and its ongoing presence in the lives of people of color.

The later part of the bridge is populated with lines referencing powerful women and the sacrifices they have made for him to be who he is today. In the lines “don’t cry for me, ride for me. Try for me, live for me. Breath for me, sing for me. Honestly guidin’ me,” he references his mother and the strength that women of color need to have in order to endure the pain of watching their loved ones be constant victims of institutionalized racism. As a man of color, movements centered on race often address the needs of his identity over the identity of his mother or Beyoncé. As discussed by Beyoncé, women of color are often left behind and must suppress the desire to show emotion in times of injustice. They must find the strength to fight for their own rights because other people are not going to stand up for them. The accented syllables in this section continue the theme of counting down. There seems to be an accent on the first syllable of groups of four and then groups of three. In the line, “Stole from me, lied to me, nation hypocrisy,” Kendrick Lamar references the hypocrisy of the United States as a nation. The United States has stolen the labor of Black bodies, then failed to give them any credit in the education system or confront the history of racism in the country. At the end of the bridge, he sets up the chorus by saying that he wants people to address his name and “prays it reads... ‘freedom.’” From here, another chorus appears, which leads into the outro. Right at the end of the song, Jay Z’s grandmother, Hattie White, is featured saying: “I had my ups and downs, but I always find the inner strength to pull myself up. I was served lemons, but I made lemonade.” As discussed in the introduction, this line is one of the reasons the album is entitled *Lemonade*. Women of color in the United States are “handed lemons” and must figure out a way to “make lemonade.”

*“Freedom”: Musical Analysis*

Musically, the song “Freedom” references various periods within the history of Black oppression. Samples of songs by other musicians of color, samples of spirituals as well as other musical elements common in protest music are incorporated into “Freedom.” This instrumentation also reflects the lyrics she is singing throughout the song. Throughout the song, the sounds all mesh well together despite their uniqueness and contrasting textures. The general upbeat nature of the song gives it a sense of power and purpose. The drumbeat is persistent and gives the song a sense of progression. It builds over time as Beyoncé’s purposeful articulations of her lyrics shine through the instrumental. Beyoncé also uses her incredible vocals to add backgrounds to the chorus to create a bigger sound. Her voice is strong, every word she says throughout the piece has significance and all the different sounds she uses add to the meaning of the song as a whole.

The song begins with some organ, a drum beat and a bass part from a sample of “Let Me Try” by Kaleidoscope. It sounds like there is some distortion on the drum beat and some distinct oscillations of the organ sound. This sample appears as the main sound during the intro, in intervals throughout the verses and beneath Beyoncé’s vocals in the choruses (Estevez). It also appears periodically in the bridge on the song. Kaleidoscope was a Latino psychedelic rock band started in 1967 in Puerto Rico. They started out as teenagers focused on writing about politics and equality as well as things like love and heartbreak. The song “Let Me Try” was released in 1969, just two years after the formation of the group, when the group members were still influenced by their teenage years. The song was more influenced by teenage heartbreak than the political climate (Estevez), but what the band stood for itself is similar to the messages that

Beyoncé is also trying to convey to her audiences. They wrote songs that allude to the experience of political upheaval, democracy and concerns about war.

It is thought that few copies of Kaleidoscope's music were sold at the time because of their "hippie" values. However, "Let Me Try" and Kaleidoscope's debut album have gained a lot of traction since the song was sampled in Beyoncé's "Freedom" (Estevez). Using a sample like this in her music exposes listeners to new political music of the past whether they are conscious of what they are listening to or not. People who do take the time to learn about the music they like are exposed to new artists and genres of music they would have never heard if people like Beyoncé did not use their platform to lift the voices of musicians they think deserve a spotlight. Like Beyoncé, Kaleidoscope paved the way for new Latinx musicians to branch out into making music in all kinds of genres. Being as popular as she is, it is important that she purposefully and methodically uses her power to introduce her audience to music that aligns with her values. She has done just that with her use of samples from "Let Me Try."

Another sample used in "Freedom" is "Stewball," also known as "Prisoner '22' at Mississippi State Penitentiary at Parchman." This is a recording taken by Alan Lomax, a folk preservationist, "recorded in 1947 at Lambert Camp at Mississippi State Penitentiary, also known as Parchman Farm" (Horowitz). The main singer in the sample has been identified as Benny Will Richardson. He was in "camp B" when this sample was recorded. This recording was part of a 1958 LP called "Negro Prison Songs." The prison was called Parchman farm, named after the plantation it was built upon. This connection exposes how interconnected the prison industrial system and slavery are. These prisoners were freed from the chains of slavery only to be unjustly placed in a prison system used to emulate the effects of slavery on people of color. The prison population of almost all Black men worked on the land's cotton fields while in

prison. This prison replaced a plantation in location, function and effect. The prison also held Civil Rights activists and people fighting for the freedom of people of color. Beyoncé is shining a light on the historical and current oppressive nature of prison systems on people of color by including this sample in “Freedom.” This sample also directly connects to the line “I break chains all by myself” because these men of color were physically in chains during their times as slaves and in prisons. This lyric about breaking chains marks a rapid musical build up in the chorus, which ends with an instrumental section containing this sample.

Samples of a recording called “Collection Speech / Unidentified Lining Hymn” by Reverend R. C. Crenshaw from 1959 are also included throughout “Freedom.” This is a recording of “spirituals and preaching at a service of the Great Harvest Missionary Baptist Church” (Lomax). In this recording, Crenshaw preaches for his congregation while a choir sings in the background. This was recorded by Alan Lomax at a Black congregation in Memphis Tennessee. The inclusion of this sample gives “Freedom” a “gospel feel,” which ties in themes of historically Black music to the song “Freedom.” This further connects her song to U.S. Black history. She acknowledges the long and rich history of the relationship between music and people of color in the United States and builds on its past in order to look towards the future. All three of these samples present in Beyoncé’s “Freedom” are significant in relation to racism in the United States. These samples present the long history of racism and the institutions that continuously support racist ideals today.

### *“Freedom”: Performance Analysis and Social Impact*

There are many performances of “Freedom” that add more meaning to the song and publicize the themes mentioned in the lyrics. Both Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar performed this

song at the 2016 BET awards. Beyoncé used her platform to bring political issues to the forefront of a large portion of the nation's attention with this surprise performance. "Beyoncé's 'Freedom' performance with Kendrick Lamar at the 2016 BET Awards, through its lyrics and symbolic imagery problematizes notions of freedom for Black women in the U.S. ... The performance underscores the ways in which Black women are simultaneously restrained while fighting for their freedoms." The performance touches on themes including feminism, love, "Black womanhood," intersectional identities, "Black legacy" and much more (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 7-8).

The performance begins with the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. from 1963 reciting the famous "I have a Dream" speech over the loudspeakers (Denninger). This is accompanied by the introduction of a line of dancers, most of whom are women of color. Martin Luther King Jr.'s voice speaks of rights for people of color, liberty and "the pursuit of happiness," while the dancers march on stage and line up with Beyoncé. The speech ends with the demand for "freedom" and the "security of justice" as the intro to the song, "Freedom," begins. Throughout the whole song, the way she says each line and the movements associated with each lyric are purposeful and powerful. She emulates the meaning of her words through her choreography, lighting, fashion choices, staging and the way she communicates with the audience. She chooses when to look and address the audience and when to look forward and focus on the path in front of her. All of these movements are calculated and will be further analyzed below.

Beyoncé, walking through water that was poured on the stage, begins singing the words to "Freedom" as the crowd cheers. During her performance of the first stanza of the song, which contains imagery depicting a thunderstorm, the venue lights flash bright white, seemingly imitating lightning strikes. As she sings the line "I'm a wall, come and march on the regular," she

begins marching around the stage with the rest of her dancers. While marching, Beyoncé and her dancers kick up the water beneath them on beat. This gives a sense of unity to the group on stage, which is, in a sense, what she is metaphorically providing to women of color in the audience.

When singing, “I’m telling these tears, go and fall away, fall away. May the last one burn into flames,” during the pre-chorus, she looks into the audience, creating an intimate moment, which mirrors the vulnerability of the line. She wants her tears to “fall away” so she can appear stronger in the face of injustice, but is looking directly towards a crowd of people, giving them an insight into her emotions. This provides context to the emotional importance of the issues brought up throughout the song. The themes of oppression brought up throughout “Freedom” affect many individuals on an emotional and physiological level. It is important to address this aspect of the oppressive systems built around us in order to understand the level of hurt they cause. After this, she launches into the chorus as the lights flash and her dancers begin running around the stage and kicking up water. The explosive dance moves, lighting and constant splashing of water emulates the intensity of the chorus.

As she sings the first line of the chorus, her dancers begin running as if to escape the so-called “freedom” given to them as women of color in the United States. However, they seem to be running in circles and just end up right where they started, which emulates the push back received when fighting for rights as a woman of color. They are running in circles but do not get anywhere. They are also running all together, which addresses the necessity of unity and solidarity among women of color and the strength that this unity provides. The dancers continue running throughout the chorus until the line “I break chains all by myself.” Here, they kneel down on the flooded floor and rapidly swipe at the water beneath them as if to emulate the

restraints or “chains” both placed on them in an oppressive environment as well as the direct restraints placed on enslaved people of color. These movements appear to be in frustration due to the constant struggle of fighting for equity in the face of oppression. When reciting this line, Beyoncé also makes a motion with her arm, which appears to mimic breaking from restraints.

Throughout the short instrumental section proceeding the chorus, she waves her hair around and gets ready to sing the next verse. Her hair is in braids and there is some jewelry on some of the braids. This is not significant to her actions in the musical performance, but it is important to note that, through this performance, she is promoting a hair style commonly worn by women of color today. Women of color often get judged for the way their hair looks and are often told that they would look better or more professional if their hair looked more like the hair of a white woman. “For decades, the media has bombarded Black women with images that showcase and privilege Eurocentric standards of beauty and thus kinky, coily, and curly-textured natural hair has been viewed by popular culture as unprofessional, radical, and undesirable” (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 7). Here, simply wearing a historically Black hairstyle can contradict this white gaze, further publicize the notion that people of color have different hair textures and encourage other women of color to be proud of their own hair.

As she begins the second verse, all her dancers skip across to one side of the stage while she sings “I’ma wade, I’ma wave through the waters” as if they were crossing a body of water or wading through it. As she sings, “I’ma riot, I’ma riot through your borders,” her dancers get into a triangle formation, perform a kicking motion, then stand up straight as if they were preparing to salute Beyoncé as she sings “call me bulletproof.” Her dancers then follow her and line up again as she gets to the pre-chorus, which exhibits the same lived intimacy as the last. Then, the second chorus comes along in a similar fashion as the last. After this, Beyoncé begins dancing with the



rest of her dancers, stomping on the floor and shouting as fire shoots from the stage and Kendrick Lamar appears from beneath the stage. A group of male backup dancers also appear on stage behind the women. This symbolizes that, even though Black men are a part of the movement towards racial equity, they should not necessarily be at the forefront of the issues addressed and that they are not always at the forefront of the fight for justice. Women of color often are. The men stand in solidarity with the women without occupying their spaces.

Before rapping the bridge to the song that is on the album *Lemonade*, Kendrick Lamar begins with some new lyrics. He states, “Meet me at the finish line. 40 acres, gimme mine,” as a call back to reparations for enslaved people. After the Civil War, former slaves were given 40 acres of land as one of the first systematic attempts to repair some of the damages done by slavery. The next line he says is “revolution televised. Hopin’ that you see the signs,” as a reference to the song “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” by Gil-Scott Heron, which “has a decidedly Black Power slant” (O’Dell). “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” became a song used to celebrate Black Lives, just as Kendrick Lamar’s music is used as anthems for the Black Lives Matter movement. However, contrary to what is mentioned in “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised,” times have changed and now that so many people have access to technology, the oppression placed upon people of color in the United States is largely available for public viewing. While technology is changing and more people have access to media discussing the oppression that people of color face in the United States, it is important to note that none of it is new. What people are able to view now is part of a long-lived and ongoing stream of police violence that has never ceased.

People like Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar are allowing stories of oppression to be heard by a larger portion of the nation. Next in the performance, Kendrick Lamar goes on to reference

the very album that “Freedom” is a part of in order to acknowledge the success of a powerful woman of color: “Lemonade all the time, keep that in mind. Formation, formation, exclamation, formation.” Prior to beginning the lyrics on the released song, he raps “Fellow great Americans, hello. This is heritage for my medicine,” acknowledging the healing power of discussing the issues of the past in order to obtain necessary reparations. After each line, Beyoncé and her dancers stomp on the stage and shout to emphasize his words. He then joins Beyoncé on the water filled stage, where they dance together and support each other’s words. As he discusses the ways in which women of color get overshadowed, he joins Beyoncé on the main stage and she emphasizes the words he speaks with her movements and vocal exclamations.

As Beyoncé begins the third chorus, her dancers lie down on the water-filled floor and remain there for the rest of the performance, as Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar stomp around and kick up the water on stage. It is exhausting to constantly be living and reliving traumatic experiences, while also tirelessly fighting oppression and yet, women of color are still not given the rights or recognition they deserve. After their call for freedom throughout the song, their bodies lie still on the stage floor, which gets at the notion that even after their efforts and resilience, their bodies are still deemed as disposable and their efforts are not appreciated. The performance ends with Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar embracing on stage surrounded by these bodies as the large crowd cheers.

As expected, the crowd cheers loudly and gives them a standing ovation. As the camera covering the event pans around the audience, it catches the reactions of countless people in awe of the amazing scene, many women of color thrilled to see their identities represented in such a powerful way and general appreciation for the thought and effort that Beyoncé put into this political performance. The performance received an overwhelmingly positive response and

praise for addressing the current political climate in such a compelling fashion. The public response shows how powerful such outspoken commentary and lyrical symbolism can be. There were countless Facebook posts and Tweets created directly addressing her performance just minutes after she appeared on stage. There are also countless mentions of people feeling seen and safe in the space that Beyoncé created that night. In their article about Beyoncé's "Freedom," Phelps-Ward, Allen and Howard say:

The "Freedom" song from Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album and BET Awards performance created a space for expression at a time when Black lives, Black activism, and Black culture have been at the forefront of media coverage while simultaneously at the periphery of broader public concern. (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 2)

And:

[H]er "Freedom" performance and *Lemonade* album create spaces that shift conversations, breed activism, and spur dialogue for future generations to consider. (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 13)

In Stephanie Shonekan's article about music that college students find comfort in during times of social unrest, she interviews a student named Danielle Walker who "found solace" in *Lemonade* and said this about the album:

It is on constant repeat. Black womyn magic is what I'm seeking... The unapologetic blackness I have been listening to has been very affirming of myself; and loving myself. Listening to music that affirms my identity is like putting on a super cloak to be able to navigate this white supremacist world. It helps me to thrive. (qtd. by Shonekan 28)

These instances of praise and recognition from institutions that support racial justice illustrate the huge impact that Beyoncé's music has had on individual consumers. Shonekan's article

addresses the individualistic perspective of the effects of protest music through interviews with students faced with the harmful effects of racism in their educational institutions. She found that students often turn to music that expresses “vulnerability and put black racial trauma into perspective” when faced with race related stressors, negativity and triggers (Shonekan 28).

Creating a piece of art that even one person is able to find joy and affirmation within is an amazing accomplishment. Through *Lemonade*, Beyoncé was able to touch the lives of billions of people, all in their own unique way. Some people experience her music as a safe space, while others are able to use her music as a jumping off point to begin educating themselves about the social climate of our country. Some people have contradicting viewpoints but are exposed to her viewpoints due to her celebrity status. Listening to Black anthems is a “political act in performance because it mobilizes communal engagements that speak to misrecognition, false histories, violence, and radical exclusion” (Redmond). Producing these Black anthems allows others to perform this political act of critically analyzing false histories created by the United States as a nation.

Due to the astounding social impact she has had on U.S. culture, “BET Awards also honored Beyoncé with the 2020 Humanitarian Award for her philanthropy and passion for social justice, which the songstress has openly spoken about throughout her career” (Nanton). She has been recognized at the national level for both her musicianship as well as her commitment to social justice. She has effectively used her platform to convey her support of Black lives. In an article published in *Forbes* magazine, Brittney Nanton cites an overwhelmingly positive review of Beyoncé’s music by Michelle Obama:

You can see it in everything she does, from her music that gives voice to Black joy and Black pain, to her activism that demands justice for Black lives. (qtd. by Brittney Nanton)

As the former first lady of the United States, Michelle Obama has immense power and influence over U.S. culture. She has broken many glass ceilings and has paved the way for other women of color in leadership positions throughout the United States of America. The fact that Michelle Obama chose to honor Beyoncé's music with such high praise and purpose shows how powerful of an impact Beyoncé has had on the entire nation. Michelle Obama emphasizes Beyoncé's drive and commitment to activism as well as her honest representation of Black voices. These themes of Black representation and activism are present throughout Beyoncé's entire album, *Lemonade*, and appear throughout her presence in the public sphere. She constantly uses her power in U.S. culture to positively influence the lives of marginalized groups and start conversations about social injustices.

While activists like Beyoncé often aim to use platforms much more effective than social media, Beyoncé's presence on social media gives insight into her intentions. Also, because she has such a huge following, her presence on social media does create substantial change. In an article published in *Forbes*, Carlie Porterfield discusses Beyoncé's Instagram endorsement of Joe Biden prior to the 2020 election:

On the eve of the presidential election, Beyoncé encouraged her 155 million Instagram followers to vote, including fellow Texans, and disclosed that she supports Democratic candidate Joe Biden in the race for the Oval Office. (Porterfield)

While there were countless people publicly supporting Joe Biden in his electoral campaign, Beyoncé's fame allowed her messages to reach larger audiences. Here, she is perfectly exemplifying the responsibility she has as a critically acclaimed and nationally recognized musical artist.

Even though she has received a lot of backlash from those who do not agree with her due to her fame, she does not use this as an excuse to stay silent. In an article entitled *The Politicization Of Beyoncé*, Melissa Harris-Perry writes the following in reference to Beyoncé's politicized activism:

Her social media feeds, public performances, and public statements have been unambiguously supportive of African American political empowerment throughout the election cycle, even as she continued to dominate the recording world with her black girl magic *Lemonade*. (Harris-Perry)

Beyoncé has not only created a chart-topping album full of critically acclaimed anthems, but she has also leveraged her musical talents to empower Black women throughout the nation. Music is a powerful tool in starting and maintaining dialogues about important social issues and Beyoncé uses this tool and her power as a famous artist to bring the longstanding issues surrounding racism and sexism in the United States to the forefront of people's minds during her entire BET awards performance. Beyoncé's performance was one of many that exemplified the necessity of representing people of color in the media. She presented herself as a contradiction to the white gaze, allowed audience members of color to be "unapologetically Black" (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 2) and promoted commentary about the myth of freedom in the United States. The performance depicted a strong image of Black feminism. Her audience is asked and almost forced to think critically about Black feminist thought whether they are conscious of it or not. "Black women have consistently been at the forefront of liberatory movements... Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance helps frame Black women's call for freedom" (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 2). Black women often have to prove themselves and their own worth to others, while this freedom to exist in a space without question is often just given to white men, and to a lesser

extent white women and men of color. This is especially true in predominantly white spaces. “Black women must break through so many barriers just to have the opportunity of an actual and proverbial seat at the table” (Phelps-Ward, Allen, Howard 4). Beyoncé took up the space she deserves and opened up a space for others who identify as a Black women.

### **“Americans” by Janelle Monáe**

In “Americans” by Janelle Monáe, the artist brings up injustices of the past and present in a satirical fashion in order to highlight their prevalence throughout U.S. culture and the abuse that these injustices perpetuate onto women, people of color, people part of the LGBTQ+ community, people of lower socioeconomic status and much more. She uses sarcasm and very specific phrases that directly address injustices that people face in our world today. The entire song is filled with lines that attempt to combat and explicitly bring up issues like racism, homophobia, sexism, classism, nationalism, police brutality and immigration policies.

In the song, she discusses the importance of solidarity and pride in one’s own identity. It is important for each and every individual to be recognized for their contribution to this country. It is often the rich and powerful that get the most praise for their actions, even if they do not contribute to the well-being of others nearly as much as other people’s actions do. This anthem gives praise to people like Janelle Monáe, activists and artists fighting for justice. As a queer woman of color, Janelle Monáe seeks to amplify her voice so she can speak out for others who have been persecuted. She knows what it is like to feel unwelcome in her own country. Through “Americans” and her entire album, *Dirty Computer*, she consistently stands in solidarity with marginalized identities through a personal lens, teaches allies what it is like to live in her own body and calls out those who have and are constantly oppressing people like her.

The incorporation of issues related to all types of marginalized peoples directly exemplifies the attempts of the Black Lives Matter movement to both raise issues of injustices related to people of color and encompass intersectional and marginalized identities within Black communities. Black Lives Matter “affirms the lives of Black queer and trans folks, disabled folks, Black-undocumented folks, folks with records, women and all Black lives along the gender spectrum. It centers those that have been marginalized within Black liberation movements” (Garza). More specifically, the Black Lives Matter movement addresses issues related to criminal justice reform, police brutality, Black political participation, implementing legislative measures, ending the war on Black people, reparations, a plan for ending structural racism and much more. Even though “Americans” does not specifically address all of these issues, it illustrates the intersectionality of various social movements by incorporating so many social issues.

“Americans” does an incredible job of empowering marginalized groups through song. Both the lyrics and music of “Americans” depict the very core of what protest songs have sounded like and have aimed to communicate throughout the past century. Monáe incorporates musical styles and ideas of protest songs from previous generations, while addressing issues that are prominent in the United States today. She incorporates her own musical style and words into her songs, while also recognizing the amazing musicians and influential people that have created protest music and advocated for equal rights before her. The lyrics in this song are largely influenced by a speech given by Barack Obama entitled "A More Perfect Union," which shows how interconnected politics and music can be.



*“Americans”: Lyrical Analysis*

Janelle Monáe begins “Americans” with lines referencing solidarity within social movements, saying “don’t fight your way alone” and “you don’t have to face this on your own.” This starts the song with a positive message recognizing the importance of community when fighting against oppression. She also affirms the intentions and the identities of the people fighting these fights by saying “Let all souls be brave. We will find a way to heaven.” The oppressive nature of U.S. American society is often justified through talk of destiny and a set idea of a person’s place in this world. It is sometimes argued, through religious beliefs, that people deserve what they are given, and this argument is sometimes used to justify prejudice or a lack of commitment to ending oppression. However, in this line, she is validating all identities, especially those who are treated like they are less deserving of equitable treatment or a place in “heaven.” With the inclusion of gospel-like music and words discussing “souls” and “heaven,” she gives the intro a religious aspect to her song. She is using the music behind these lyrics to emulate the empowering nature of a religion or higher power that does not discriminate. While religion or religious beliefs are sometimes used to make sense of prejudice, the belief in a higher power can also bring solidarity to a community trying to fight for equitable treatment. She is communicating to her listeners that, no matter what a person’s identity is, they have the right to be treated with respect and if they are not, they have the right to fight for their freedoms.

After the introduction, there is a section that includes Janelle Monáe’s voice speaking a series of clever one liners as the musical setting drastically changes. One line states “war is old, so is sex,” which acknowledges common lyrical themes found in historical protest music. She recognizes that people are often interested in subjects that have to do with war and sex and that these topics are highly politicized. There have been countless protest songs written about war

and the unnecessary deaths that continuously occur due to them. War is often romanticized through U.S. patriotism despite the toll that it takes on many families throughout the United States. Janelle Monáe's line is a commentary on the U.S. American fixation on war, which takes lives, as well as on sex, which may lead to new life. The relationship between sex, music and politics is complicated. Laws have been placed on the United States population that perpetuate oppressive views towards the LGBTQ+ community as well as the state of available contraceptives. U.S. politics has sought to control the bodies of women and people who may become pregnant as well as the sex lives of people in non-heterosexual relationships. This control has been placed on these marginalized communities for centuries and Janelle Monáe is addressing the long history of these subjects in oppressive U.S. politics.

The next line in "Americans" is "let's play God, you go next." This line confronts the omnipotent role that oppressors have on the United States as a whole. People have been using their privilege to control others and oppress those with less power. Their role is unjustly almighty. Janelle Monáe is comparing their power to that of God, while also insinuating that God and religion is sometimes used as an attempt to justify unequal power dynamics. However, when she says, "you go next," this could be alluding to an uprising of marginalized people in search of the same freedoms given to those who currently "play God" as if it will soon be their turn to have a God-like control over their own lives.

The next line in the song states "Hands go up, men go down" in recognition of victims lost to police brutality. It is often the case that Black men killed in an encounter with the police are compliant and do things like "put their hands up" prior to being shot. These killings spurred many Black Lives Matter protests and the saying "Hands up, don't shoot." This chant has been used on numerous occasions to communicate the power imbalance and racially driven prejudices

placed onto men of color by police officers. Next, she says “try my luck, stand my ground,” which, again, references the fatal shootings of young Black men by police officers. Stand your ground laws “allow armed individuals who believe they are in imminent danger to use deadly force.” These laws are “essentially a revocation of the duty to retreat,” which states that “a person who is under an imminent threat of personal harm must retreat from the threat as much as possible before responding with deadly force” (Leonatti et al.). Stand Your Ground laws were used to offer immunity from prosecution to the shooter of Trayvon Martin in 2012. These laws are heavily criticized for inciting more violence and for their inherent bias against people of color, particularly Black people.

After this line, Janelle Monáe goes on to say “Die in church, live in jail. Say her name, twice in hell.” Here, Janelle Monáe could be referencing the violence initiated by a white supremacist on Black church goers during the Charleston shooting in 2015. She also comments on the prison industrial complex when she says, “live in jail”, which disproportionately imprisons people of color, specifically Black men and Latinos. There has been a huge increase in private prisons, which has led to the mass incarceration of people of color living their lives in the confines of jail. This has also led to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes placed on people of color. When singing “say her name, twice in hell,” Janelle Monáe is referencing the movement called “Say Her Name,” which aims to highlight the individuals who have been victims of racial violence. During protests, people sometimes chant the names of people of color that have been lost to police violence in order to represent all of them as individuals instead of as statistics in police shootings. This allows allies to become more aware of the weight of each individual death and the pain that the loss of each one of these lives has had on the people that knew the victims as well as communities of color who are put in a vulnerable position of being potential victims.

Next, Janelle Monáe sings “Uncle Sam kissed a man,” planting an image of a prominent patriotic U.S. American figure kissing a person of the same gender. This forces her listeners to, if only for a short moment, imagine this figure as a gay man. Uncle Sam has historically been used as a figure to promote the United States Army, an institution where LGBTQ+ people face heavy discrimination. This view of patriotism, which largely contrasts with the intentions behind using Uncle Sam as a U.S. American figure, might also open the listeners' minds towards viewing long-standing traditions or figures as malleable. The next line, “Jim Crow Jesus rose again,” also criticizes the use of another well-known made-up U.S. American caricature, Jim Crow. Jim Crow is a figure that was widely used to promote racist depictions of Black people. Theatrical performances of white people in blackface were created to make fun of stereotypes placed upon the Black community. This name, “Jim Crow,” is also used in reference to laws promoting segregation. Jim Crow Laws were used to restrict former slaves, African Americans and Black people in general from gaining the civil rights given to white people. Stating that “Jim Crow Jesus rose again” incorporates religious undertones to this idea of segregation. Religion often preaches perseverance in times of injustice. People of color have had to be resilient in the face of oppression for centuries and the resurrection of Jesus is symbolically analogous to the consistent resilience necessary to live as a person of color in this country. This line also encourages listeners to think of the way segregation affects people today. Times may have changed since minstrelsy was widely accepted throughout the United States and “Jim Crow” was a part of popular culture, but the effects of Jim Crow laws are “rising again” through modern racist laws. The persecution of Black people in the United States has been ever-present and has been constantly “resurrecting” itself throughout the history of the United States. This line punctuates the spoken work introduction to the song and leads into the first verse.

The first verse is a compilation of sarcastic comments mocking the bigotry found in parts of U.S. culture. Janelle Monáe begins by singing “I like my women in the kitchen,” which clearly nods to the sexist nature of old, but still prevalent U.S. family values. A century ago, women were often denied any desired career path besides a homemaker and it was often said that a woman's place is in the kitchen. The last line of this first verse, “A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes, but she’ll never ever wear my pants” also addresses issues surrounding the history of incorporating misogynistic values into the traditional U.S. family. In heterosexual relationships, women have historically been forced to take on undesired jobs in order to support their husbands and allow their husbands to gain more power in the work force. They take on jobs that allow their husbands more time to devote to maintaining a career, which is symbolically analogous to washing clothes but never getting to wear the pants. Her use of the words “pretty young thang” is meant to be derogatory and this phrase is used to play into the sexist character she is creating in order to communicate the effects of misogyny in a creative manner. While this type of extreme sexism is no longer present in every family, the reproductions of these sexist ideals still prevail in U.S. society. Through many studies of different families across the United States, it has been shown that women are still expected to do much of the housework, even if they do have a job and career path (Hochschild).

Gender stratification and female participation in the workforce is improving. However, as noted by Arlie Hochschild in *The Second Shift*, this workplace revolution is considered “stalled” until women no longer bear the brunt of the home labor as well. Women are still largely expected to do things like “wash clothes,” as mentioned in “Americans,” while men are given the power associated with “wearing the pants” in a heterosexual relationship, even if the woman has a job of her own. Based on studies analyzed in *The Second Shift*, completing all of the “women’s

work” for a household after coming home from a job felt like a “second shift” for many women. However, their husbands were only expected to take on the work they got paid to do (Hochschild 256). Even though women are gaining access to more and more opportunities, to many women, it often feels like they are constantly being blocked by one “glass ceiling” after another. As Janelle Monáe insinuates, it often feels like women will “never ever” gain the power associated with “wearing the pants” in a relationship. “Occupational sex segregation limits the employment opportunities of both sexes,” however, this segregation “disadvantages women workers most because what is typically labeled ‘women’s work’ has some very negative features associated with it” (Renzetti). Janelle Monáe plays upon both the power given to men who “wear the pants” in a heterosexual relationship and the devaluation of “washing clothes” and other jobs that are considered “women’s work.”

The second line of the first verse states “I teach my children superstitions,” as another call back to how strong of a grasp religious beliefs have on U.S. values. While many religious beliefs promote positive change and teach resilience, as mentioned previously, some beliefs or superstitions can result in prejudices towards others, which may lead to discrimination on the basis of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and much more. These beliefs are often learned during childhood and consistently passed down through generations from parents to children. Calling these prejudiced beliefs “superstitions” disconnects them from the positive aspects of religious values, diminishes them to unnecessary dogmas and dissociates them from cultural religious identities.

Janelle Monáe then goes on to sing “I keep my two guns on the blue nightstand,” which, again, references the excessive gun violence in the United States. Creating an image of two guns on a blue nightstand references the absurdity of needing two, let alone one gun in a place

considered intimate and often shared with a loved one. Keeping a deadly weapon in a home with loved ones alludes to the probability that violent acts often occur between people who know each other. Creating a depiction of guns on a specifically “blue” nightstand also presents the image of a police officer and the respect that this profession receives from white U.S. Americans who are not typically victims of police brutality. Blue is the color that often represents the police force. The image of a blue nightstand with two guns upon it creates a depiction of a character representative of a large portion of the United States of America.

The second verse begins with the line “Seventy-nine cent to your dollar. All that bullshit from white-collars.” This line, again, addresses issues of sexism in the workforce. The wage gap is a huge barrier for many women and their chance to succeed in a capitalist nation. Many companies are still set up like the traditional family household, where women are seen as “less interested” and less qualified for higher paying, higher valued work. “Researchers who have studied women in sex-atypical occupations report that they are usually disadvantaged in hiring and promotions and that they encounter a ‘glass ceiling’ as they attempt to navigate their way up the occupational hierarchy” (Renzetti). Companies are often more likely to hire men, even if a female candidate is more qualified. Still, men sometimes view women as workplace tokens to fulfill their diversity requirements. Women are more closely scrutinized by others in their work due to tokenism, which puts a lot more pressure on them to perform successfully.

Because sometimes only mothers get maternity leave, the expectation that women should be homemakers is institutionalized, which justifies personal power disparities in marriages. The wage gap also has a huge effect on the way work is divided in the home. Because men are paid more, it makes more financial sense for the husband in a heterosexual relationship to get a job outside the home and for the wife to take care of the children. This way, the family would earn

more money overall. In this regard as well, the institutionalized sexism within the labor force has a direct impact on marriage and family life. Addressing the wage gap is necessary in creating more egalitarian heterosexual relationships and allowing women to maintain a desired work-life balance (Rodriguez).

Janelle Monáe grew up with working class parents. Her mother worked as a janitor and her father worked as a truck driver. Through her music, she is building upon the experiences she has had with the inequities within the work force and general income inequality. When she sings “all that bullshit from white-collars,” she is referencing those with high paying jobs who financially benefit from income inequality as well as white men, who both have a larger chance of obtaining a white-collar job and financially benefit from the wage gap. There is a huge wealth disparity in the United States caused by income inequality, which disproportionately disadvantages women and people of color. This causes an even higher racial discrepancy within the prison industrial system because those in the upper class are often able to use their status to avoid consequences for their actions.

Janelle Monáe is both presenting herself as a successful woman of color in the music industry and is also discussing the institutionalized sexism that has made its way into the workforce, along with many other facets of a woman’s life in the United States. In the book, *Music and Social Movements*, William Danaher writes:

As women musicians become associated with more traditionally male occupational roles (see Clawson 1999), the ability of women musicians to affect change via social movement participation may increase. (Danaher 9)

This illustrates the fluid and interconnected relationship between women activists and their place in corporate institutions. Musicians may combat sexism in the workforce through their activism



and, in turn, the ways in which their activism is incorporated into corporations directly affects a woman's place in the music industry.

The next line of "Americans" is: "You see my color before my vision. Sometimes I wonder if you were blind, would it help you make a better decision?" These lines clearly speak to the racial stereotypes placed on people of color and the unfair disadvantages that arise due to these stereotypes. People with racist ideals often judge people of color based on the color of their skin rather than their abilities. Janelle Monáe also makes a clever play on words here, using the theme of sight, color and vision. Vision sometimes refers to the physical ability to see, however, it can also reference an idea, thought or piece of wisdom imparted onto others or just simply conceptualized. This play on words highlights the influence that surface level features, like the color of someone's skin, might have on someone's impression of a person before they actually hear the person out. She then ties in the theme of vision in the second line of this phrase by saying, "Sometimes I wonder if you were blind, would it help you make a better decision?" Janelle Monáe is insinuating that maybe if people could not see who they were interacting with, there would be less prejudice on people of color and fewer actions or decisions that further perpetuate these prejudices. This line ties back into workforce inequality with the notion of decision making. People of color are often taken less seriously in the workplace and are less likely to receive praise for their work or get a promotion. As discussed previously, this makes it more difficult for people of color to succeed or work their way up in their careers. The decision to hire and promote people is often largely influenced by a person's appearance and identity.

Between and after these verses, there is a pre-chorus and a chorus. The pre-chorus introduces themes related to U.S. history as well as politics that most people from the United States are familiar with. She sings "I pledge allegiance to the flag," which are the words that

begin the Pledge of Allegiance. The Pledge of Allegiance contains many racist implications yet is still taught to young people in the United States. There have been many instances of students of color refusing to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in protest of the racist ideals it promotes. However, these students often get in trouble with schools or communities that are promoting the white nationalist ideals found in the Pledge of Allegiance (Petrella). While the specific words that students are reciting are not explicitly bigoted in an obvious manner, the creation of the Pledge of Allegiance was backed by racist intentions.

The writer of the Pledge of Allegiance “feared that the ‘poor stock’ of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe would result in a loss of white native-born Protestant American culture, the very culture that, in his eyes, had built the American republic” (Petrella). He thought that immigrants would not be able to assimilate to the culture of the United States, would lower the “racial standard” in the United States and would “[threaten] the American republic” (Petrella). This was not an unpopular opinion amongst the population of the United States in the 1890s when the Pledge of Allegiance was written. There were many laws passed in attempts to exclude immigrants and the culture of immigrants from the United States. The creation and propagation of the Pledge of Allegiance allowed these ideals to spread across mainstream U.S. American culture.

These nationalist ideals are still prevalent throughout the United States and were very much promoted by the president of the United States at the time Janelle Monáe’s “Americans” was written and released. The racist immigration laws, stereotypes placed on immigrants and racially driven compulsory patriotism promoted by Donald Trump as well as the support he had from almost half of the population of the United States makes it clear that the racist intentions behind the Pledge of Allegiance are still very prevalent in the culture of the United States today.

In “Americans,” Janelle Monáe plays a character with these racist ideals to highlight their presence in U.S. culture and highlight the necessity to resist the propagation of these ideals through protest. One form of resistance is this very song as well as the countless other protest songs that have been created in response to the United States’ racist present and past.

In an interview publicized by *Vulture* magazine, written by Hunter Harris, Janelle Monáe is cited saying:

The election sped up the release of *Dirty Computer*. I was actually taking longer to do it, and then I felt a sense of urgency because of the election. When you elect a president and a vice-president who have been very clear about their Islamophobia, their racism, their sexism — leaders who’ve been very clear about how they feel about marginalized groups, people that I care about, groups that I feel a part of, it was important for me to figure out how I could celebrate [these communities]. (qtd. by Harris)

This shows just how socially conscious Janelle Monáe is and how closely linked her music is with U.S. politics. Not only was her album a response to the racist ideals that Donald Trump promoted, but she also altered the timeline of her album’s release in order to specifically address the impending bigotry that had and would occur throughout Trump’s presidency. Here, Janelle Monáe is clearly stating some of the main goals of her album and is discussing her willingness to take immediate action against oppressive politics.

The next line of the song states “Learned the words from my mom and dad” in reference to the Pledge of Allegiance in the previous line. This line illustrates how harmful values are passed down through generations, creating the ever-present bigotry that has existed throughout the history of the United States. Prejudice is not an innate characteristic present from the early years of a person’s life. It is learned through family values, the communities people are raised in,

education systems and various other forms of intergenerational communication. This passing down of harmful ideals and prejudices across different generations, from parents to their impressionable children, grandchildren and so on has resulted in the long-standing institutionalized bigotry and oppression found in U.S. politics, patriotism and culture.

The preceding lyrics, “Cross my heart and I hope to die,” could be a call back to the youth who are being fed misinformation in the form of “patriotic” pledges, like the Pledge of Allegiance, and from their elders. “Cross my heart and hope to die” is a common saying sometimes used in a playful sense by younger children making promises to their peers. This adds superficial lightheartedness to a line implying that children are learning to die for their country. Here, it seems like Janelle Monáe is giving this simple term that is often stripped of any serious meaning the weight of its actual words. This line brings awareness to the horrific notion that someone should be willing to die to promote the continuation of U.S. patriotism. The children who are learning these phrases are also being told that their lives are more important than those outside the country through the perpetuation of nationalist ideals, which could ignite a false sense of superiority in young minds that are not able to understand the problematic nature of the nonsense being thrown at them. This allows young white children to feel like they belong, which is innately satisfying and easy to leave unquestioned because it is human nature to want to be a part of a community. However, this ostracizes those who do not identify with those in power, leaving women, people of color and other marginalized groups of people to have to stand up for their own right to find community and a sense of belonging in the United States. Janelle Monáe is shedding light on the parallels between the child-like instinct to be unknowingly mean or exclusionary and the prejudiced ideals that follow children into adulthood and exacerbate their exclusionary nature once they have more power and influence within U.S. society.

The line containing the lyrics “cross my heart and I hope to die” then continues to include the words, “with a big old piece of American pie.” The second part of the phrase, “with a big old piece of American pie,” takes a look back at the association between the U.S. ideals and the symbolic representation of pie found throughout U.S. history and art. Pie is something sweet and often symbolizes the good things that the United States has to offer. Everyone wants a “piece of the pie” or, in other words, the prosperity that is promised through the notion of “the American dream.” However, as discussed previously, only some are granted the opportunities to obtain a “slice of the pie” that promises a sweet life. U.S. Americans use pie to symbolize the good things that may be achieved through hard work in the United States, however, this hard work does not guarantee prosperity. The prosperity that is promised is much more difficult to obtain for people of color, women and other marginalized groups. This line also insinuates that the racist attitudes spread by writings like the Pledge of Allegiance are just as central to U.S. culture as pie, a very important and commonly served dessert at many holidays and gatherings throughout the history of the United States of America, post-colonization.

The mention of “American pie” is also a reference to the song “American Pie,” released by Don McLean in 1971. By referencing this song, Janelle Monáe is explicitly acknowledging a protest song that came before her time and sought to address U.S. political climates. Don McLean is cited saying: “politics and music flow parallel together forward through history... The music you get is related somehow to the political environment...” (Serwach). The inclusion of a reference about another politicized artist shows a commitment to recognizing the long-standing fight for justice in the United States led by artists and activists. This reference also highlights how influential music can be and has been in the face of injustice throughout the history of the United States.

This line, which references “American pie,” then leads into the chorus, which contains the following lyrics: “Love me, baby, love me for who I am. Fallen angel, singing ‘Clap your hands.’ Don’t try to take my country, I will defend my land. I’m not crazy, baby, naw, I’m American.” The chorus directly calls out the notion of “American land” and addresses what it means to be a U.S. American. The chorus wrestles with the conflicting nature of wanting to be loved for being authentic in one’s own homeland and the facet of U.S. American culture that largely values the racial and ethnic profiles of the white majority over others. Throughout each chorus, Janelle Monáe reiterates that she should be loved for who she is despite what U.S. culture has communicated to her. While she does sing “I’m American” as part of the overtly patriotic character she has created, the repetition of the words “I’m American” cuts below the surface of her character and gets at the notion that no matter what anyone says, Janelle Monáe herself is an American. While U.S. American culture has not created a space for her to reap many benefits given to straight, white, cisgender men, she still has every right to be considered part of the country she calls home. This idea calls back to the line, “Don’t try to take my country, I will defend my land” in the middle of the chorus.

Many white supremacists believe that those who do not fit into the major racial identity in the United States do not belong in the country. The common reason given for this type of bigotry often has to do with “defending land” from people who might “take their country.” Janelle Monáe addresses these common sentiments within the chorus, while also flipping the meaning of both of these lines to relate them to her experience as an American. Janelle Monáe herself is an American, but the racist attitudes that populate white U.S. American ideals are directly attempting to strip her of her right to be an acknowledged part of the country. In this way, she must defend her own land and territory within the United States from those who think

she does not belong. The inclusion of these lines in the chorus and pre-chorus, sections of the song that get repeated multiple times, allows Janelle Monáe to reiterate these points time and time again, while also allowing her listeners to derive deeper meaning into these lyrics every time they are heard. Despite the contrasting ideals she has from those who do not respect her place in the United States, she wants everyone to know that she is just as American as anyone else who lives in the country.

In an interview publicized by *Vulture* magazine, written by Hunter Harris, Janelle Monáe is cited saying:

My ancestors literally built the White House that the leader of the free world sleeps in, but [Donald Trump] still disrespects immigrants and people who were forced to come over here,” Monáe says. “I don’t have to leave. This is just as much as my country as it is his, or those who are in the position of power. Why do I have to leave?... my song “Americans,” is in the reclamation section of Dirty Computer, you know?... I’m staying right here. We built this shit. (qtd. in Harris)

The lyrics “don’t try to take my country, I will defend my land,” are in reference to the thought process described by Janelle Monáe in *Vulture*. Janelle Monáe is expressing her exasperation towards the blatant inequities and unfair power differentials between her and Donald Trump. White straight men, such as Donald Trump, and white people in general have benefited from the slave labor of countless African Americans and people of color in general. White people, including Donald Trump, benefit from the exploitation of people of color, yet still persecute them, denounce them and question their place in the culture of the United States. The chorus of “Americans” directly addresses these issues with respect to the political climate at the time it was written.

Within the bridge and the outro of the song, there is a discussion of explicit ideals and rights that people have spent decades fighting for. As she did in “Crazy Classic Life,” a previous song in her album, *Dirty Computer*, Janelle Monáe incorporates Rev. Dr. Sean McMillan’s voice (Baskin), which speaks of injustices prevalent throughout U.S. culture. As Carmiya Baskin mentions in the article, “Politics, Passion, and Pop: Janelle Monáe’s ‘Dirty Computer,’” Janelle Monáe is offering a “clever and melodious commentary on current political and social disputes” (Baskin). She is providing the nation with political commentary on a platform that is easy to access and enjoyable to listen to. The spoken word section includes lines explicitly advocating for women to get equal pay, for equal treatment of “same-gender loving people,” for the creation of opportunities for everyone of all socioeconomic classes and for better immigration policies with lines like “until Latinos and Latinas don’t have to run from walls, this is not my America.” The line “until black people can come home from a police stop without being shot in the head, this is not my America” addresses police brutality and racism head on. This is a powerful part of the song that ties together so many ideas of what it means to live in the United States and be a U.S. American. One of the last lines of this spoken word section is “But I tell you today that the devil is a liar because it’s gon’ be my America before it’s all over,” which leaves listeners with a glimpse of hope for the future. This line both compares the people who advocate for the continuation of racist values to the devil and empowers those who are fighting for justice. Basic rights have been denied to those who fall within the marginalized groups mentioned above. The spoken word sections address so many terrible injustices in a very clear and succinct manner. This part of the song adds a lot of meaning to the piece as a whole because it gets at the core of what Janelle Monáe is fighting for and breaks out of the character she had been playing for some of the song.



After the bridge, another chorus leads to the outro, which leads up to the final line of the song: "Please sign your name on the dotted line." This line employs the common idiom used to convey the overwhelming power that large companies and corporations have on people in the United States. The capitalist nature of U.S. politics directly leads to the further devaluation of those who do not fit into the majority. Capitalism, among many other things, has caused working class people, people of color, women and many other marginalized communities to be pushed to the sidelines of U.S. culture. The value placed on monetary gain as a source of U.S. pride and as a measure of success has led to huge wage gaps between men and those of other genders, income inequality between various racial groups and minimum wages that do not come close to allowing basic needs to be met. While this line could be referencing the signing away of one's life to the corporate control that is placed upon much of the United States, it could also be referencing the tireless work done by those who create petitions and protest for the rights of marginalized groups in the United States. It takes work and commitment to fight for justice in the face of oppression. Activists must consciously join the effort in taking an active stance in the face of injustice. The act of physically signing on a dotted line could represent an active commitment to fighting for positive change. The line begins with the word "please," which could be interpreted as a sarcastic use of what one might call good manners. However, this "please" could also be a genuine plea for help. It takes communities of people to stand up to oppressive systems. Janelle Monáe could be asking every single one of her listeners to come together in order to achieve a common goal of peace and justice for all.

*“Americans”*: Musical Analysis

Janelle Monáe begins the song with a gospel-like intro featuring her vocals meshed together in harmony with what sounds like a synthesized organ. This intro appears to be reflective of what one might hear in church or at a religious ceremony. As mentioned previously, this section also contains lyrical themes relating to religion. Janelle Monáe was raised with Baptist values and often performed in her church choir. While it does not appear that Janelle Monáe subscribes to one particular religion, she has mentioned God in various discussions of love and acceptance of all people. In the interview mentioned previously by *Vulture*, she is cited saying:

I try to learn from other religions. You can have faith, and you can believe, and that’s great, and I also believe that if your religion makes you a better person, a more loving person, a more giving person, I think you should choose that religion. (qtd. in Harris)

It is clear that she values religious beliefs that promote love and generosity. Janelle Monáe’s inclusion of this gospel-like intro also calls back to the long history of religion and solidarity among people of color in the United States. Church songs have been used for decades to create a sense of community for groups that are often pushed to the side of U.S. culture. Some church songs often act in similar ways to protest songs in the sense that they are easily accessible to the public, are meant to be sung in large groups and address themes of solidarity among marginalized groups. Gospel music is also often tied to Black activist spaces, one of the many types of spaces Janelle Monáe creates throughout her music. In Shonekan’s text, she writes:

Gospel music has had a wide and consistent appearance in black activist spaces and would also serve this generation’s activism as well. In conjunction with the black church,

gospel music has always been critical to any movements that black folks have led in the United States. (Shonekan 21)

Throughout the history of the United States, gospel music has served as a driving force in the creation of environments that support Black artists and activists and people of color in general. Janelle Monáe's inclusion of this type of sound calls back to the history of Black activism and solidarity. She is recognizing the activists and musical styles that were present before her time as a musician to acknowledge the difficult work that was put in to break barriers before her time as an activist and musician.

After the first few lines of the song, the harmonies drop out as a funky bass line and a steady drumbeat appear. The steady drumbeat and low bass line allow Janelle Monáe's spoken lyrics to be heard. She sings "war is old, so is sex..." and the rest of the lyrics in the second stanza of the piece. As she sings this section, the music slowly builds and the organ-like sound from the beginning is reintroduced in a more rhythmic manner. This then leads into the first verse. The first verse is filled with an upbeat funky guitar part, a rhythmic organ part, a steady upbeat drum part and energetic vocals. Janelle Monáe has been known to "[gravitate towards] strong messages and upbeat music" that "beams... listeners out from the difficult center of struggle" (Shonekan 23) in her music, and "Americans" is no exception. While she may be addressing painful subjects that could resurface some trauma that marginalized U.S. Americans experience, the upbeat nature of the song allows listeners to celebrate themselves despite their struggles. Janelle Monáe has created an anthem for those who are struggling to feel heard. She is giving marginalized groups an accessible, creative and fun outlet to express themselves.

After the first verse, moderately dissonant background vocals lead the listeners into the chorus and remain consistently dissonant through the beginning of the chorus. It is clear that

Janelle Monáe made unique musical choices, while building upon musical themes of the past. She has been able to break out of many of the musical constraints placed on her as a woman of color. As she does so, she also recognizes those who sought to break those same constraints before her. Prince, an artist who often sought to deconstruct the constraints that U.S. society placed on his identity as a Black man, was a huge influence on the creation of *Dirty Computer* as a whole. Many similarities can be drawn between this conscious yet bold attitude displayed by Janelle Monáe and Prince's representation of his own body. This attitude is translated into her music.

Janelle Monáe had received a lot of personal musical guidance from Prince over the years. "Prince and Monáe had a close working relationship before he died in 2016" (Wicks). Janelle Monáe is cited saying the following: "Prince actually was working on the album with me before he passed onto another frequency, and he helped me come up with sounds..." (qtd. by Wicks). Prince's influence becomes apparent when analyzing many of the musical components found throughout *Dirty Computer*. In an article published by the *Rolling Stone* magazine, Hermes writes that "[Prince's] influence is plain" within the "kinetic mandate of 'Americans'" (Hermes). The music of "Americans" is constantly pulsating forward with energy and power, just as Prince has exemplified in tracks like "Kiss," "When Doves Cry" and "Delirious." The upbeat nature and steady drumbeat of "Kiss" is exemplified throughout "Americans." The guitar strumming at the beginning of "Kiss" is also very similar to the sparse, yet upbeat rhythm played by an electric guitar in "Screwed," another song from Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer*. The energetic and funky rock guitar as well as the rhythmic organ in "When Doves Cry" feels similar to the guitar part used in the chorus of "Americans" and the organ used in the intro. The funky

bass line heard throughout Prince's "Delirious" has a similar rhythmic pattern and note progression to the one found throughout "Americans" as well.

In the same *Rolling Stone* article mentioned above, Hermes describes *Dirty Computer* as "a liberated futurist funk masterpiece" that "radiates personal, musical, sexual and political freedom" (Hermes) and states that, through songs like "Americans," Janelle Monáe "weaponizes Prince's fluidly radical pop-funk spirit for a new power generation, targeting oppression on various intersectional fronts" (Hermes). It is clear to many that Janelle Monáe both admires and acknowledges great artists who broke barriers before her, yet still looks forward to creating positive change for artists of the future. In her performance at the 2016 BET awards, the same show which featured Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar's performance of "Freedom," Janelle Monáe paid tribute to Prince. She sang "Delirious," "Kiss," "Pop Life," and "I Would Die 4 U." The gospel-like aspect of the background singers within her performance of "I Would Die 4 U" both sounds similar to the intro of "Americans" and communicates a message of solidarity and community among people who love each other. During this BET awards performance, she even wore assless chaps, which were famously worn by Prince at the 1991 MTV VMAs. In this performance and many others, she consistently uses her outward appearance to send messages to her audience and empower those who look like her.

While it is clear that Janelle Monáe was largely influenced by Prince and his music, she still incorporated her own unique and creative musical style. The collection of vocal harmonies both at the beginning and throughout the chorus of "Americans" as well as her incorporation of spoken word sections about social justice felt unique, purposeful and powerful. Many agree that "'Americans' addresses marginalized people in contemporary America through an animated pop rhythm interspersed with excerpts from Pastor Sean McMillan" (Baskin). Her incorporation of

such explicitly political views in a time where marginalized people were actively being persecuted by their own government and the so-called president of the United States dealt with current issues in a unique way that shined a new light on the irony found within the values of major political parties. She brought something new to the world of music with this social justice inspired album of queer, Black feminist anthems.

The last line of the song, “please sign your name on the dotted line” also references a song by Prince. In “Darling Nikki,” a song about a sexual encounter with a girl named Nikki, Prince sings the line “sign your name on the dotted line” in the following stanza:

She took me to her castle  
 And I just couldn't believe my eyes  
 She had so many devices  
 Everything that money could buy  
 She said sign your name on the dotted line  
 The lights went out and Nikki started to grind

Here, signing on a dotted line seems to imply some sort of commitment to one another. When Janelle Monáe uses this phrase at the end of “Americans,” she could be trying to communicate that people must be willing to make an unbreakable commitment to loving one another.

The line “please sign your name on the dotted line” can also be heard in the last chorus behind the main vocals. This line is included in the background prior to it being played as part of the main vocal line. This could be to introduce the line’s melody and harmonies before it is played by itself, so listeners become subconsciously familiar with the line before they hear it on its own. These lyrics are played behind the main vocals which Janelle Monáe is singing “Fallen angels, singing ‘Clap your hands.’” She could be telling these “fallen angels,” those who have

become outcasts of U.S. culture due to constant discrimination, to sign on the dotted line and make a commitment to do whatever it takes to stay strong in the face of consistent oppression. This line could be encouraging these marginalized groups to commit to their own well-being and sense of self even when a major portion of the United States is denying them basic human rights.

### *“Americans” : Performance Analysis*

Janelle Monáe incorporates the meaning behind the lyrics of “Americans” in her performances of the song. A notable performance of “Americans” includes her show on the Late Show with Stephen Colbert. In an article in *Rolling Stone*, Daniel Kreps writes about how she is “redefining patriotism” with her inclusion of mostly people of color, women and more specifically women of color as her dancers in this performance (Kreps). The identities of the dancers she decided to include in her performance is evident when watching the show, but is nonetheless important to discuss when addressing issues of representation in the media. Along with dancers who appear to be mostly women of color, she invited a transgender dancer to perform with her as well as people with different body types. These marginalized groups are largely absent in the mainstream media. Her intentional inclusion of people whose identities are not often shown on screen allows audience members with these same identities to see themselves as a part of popular culture. When people are able to relate to those who appear successful or admired, this gives them a sense of worth and acceptance by the society they are a part of.

After Stephen Colbert’s introduction, the performance of “Americans” begins with Janelle Monáe and some of her backup dancers singing the intro of the song together, creating beautiful harmonies and establishing a sense of community right from the start. Projected behind the dancers is a large U.S. American flag with a color scheme different from the traditional U.S.

American flag. The colors of the flag are constantly changing in the background, which seems to symbolize the malleability of culture and changes that need to be made within U.S. politics in order to create an inclusive system that caters to a diverse group of people. The color scheme of the performance also includes a lot of reds and blues to symbolize U.S. patriotism, themes that are consistently brought up throughout the song. Throughout her performance, she appears to be very conscious of her body language, the way she sings each word and the gestures she uses.

It also appears as though she is very conscious in terms of her outfit choice. She wears a red plaid blazer, a black hat with a red stripe above the rim, black pants and black boots. Her hair is pulled back into a single braid, which appears to be dyed grey or white at the bottom. Janelle Monáe often aims to promote the acceptance and recognition of androgynous clothes and traditionally Black hairstyles in her appearances on stage. In the book, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*, Francesca Royster writes:

Monáe's style, as well as her musical content, does stretch the physical and artistic territory that many women in Soul, funk, and R&B have been allowed by this still male-driven industry. She is not afraid to sweat, or let her hair come undone, dancing with a manic energy that signals both pleasure and purpose. (Royster 187)

Janelle Monáe does not constrain herself to what society expects a young queer woman of color to look like. Similar to Prince, her style is often fairly androgynous, which allows her to express her gender and sexuality in a way that she defines for herself. She uses fashion to defy racial stereotypes and expresses her sexuality on her own terms. In a statement written by Tim Grierson in *Rolling Stone*, Janelle Monáe is cited saying:

I can connect to the other, because it has so many parallels to my own life – just by being a female, African American artist in today's music industry. ... Whether you're called



weird or different, all those things we do to make people uncomfortable with themselves, I've always tried to break out of those boundaries. (Grierson)

Just like Prince, Janelle Monáe is actively attempting to push people's boundaries and expand the minds of people with deep rooted prejudices. She is both purposeful and unapologetic in her celebration of her own body through her music. She aims to address the perpetual politicization of Black queer female bodies and flip the script in terms of what it means to be a Black queer woman in American culture.

While singing the lines "war is old, so is sex, let's play God, you go next," she seems to be sitting at a desk, as if she were a reporter on the news, as moving stars flash behind her on a big screen. This is a nod to the way various forms of media portray patriotism and U.S. politics. Many sources of news are untrustworthy and aim to perpetuate false stereotypes placed upon marginalized groups, especially people of color. She breaks out of this newscaster character as she sings the lines "hands go up, men go down." As she sings "hands go up," she quickly stands up out of her chair and as she sings "men go down" she slams an open palm onto the desk in front of her. It appears as though she breaks out of character during the very lines of the song that address issues that are largely misrepresented by right-wing news sources. It looks like she is breaking out of character to show more respect for the lives lost to police brutality than is shown by media outlets in general.

As Janelle Monáe sings "try my luck," she walks up onto her chair and as she sings "stand my ground" she places both feet upon the desk in front of her and stands tall above the stage. It looks like every step she takes has purpose, which gives her an air of confidence throughout the performance. As she sings "say her name, twice in hell," Janelle Monáe points above her with two fingers in explicit solidarity with individuals who have been brutally

murdered as a symptom of U.S. systemic racism. She sings the words “Uncle Sam kissed a man” in a flirty manner as she stares right at the camera. This publicly and directly communicates an image of a popular patriotic symbol being depicted as a gay icon. Next, as she sings “Jim Crow Jesus rose again,” her voice becomes more animated, intense and higher than what can be heard on the official track, which communicates the dire need for progressive change in U.S. culture so racist ideals are not continuously brought to the forefront of decision making in U.S. politics.

This line leads into the first verse.

Throughout the first verse, Janelle Monáe’s dancers begin moving their limbs in random directions. They stay in their own spaces while doing this. They seem to be moving in relation to the beat without necessarily trying to be perfectly in sync with each other. It is fairly clear that the dance moves seen within this performance are not incredibly rigid, nor do they require extensive experience in the field of dance to recreate. However, this makes the performance more accessible to the public. Anyone can put themselves in the place of the dancers they see on stage and appreciate the diverse identities that are represented. The people watching the show do not need to be professional dancers in order to see themselves in these individuals. These dancers are contributing to the performance of a critically acclaimed song with high social impact simply by being themselves. This creates a platform for others with their same identities to gain the courage and confidence to also use whatever skills they have to make a positive impact on U.S. culture.

When Janelle Monáe sings the line “pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes, but she’ll never ever wear my pants,” her dancers begin stomping on the ground and getting ready for the chorus of the song. It looks like the dancers are moving and jumping up and down with stereotypically feminine body language as Janelle Monáe sings “pretty young thang she can

wash my clothes.” Then they transition to stomping a rhythm that is twice as fast and almost looks like they are all throwing simultaneous tantrums as Janelle Monáe sings “but she’ll never ever wear my pants.” These motions indicate how childish and immature it is to keep women out of the workforce. Many arguments against allowing women to enter the workforce are based on an unwillingness for men to give up the power and superficial benefits that go hand in hand with the oppression of women. The sentiments contained within the reactions against progressive women’s rights movements are selfish as well as simplistic and can be compared to the reaction a young child might have when they do not get what they want. The physical motions that might accompany a child’s simplistic reaction to a small inconvenience is depicted through the movements of the dancers.

As the pre-chorus begins, Janelle Monáe’s dancers crowd the center of the stage as if they were all part of one big fight. As she sings about learning the Pledge of Allegiance from previous generations, the dancers appear to be experiencing physical turmoil, an expected reaction to hearing a racist pledge that has prevailed through U.S. history. The representation of fighting could also allude to the various arguments and protests that have taken place over the ongoing inclusion of racist writing, such as the Pledge of Allegiance, within the U.S. education system.

As soon as she begins saying the words, “cross my heart and I hope to die,” her dancers immediately pause their exaggerated movements and freeze as they stare straight towards the audience. They do this as if they were making a promise to the people watching that, while their motions might be over-the-top for the sake of creating an aesthetic performance, the issues being conveyed throughout the song are problems that must be taken seriously in order to create a country that values the lives of all of its inhabitants. As she says the word “die,” her dancers lean backwards as if they were beginning to fall down to show that Janelle Monáe is aiming to

communicate a literal representation of the phrase “cross my heart and I hope to die.” There are lives on the line, many of which are people of color, specifically women of color. The fact that women of color make up a large portion of her dance crew gives the audience a picture of whose lives are actually put at stake due to the bigotry within U.S. politics.

During the remaining part of the chorus, her dancers break from the semi-unison structure they created previously and perform less synchronized movements. They all take on roles in the dance routine that they are capable of doing. This shows a new aspect of diversity within the group of people whom Janelle Monáe chose to join her on stage. Some of them are capable of physically lifting another dancer off the ground, while some are able to dance while being carried on the back of another. Some dance in a group, while some maintain a little bit more space to do their own thing. Some of the dancers sing along to the song and others move their body in rhythm with the beat. This shows that, no matter an individual’s ability, they are all welcome in the space that Janelle Monáe has created on stage.

As Janelle Monáe sings “love me baby,” she looks directly at the camera. She does not say these words as though she is asking people to love her. She says them like she is telling others that she is deserving of love and she knows it. As she says, “I will defend my land,” she gets close to the camera and gestures to anyone watching the performance to emphasize the importance of her point here. She is letting people know that she will defend her place in U.S. culture no matter what anyone else thinks of her or assumes about her based on her identity.

When she begins the second verse saying, “seventy-nine cent to your dollar,” she points at various places within the audience in order to address the disparity in benefits given to the very individuals in the room. Not only are the concepts that are present throughout the piece relevant on a national political scale, but they also affect each individual in the United States of

America whether they know it or not. Every individual, no matter who they are, is affected by the systemic issues addressed in “Americans” on a day-to-day basis. She also points at the audience when saying “all that bull from white collar” as if to address the fact that there are many people that do benefit from these systemic injustices that do not do anything to create progressive change in U.S. culture. People who work in white collar jobs both reap the benefits of being well off as well as the benefits of not having to confront the same injustices that others do.

As she sings “you see my color before my vision,” she gestures to her own body and face then proceeds to point to her eye as she speaks the word “vision.” Throughout this whole verse, she is no longer playing the character she created at the beginning of the song. It is almost as if she is having a conversation with the character she created. She is now discussing how she is personally disadvantaged through the unfair advantages given to men, white people and people in the upper classes of U.S. society, while in the first verse, she was acting as if she were those people. This both serves as a way to mock those who are unwilling to give her the respect she deserves, while also making it clear that there are dangerous consequences for the attitudes depicted in the first verse and that many of her identities bear the brunt of these consequences.

She then goes on to sing her next line, “sometimes I wonder if you were blind, would it help you make a better decision?” while looking right at the camera. She is looking out towards everyone watching her performance. This seems to convey the notion that not only people who fit the description of the character she created in the first verse are actively suppressing her identities. Even people who make a conscious effort to treat those with oppressed identities as equals may still often make snap judgements about others. These judgements are often based on the color of a person’s skin, the gender they present as, their mannerisms and other superficial

characteristics that are visible upon a first glimpse at their appearance. While there are people who actively seek to reap the benefits given to them by the oppression of marginalized groups, it is also important to realize that anyone can have a negative impact on the progression of a nation's oppressive attitudes through the way they interact with their surroundings. Everyone must be conscious of the ways in which they can and have harmed others, even if the harm caused was not intentional. Everyone has the responsibility to address the implicit biases they carry around with them. Even people who are actively seeking to watch Janelle Monáe's performance and praise her as an acclaimed artist can impart violence onto her and those who share her marginalized identities. She is looking at the camera, out at the world of people looking at her, and calling them out in one of the most creative ways possible. This line then leads into the second pre-chorus and chorus of the performance.

During the second pre-chorus, Janelle Monáe's dancers perform more synchronized movements, then, as the chorus begins, they all come together and sing along with Janelle Monáe to depict an inclusive definition of what it means to be a U.S. American. Despite the diversity of identities within the group of people on stage, they are all Americans and deserve to be thought of as such. This second chorus then leads into the bridge of the song.

During the bridge of the song, all of the performers march to the stage and stand tall in an orderly fashion beside and behind Janelle Monáe. They stand tall in solidarity with the marginalized groups that are mentioned in the bridge. As new themes emerge within the spoken words, different performers raise their fists in solidarity with the groups mentioned. As the music speaks of equal pay for equal work, three of the women surrounding Janelle Monáe raise their fists, along with Janelle Monáe herself. One of these women include the transgender dancer Janelle Monáe invited to be a part of this performance. Including her as one of the women to

stand in solidarity with other women affirms her identity as a female and affirms the marginalization that she experiences due to her gender identity. This subtle choice sends the message that transgender women of color are women, must be treated as such and do experience the gender-based oppression that cisgender women experience. The inclusion of a transgender woman of color also gives a voice and a platform to one of the most marginalized groups in the United States, Black transgender women. The next line speaks of same-gender-loving people as two of the male presenting dancers step forward, one wearing what looks like a pride shirt. During the line that discusses police brutality, the rest of the performers of color raise their fists in solidarity, followed by the two white performers who raise their fists during the line addressing the socioeconomic disadvantages placed on “poor whites.”

Throughout the performance, it is clear that Janelle Monáe is “unafraid to take on explicitly political positions” (Royster 188). This aspect of her identity as a performer is clear during the bridge of “Americans.” When the voice speaks “this is not my America” after discussing all of the injustices mentioned in the previous paragraph, the whole group on stage makes an “X” with their forearms in front of them and Janelle Monáe shakes her head. They are standing in solidarity with the idea that the United States was not made for them. However, due to all of the hard work that women of color have done to change U.S. culture for the better, people are slowly creating a more inclusive country that everyone may be able to, someday, call “their America.” Right after the bridge, the dancers explode into an energy-filled burst of chaotic dance moves during a shortened chorus. This then leads into the outro, where the same voice speaks of immigration rights and they all stand with their fists in the air. During a fading instrumental outro, the performers celebrate mid-stage, wrapped in a giant American flag. This emphasizes the notion that, while this country might not be “their America,” they are all still

Americans and deserve to be treated with the same respect given to those with privileged identities.

It has been shown time and time again that performances by people who identify as queer woman of color create a space within modern popular culture for other queer woman of color to thrive in whatever field they desire to pursue. Musicians with these marginalized identities have been consistently putting in the work so others like them can feel like they belong in the music industry. Francesca Royster writes: “Whatever their claims to identity might mean, their performances mean and mean intensely for other black and queer lives, as models, influences, and soundtracks to queer world making” (Royster 24) in her book, *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*. Black queer performers have historically been known to use their platform to not only showcase their talents, but to raise the voices of other musicians of color, as Janelle Monáe did through her choice of exhibiting a diverse group of dancers. Jodie Taylor writes that “music-related performances... [generate] radical contestations to normalization and enables the transformative politics of queer possibilities” (Taylor 38) in her article *Playing it Queer: Popular Music, Identity and Queer World-Making*. Performances like Janelle Monáe’s “Americans” acts as this type of contestation to problematic norms.

#### *“Americans”: LGBTQ+ Representation and Social Impact*

While it is not necessary for LGBTQ+ artists to specifically address their sexuality to the public, Janelle Monáe’s public discussion of her sexuality has allowed other queer identities to be heard. As a prominent musical artist with celebrity status, she uses her voice and her social media to lift the voices of activists that aim to support people of color and people of color who



identify as LGBTQ+. She has regularly used her Twitter to provide the public with resources aimed at promoting the Black Lives Matter movement and its mission. She has also been known to “[speaks] out in her interviews against sexism and homophobia” (Royster 188).

As a pansexual woman, Janelle Monáe is able to speak out about an identity that rarely gets any attention in the mainstream media. She is paving the way for other young queer U.S. Americans to discover new ways of discussing their sexualities. Simply being able to see a powerful queer woman of color being celebrated and represented on stage has a huge positive effect on the way younger generations of queer U.S. Americans are able to view their self-worth. The impact of representation has been thoroughly studied throughout the history of the music industry. “One of the most important reasons for representation is the impact of LGBTQ+ visibility on music listeners. While visibility may seem like an abstract, insignificant concept, it is an effective way of supporting the community,” writes Joey Tan in their article *LGBTQ+ Representation and Activism in the Music Industry* (Tan 1). Many articles cite identity representation as one of the most important aspects of popular protest music. LGBTQ+ representation in popular culture is necessary to normalize LGBTQ+ identities in modern U.S. society. Representation also challenges the stereotypes placed upon queer U.S. Americans through the media. LGBTQ+ identities have often been misrepresented in the mainstream media by those who do not identify as queer. These representations are not only misleading to those who do not identify as queer, they are incredibly damaging to those that do. Promoting LGBTQ+ representation created by actual queer people challenges discriminatory practices found throughout the music industry.

Queer music also publicizes queer struggles in the United States. This quote from the aforementioned article by Joey Tan succinctly summarizes the multifaceted nature of queer music and its impact on modern society:

LGBTQ+ representation within the music itself takes multiple forms, including music sharing LGBTQ+ struggles and issues, music promoting queer pride, music as a response to discrimination, and simply music created by LGBTQ+ artists. (Tan 3)

While there are countless other reasons as to why queer representation in music related media is important, these are some of the most common methods of promoting LGBTQ+ identities. Jodie Taylor also writes the following:

[M]usic's ability to locate the individual in the social has the potential to provide marginalized people such as queers with a means of transgressing the public/private dichotomy that has long operated as a means of sexual repression. Music is used extensively in queer identity work to contest gender and sexual norms... this particular function of music is especially important to queers because it accommodates emotional, physical and sexual expressions that may be unavailable to them in other expressive forms or in other aspects of daily life. (Taylor 45)

Here, Jodie Taylor is addressing the importance of music in queer identity work. She specifically mentions sexual repression and sexual norms. These aspects of musical performance are often broken by Janelle Monáe and those who have been her musical inspirations.

In "Americans," Janelle Monáe is employing a common theme of futurism found within much of her music. She "[uses] stories about the past and the present to reclaim the history of the future" (Murchison 81). In the beginning of "Americans," she presents the historically American notion that a woman's place is in the home in a satirical fashion, while also tying in themes

dealing with sexism in the U.S. American workforce. In the second verse, she addresses equal pay and racism in the workplace. In the verses of the song, she is setting up these stories of the past and present. Later, in the bridge of “Americans,” she begins looking towards the future. She looks towards a future in which women will get equal pay for equal work. “Americans” exemplifies futurism from beginning to end. Janelle Monáe has also been known to incorporate “Afrofuturist” themes within her music. She writes about a future in which queer people of color are respected for who they are without any stigmatization of their identities. This construction of a desired reality can build hope among marginalized communities as well as communicate a public and collective desire for equity and justice for all. Afrofuturist music is speculative fiction that addresses racial discrimination in the context of futuristic technology.

In her paper, *Let's Flip It! Quare Emancipations: Black Queer Traditions, Afrofuturisms, Janelle Monáe to Labelle*, Gayle Murchison writes:

Quare black music has offered one avenue by which African Americans can create and inhabit spaces where they are free to express a range of sexualities, especially those beyond cis- gender heteronormative ones, and Afrofuturist aesthetics and musicians have played an especially prominent and public role in both quare black music and global African American popular music in general. (Murchison 82-83)

And with a direct reference to Janelle Monáe and her music Gayle Murchison also writes:

Afrofuturist quare musicians (from Sun Ra to Janelle Monáe) create post- civil rights worlds in which African Americans enjoy full social privilege and civil rights and liberties and inhabit spaces welcoming a range of emancipated black sexualities.

(Murchison 80)

In her visual album that accompanies *Dirty Computer*, Janelle Monáe depicts herself as an android in a futuristic universe. Scenes of her in a futuristic universe are interspersed with flashbacks of her life as a human on earth. Even prior to the release of Janelle Monáe's first album, sociologists were finding the benefits in futuristic thinking contained within artistic expression. Tia DeNora, who is consistently cited across literature pertaining to the sociological aspects of music making, stated that "music may serve as a recourse for utopian imaginations, for alternative worlds and institutions, and it may be used strategically to preage new worlds" (DeNora 159) ten years prior to the release of Janelle Monáe's first publicized album. This concept of futurism, specifically Afrofuturism is not new. However, Janelle Monáe develops this concept with such precision and intensity that it has been thoroughly intertwined with her identity as a musical artist.

In her previous albums, she has been known to depict herself as an android because she feels as though she is treated differently from everyone else. She feels like "the other" in the United States so she chooses to represent this feeling of alienation through a depiction of herself as an android. In reference to her sexuality, she has been cited saying that she is simply attracted to other androids. Countless other scholars have also found benefits in queer-centered futuristic music. Jodie Taylor writes both:

[Q]ueer musics anticipate new queer futures.... The aesthetic, especially the queer aesthetic, frequently contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity.

(Taylor 48)

and

Queer scenes are attempts to make worlds within which queerness is legible. Music is a strategic resource that both aids self-fashioning and sustains world-making attempts.

(Taylor 63)

Queer futuristic music is used to conceptualize and present an overarching outline of what society should aim to emulate in order to create an environment where queer people feel safe and accepted. LGBTQ+ music presents queerness in a manner that allows everyone to learn about queer realities, not just those who identify as LGBTQ+. Queer music also provides an escape into a new desired reality for those who identify as queer. A song depicting a future in which queer identities are celebrated by all can act as a short-lived mental liberation from the struggles of being queer in a generally homophobic society. Being an LGBTQ+ artist, Janelle Monáe creates these spaces in her music simply through her publicized identity. When queer listeners hear that she is explicitly advocating for equal rights for “same-gender-loving people” in a song, this creates a space within the whole listening experience for the LGBTQ+ community to feel represented and heard, even if the song only touches on queer themes in a few lines. Allies of the LGBTQ+ movement are also able to listen to queer songs and get a sense of how important, yet neglected, LGBTQ+ issues are.

The care that Janelle Monáe employed while creating “Americans” is apparent. Her musical style is creative, which draws listeners in, and her message is powerful, which allows listeners to feel safe and empowered. *Dirty Computer* was put together with grace, precision and care. As the last track on the album, “Americans” leaves listeners contemplative yet empowered. “Americans” has been described as “current yet timeless” (Scarsbrook), as an “anthem of inclusivity” (Hermes) and as a “party-starting protest” (DeLuca) song. In an article in *Rolling*

Stone, Will Hermes compares Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* to some of the most influential politicized albums created in the last decade, previously discussed throughout this paper:

[*Dirty Computer* is] a pop-culture salvo that's rooted in the present while recognizing and building on the past. In its own way, it's as artful, ambitious, determined, joyous and inspiring, as *Lemonade* or *To Pimp a Butterfly*. (Hermes)

In an article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Dan DeLuca states that Janelle Monáe “denounces intolerance and embraces inclusivity in all its forms” (DeLuca). This seemed to have been one of her main goals when setting out to create *Dirty Computer*. The overarching response to the album, especially the response from queer woman of color, has been extremely positive. This shows how successful Janelle Monáe was in achieving what she set out to do. Overall, *Dirty Computer*, and specifically “Americans” is an incredibly successful celebration of Black, queer and female strength and excellence.

### **Conclusion**

Music is powerful when presented in conjunction with and in response to the political climate it is written in. Because of music's prevalence, the celebrity status given to talented musicians, and music's emotionally moving use of rhythm and harmonies, musicians have immense amounts of power in the culture of the United States. Musical artists have the responsibility to use this power with care. Because music does not exist in isolation from the world around musicians, musical artists must educate themselves and be conscious of the way they express or explicitly state their values within their music or in the eye of the general public. They must recognize that they have the power to harm others and must be conscious of their words and actions in relation to the social and political climate of their times. Musical artists

must also use their voice in attempts to create positive social change within whatever communities they are able to. As has been illustrated throughout my analysis of “Freedom” and “Americans,” Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe have done just that. They have used their musical talents, their words and their performances to address systems of oppression found throughout the history of the United States.

Through an analysis of the lyrics of “Freedom” and “Americans,” notable components of the accompanying music and their performances, I found that, not only do these songs touch on prevailing injustices throughout the culture of the United States, but they also critically analyze countless nuanced aspects of said injustices from a personal perspective. The lyrics of both “Freedom” and “Americans” reference modern and historical injustices in careful and creative ways. Both artists use symbolism, wordplay and evocative imagery to both implicitly and explicitly address the oppression placed on people with marginalized identities in the United States. Every line of both “Freedom” and “Americans” is carefully crafted and adds significant substance to their respective song as a whole. The musical components of both “Freedom” and “Americans” show Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe’s deep commitment towards recognizing the work of artists and activists who broke barriers before them. Beyoncé’s choice of samples and Janelle Monáe’s use of musical themes commonly employed by Prince make it clear that both artists put a lot of thought and effort into creating historically meaningful yet unique, creative and personal sounds. The catchy melodies and rhythms found throughout both songs allow them to be used as a source of solidarity and empowerment during protests as well as within marginalized communities in general. The analyzed performances of these songs showcased personal, physical and visual representations of Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe’s own music. In this way, they are providing their audiences with a personal interpretation of their own lyrics and

music. Through their performances, they were also able to showcase both their own talents and the talents of other performers with marginalized identities, further normalizing their appearance in the mainstream media.

Based on the various aspects of Beyoncé's "Freedom" and Janelle Monáe's "Americans" that I analyzed, I have learned so much more about the possible social impact of musical artists. Their impact has been thoroughly analyzed, documented and celebrated by marginalized communities and allies. They actively, carefully, consciously and creatively use their music to present authentic depictions of their experiences as women of color in the United States. Their music is powerful and has served as a source of empowerment and recognition for those with similar marginalized identities, a source of solidarity throughout protests and active progressive social movements and an educational tool for those who want to learn more about U.S. history from the creative personal perspective of a person who identifies as a woman of color. In the future, I will aim to be more explicitly conscious of the music I am listening to. While listening to music can be a large source of enjoyment, stress relief and fun, it can also serve as a tool to learn more about important aspects of the world around me. Listening to music by those who do not share the same identities as me can be insightful, as they are able to personally understand and address the nuances of certain macro and microaggressions that I am not directly marginalized by. Through the music of Beyoncé and Janelle Monáe, I have realized the importance of using my voice as a musician to create positive change by authentically writing about my experiences in relation to the political realm I am a part of, addressing systemic injustices and lifting as well as learning from marginalized voices. I have learned so much through my analyses of "Freedom" by Beyoncé and "Americans" by Janelle Monáe and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to critically analyze the work of these two influential artists.



## Appendix

### *"Freedom" by Beyoncé: Lyrics*

Tryna rain, tryna rain on the thunder

Tell the storm I'm new

I'm a wall, come and march on the regular

Painting white flags blue

Lord forgive me, I've been running

Running blind in truth

I'ma rain, I'ma rain on this bitter love

Tell the sweet I'm new

I'm telling these tears, go and fall away, fall away

May the last one burn into flames

Freedom

Freedom

I can't move

Freedom, cut me loose

Singin', freedom

Freedom

Where are you?

'Cause I need freedom, too

I break chains all by myself

Won't let my freedom rot in hell

Hey! I'ma keep running

'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves

I'ma wade, I'ma wave through the waters

Tell the tide, "Don't move"

I'ma riot, I'ma riot through your borders

Call me bulletproof

Lord forgive me, I've been runnin'

Runnin' blind in truth

I'ma wade, I'ma wave through your shallow love

Tell the deep I'm new

I'm telling these tears, go and fall away, fall away

May the last one burn into flames

Freedom

Freedom

I can't move

Freedom, cut me loose

Singin', freedom

Freedom

Where are you?

'Cause I need freedom, too

I break chains all by myself

Won't let my freedom rot in hell

Hey! I'ma keep running

'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves

Ten Hail Marys, I meditate for practice

Channel nine news tell me I'm movin' backwards

Eight blocks left, death is around the corner

Seven misleadin' statements 'bout my persona

Six headlights wavin' in my direction

Five-o askin' me what's in my possession

Yeah I keep runnin', jump in the aqueducts

Fire hydrants and hazardous

Smoke alarms on the back of us

But mama don't cry for me, ride for me

Try for me, live for me

Breathe for me, sing for me

Honestly guidin' me

I could be more than I gotta be

Stole from me, lied to me, nation hypocrisy

Code on me, drive on me

Wicked, my spirit inspired me

Like yeah, open correctional gates in higher desert

Yeah, open our mind as we cast away oppression

Yeah, open the streets and watch our beliefs

And when they carve my name inside the concrete

I pray it forever reads

Freedom

Freedom

I can't move

Freedom, cut me loose

Singin', freedom! Freedom! Where are you?

'Cause I need freedom, too

I break chains all by myself

Won't let my freedom rot in hell

Hey! I'ma keep running

'Cause a winner don't quit on themselves

What you want from me?

Is it truth you seek?

Oh, Father, can you hear me?

What you want from me?

Is it truth you seek?

Oh, Father, can you hear me?

Hear me out

"I had my ups and downs

But I always find the inner strength to pull myself up

I was served lemons, but I made lemonade"

*"Americans" by Janelle Monáe: Lyrics*

Hold on, don't fight your war alone

Halo around you, don't have to face it on your own

We will win this fight

All souls be brave

We'll find a way to heaven

We'll find a way

War is old, so is sex

Let's play god, you go next

Hands go up, men go down

Try my luck, stand my ground

Die in church, live in jail

Say her name, twice in hell

Uncle Sam kissed a man

Jim Crow Jesus rose again

I like my woman in the kitchen

I teach my children superstitions  
I keep my two guns on my blue nightstand  
A pretty young thang, she can wash my clothes  
But she'll never ever wear my pants

I pledge allegiance to the flag  
Learned the words from my mom and dad  
Cross my heart and I hope to die  
With a big old piece of American pie  
Love me baby, love me for who I am  
Fallen angels singing, "clap your hands"  
Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land  
I'm not crazy, baby, naw  
I'm American  
I'm American  
I'm American  
I'm American

Seventy-nine cent to your dollar  
All that bullshit from white-collars  
You see my color before my vision  
Sometimes I wonder if you were blind  
Would it help you make a better decision?

I pledge allegiance to the flag  
Learned the words from my mom and dad  
Cross my heart and I hope to die  
With a big old piece of American pie  
Just love me baby, love me for who I am  
Fallen angels singing, "clap your hands"  
Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land  
I'm not crazy, baby, naw  
I'm American  
I'm American  
I'm American  
I'm American

Let me help you in here  
Until women can get equal pay for equal work  
This is not my America  
Until same gender loving people can be who they are  
This is not my America  
Until black people can come home from a police stop without being shot in the head  
This is not my America  
Until poor whites can get a shot at being successful  
This is not my America

I can't hear nobody talkin' to me

Just love me baby, love me for who I am

Fallen angels singing, "clap your hands"

Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land

I'm not crazy, baby, naw

I'm American (love me baby)

I'm American (love me for who I am)

Until Latinos and Latinas don't have to run from walls

This is not my America

But I tell you today that the devil is a liar

Because it's gon' be my America before it's all over

Please sign your name on the dotted line



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