

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: BLACK NIGHTMARE IMAGINARY:
POPULAR MUSIC, COLLECTIVE TRAUMA,
AND THE INTRANSIGENCE OF
ANTIBLACK VIOLENCE

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“Black Nightmare Imaginary: Popular Music, Collective Trauma, and the Intransigence of Antiblack Violence” is an interdisciplinary examination of the *Black Nightmare Imaginary*, a form of ideological common sense about the precarity of Black life and the necessity of various modes and maneuvers of contestation and escape needed to survive. I argue that Black Americans have shared access to a psychic repository of scenes and scenarios of antiblack violence that exist in vivid detail out of a collective awareness of the omnipresent violence foundational to Black life itself. Black musicians can tap into this shared terrain of terror through creative works that return us to these traumatic moments and perform perseverance in the face of that trauma. These scenes of violence include the horror of the auction block, the humiliation of the minstrel show, the degradation of the social services visit, the tension of a traffic stop, and more. This is the stuff of our nightmares—the full spectrum of antiblack violence that persists

through what Saidiya Hartman calls “the afterlives of slavery.” Foregrounding these scenarios of violence, Black musicians create works that can be read as enacting tactics of resistance to that violence. These tactics include vigilantism, nihilism, opacity, and marronage.

Incorporating sonic, visual, literary, and discursive methods, I use the theoretical lens of the Black Nightmare Imaginary to do interdisciplinary analyses of the songs, music videos, album covers, and journalistic representations of a set of post-Civil Rights era Black musicians—including Mary J. Blige, Prince, N.W.A, 2pac, and Sister Souljah. This work challenges prevailing attitudes that misunderstand and devalue Black creative works with simplistic binaries of good /bad, positive/negative, political/apolitical. To the contrary, these are complex works that reckon with both the life and death stakes of the violence foundational to Black American life and the irreducibility and irrepressibility of that life to its influence.

BLACK NIGHTMARE IMAGINARY: POPULAR MUSIC, COLLECTIVE
TRAUMA, AND THE INTRANSIGENCE OF ANTIBLACK VIOLENCE

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Keith and Cheryl Donnell, and my siblings, Jennifer and Keith Jr., for their unwavering love and support. To my nephews, Matthew and Mason, of whom I am so very proud. To my partner, Jonathan, for his constant encouragement and belief in me. Finally, to my grandmother, Blanche Donnell, my grandfather, Joseph Hill, and in memory of my late grandmother, Arden Elizabeth Hill.

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Introduction

Black Nightmare Imaginary

A little over a week after the Los Angeles Uprising came to an end, a journalist asked 28-year-old writer, rapper, and activist Sister Souljah if she thought it “wise” for participants to have engaged in “Black-on-white” violence during the riots. The May 13, 1992, issue of the Washington Post quoted her response as: “Yeah, it was wise. I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?”¹²

Her words, printed during an election year now engulfed in racial conflict, ignited a firestorm. Bill Clinton, in a contentious battle with George H. W. Bush for moderate voters, jumped at the opportunity to rebuke Souljah’s remarks and—by citing her involvement with the Rainbow PUSH Coalition—distance himself from Jesse Jackson and other racial justice advocates in the process. The controversy inspired coinage of the “Sister Souljah moment,” a now-standard political stunt in which candidate distance themselves from so-called “extremists” within their own party to appeal to centrist voters.³

The Sister Souljah situation reflects America's greater willingness to police Black rage than the nightmarish realities of Black life. Anyone aware of Sister

¹ Mills, “Sister Souljah’s Call to Arms.”

² Full quote: “... White people, this government and that mayor were well aware of the fact that black people were dying every day in Los Angeles under gang violence. So if you're a gang member and you would normally be killing somebody, why not kill a white person? Do you think that somebody thinks that white people are better, are above and beyond dying, when they would kill their own kind?”

³ Swash, “Bill Clinton’s Sister Souljah Moment Tops Year of Political Controversy.”

Souljah's musical repertoire was not surprised by her sentiments. Released a month prior to the riots, her 1992 album *360 Degrees of Power* is a raw, dissonant beast of a record, full of pummeling rhythms, air sirens, and half-rapped, half-shouted declarations of war on America's white supremacist hegemonic order. Souljah pulls no punches—the album is explicit in its call for the development of a new revolutionary consciousness amongst Black youth to upend a social order fueled by Black suffering and death. Her delivery is so blunt and straightforward that the album's musicality often implodes under the weight of her incendiary approach.

Souljah is careful to properly situate us in the album's righteous anger with its album cover photo (Figure 1). It features Souljah clutching the lifeless body of a Black little boy. Her eyes are filled with fury and her mouth is agape in mid-roar. On an album intended to soundtrack the revolution, *360 Degrees of Power* could easily feature a cover image of Black militants dressed in fatigues, or of revolutionaries in the streets with Molotov cocktails. Instead, the album's cover depicts but *one* horrific manifestation of the omnipresent antiblack violence that fuels Souljah's message of rage, rebellion, and revenge. She situates us in the nightmare of unchecked violence against Black youth, and of our inability to protect them—the shared realization of a fundamental inability for Black people to control what happens to their bodies, or to the bodies of their loved ones. In 1992, any number of horrors might come to mind—the shooting of Latasha Harlins,⁴ the murder of Yusef Hawkins,⁵ even the Atlanta Child Murders.⁶ By forcing us to gaze upon the nightmare of racial violence, Sister

⁴ Kashanie, "Remembering Latasha Harlins, Whose Death Helped Setoff Unrest in Los Angeles."

⁵ Blumenthal, "Black Youth Is Killed by Whites; Brooklyn Attack Is Called Racial."

⁶ Burch, "Who Killed Atlanta's Children?"

Souljah makes clear that Black rage is inevitable, justified, and (maybe) coming to a city near you.

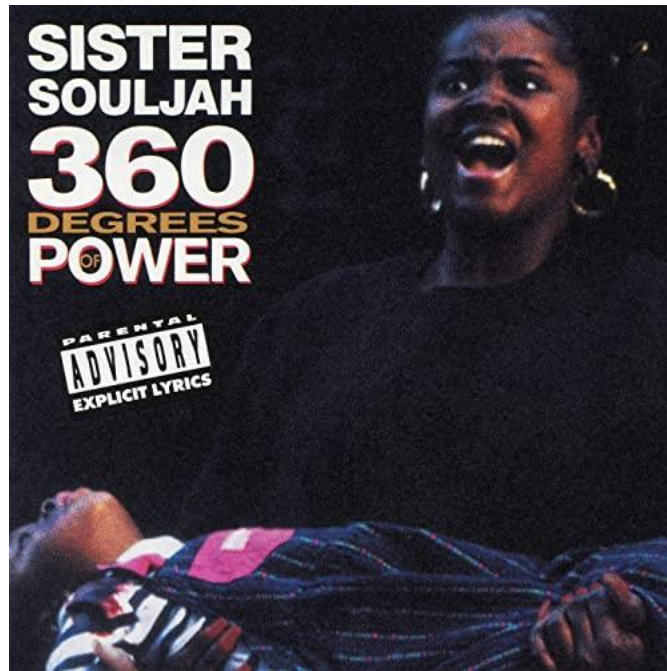


Figure 1. *360 Degrees of Power* by Sister Souljah, album cover

Souljah's use of this image to frame her work conjures *The Black Nightmare Imaginary*, a shared awareness and recognition of the terror of imminent, immanent, and in-progress antiblack violence that, while not directly experienced on a material level by all Black Americans, exists in vivid detail in a shared psychic landscape of possibility because of our collective availability to that violence. The Black Nightmare Imaginary is a form of ideological common sense⁷ about the fungibility of Black flesh, and the necessity of various modes and maneuvers of contestation and escape to survive. Black artists can tap into this shared terrain of terror through

⁷ See Wahneema Lubiano's "Black Nationalism and Black Common Sense." My use of "ideological common sense" here is similar to her discussion of Black nationalism as a form of counterhegemonic common sense about Black life under the oppressive conditions of white supremacist hegemony. She explains, "When I say, 'common sense,' then, I refer to ideology lived and articulated in everyday understandings of the world and one's place in it." Lubiano, *The House That Race Built*.

creative works that return us to moments of trauma that resonate on a collective level through various modes of resistance to it, including opacity, marronage, nihilism, and in the case of Sister Souljah's work, vigilantism. This project grapples with the following questions: What is the relationship between Black music and violence? What are the stakes of Black creative expression in an antiblack world? How can post-Civil Rights era Black music reflect modes of radical resistance? How does collective trauma and a shared sense of precarity both inform the music and how we challenge that persistent threat of antiblack violence? What happens to our interpretation of black music when we mind and foreground social death's spectral presence?

Robin Kelley is an important interlocutor for this research. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, Robin Kelley catalogs the efforts of various Black radical thinkers, intellectuals, activists, and artists to envision a new world in which racism and exploitation are eradicated—this is the “Black radical imagination.”⁸ While their tactics may vary, these radical thinkers are connected by imaginations that plant the seeds of Black radical ideas, movements, and creative works.

Black Nightmare Imaginary: Popular Music, Collective Trauma, and the Intransigence of Antiblack Violence will explore the interplay between freedom dreams and the racial nightmares that correspond to them. I contend that an undergirding force that can inspire freedom dreams is a shared imaginary of antiblack violence that fuels Black musical performance and participation. We can use the

⁸ Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, pg. 6.

Black Nightmare Imaginary to situate ourselves in the crises that require the evasive tactics employed by Black artists in their works. The Black Nightmare Imaginary recognizes the generativity of violence as a force that clarifies the condition of Blackness as one in which social life persists as constant political struggle under the *spectral presence of social death*.⁹ Freedom dreams are the glorious result of the radical will to resist and persist despite the omnipresent threat of violence. The Black Nightmare Imaginary locates the centrality of the racist nightmares that can foreground these dreams. Rather than run or avoid them, nightmares can provide the necessary fuel to inspire rebellion in ways great and small.

This introduction clarifies the concept of the Black Nightmare Imaginary. Next, it addresses the key theoretical conversations and concerns that inform my project, including Orlando Patterson's theory of social death, the close relationship between Blackness and violence, the generativity of violence for Black cultural production, cultural melancholy and trauma, Black radicalism, the importance of ideology and racial capitalism to Black popular culture, and the politics of Black cultural production. Finally, it includes notes on methodology and chapter summaries for this dissertation.

Dreams to Nightmares at the Dawn of the Nineties

The Black Nightmare Imaginary, as both a concept and theoretical lens, is relevant across the vast history of Black cultural production. From the spirituals that

⁹ I argue that social death is a spectral presence, rather than the totalizing condition of subjection outlined by an overly strict reading of Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. See the section below "Social Death as Spectral Presence" for a longer rumination on Patterson.

emerged from the condition of enslavement to the blues subject formed amidst the pervasive violence of the post-Reconstruction period—Black music has engaged the omnipresence of antiblack violence for centuries. We can situate and unlock the radical power of soul anthems of the Civil Rights-era like Sam Cooke’s “A Change is Gonna Come,” or Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” by foregrounding the murder of Emmett Till, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, and other nightmarish scenes of violence. Beyond music, discourse on the interplay between dreams and nightmares of Black life can be found in both Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet.” In fact, the very first chapter of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is titled “Nightmare,” in which X recounts a harrowing attack on his family’s homestead by the local Klu Klux Klan.

However, for this dissertation I focus my attention on the late 1980s into the early 1990s, roughly between the years of 1986 and 1994. I view this set of years as a “coming-of-age” period for what Nelson George calls the “post-soul generation” that emerged during America’s attempt to absorb the victories, failures, and ambiguities that resulted from the activism of the 1960s and 70s. According to George, hallmarks of the post-soul era include greater visibility of Black people in various spheres of public life, particularly in music and popular culture, and a surge in various symbolic markers of progress. However, this exceptionalism belied stark class tensions, the corrosive impact of Reaganomics, the destructive consequences of drugs, the emergence of the HIV/AIDS crisis, and overall cynicism about racial progress.¹⁰

¹⁰ George, *Post-Soul Nation.*, pg. xi.

Against this larger backdrop of conflict, the years between 1986 and 1994 hold a series of landmark albums, legislation, and scenes of antiblack violence that make this period a fertile one for exploring how Black cultural production engages with the tension between Black politics and the intransigence of antiblack violence. First, these years saw hip hop arrive at its “golden age,” starting with the release of Run DMC’s *Raising Hell* in 1986 and followed by important works from the likes of Eric B. & Rakim, Boogie Down Productions, De La Soul, MC Lyte, N.W.A, and Public Enemy.¹¹ During these years, hip hop’s critical and commercial success soared, as did its engagement with radical and controversial socio-political themes. Public Enemy and N.W.A factor heavily into this project as two artists that epitomize the blurry divide between “conscious” and gangsta rap genres at the dawn of the 90s. Both challenge the politics of respectability and progress reflected in artists like Michael Jackson and Whitney Houston, as well as programs like *The Cosby Show*. However, they also challenge each other regarding the proper direction to channel the rage of the streets, and they traffic in misogynist and homophobic images and attitudes that undermine can undermine their radical power.

Additionally, this period is bookended by two landmark pieces of legislation: the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, commonly known as the 1994 Crime Bill. The former, passed at the onset of the crack epidemic, established drug policies that disproportionately punished Black communities and provided important fuel for the phenomenon of

¹¹ Williams, “How Run-D.M.C.’s ‘Raising Hell’ Launched Hip-Hop’s Golden Age.”

mass incarceration.¹² The latter, passed eight years later during the Clinton Administration, included antiblack policies like the “three strikes” rule, expanded the federal death penalty, and included incentive grants to expand policing and incarceration capacity nationwide.¹³ These were incredibly destructive pieces of legislation for Black people, and yet both received support from large swaths of Black political leadership. A deadly intraracial divide along class lines helped to usher them into law, reflecting the dangers of Black mainstream political narratives of respectability and progress that can serve to reinforce antiblack hegemony.¹⁴

Finally, during this time Black America was reeling from a series of nightmarish scenes and scenarios of antiblack violence that engendered a general sense of precarity and terror that contrasted with the socio-political rhetoric of mobility and progress. These tragedies include the Tawana Brawley case (1987), The Central Park Five (1989), the murder of Yusef Hawkins (1989), the shooting death of Latasha Harlins, the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the countless nightly representations of crack addiction and gang violence on televisions and newsstands nationwide. The Rodney King video—as well as the verdict and ensuing 1992 uprising in Los Angeles—loom large over this project as emblematic of broader frustration with the intransigence of inequality and anti-Black violence in the post-Civil Rights era. The Rodney King video captured and circulated just one of the many nightmare scenarios of Black life to millions of homes around the world. The omnipresence of these and

¹² MADEO, “Oct. 27, 1986 | Anti-Drug Abuse Act Creates Racially Biased 100 to 1 Crack/Powder Disparity.”

¹³ 133, “The 1994 Crime Bill and Beyond.”

¹⁴ See Robin Kelley’s *Yo Mama’s Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* for extended ruminations on respectability politics and the pathologizing of poor Black communities during the 1990s. Kelley, *Yo’ Mama’s Disfunktional!*

other scenes of antiblack violence reflect the necessity of the various modes of resistance performed by the artistic works and practices engaged in this project.

The Black Nightmare Imaginary foregrounds the spectral violence that initiates these modes of resistance to force a reckoning with the trauma of imminent, immanent, and in-progress antiblack violence that continues to threaten Black lives. I engage with a set of late 80s and early 90s Black artists—including Mary J. Blige, Prince, Sister Souljah, 2pac and others—using the theoretical lens of the Black Nightmare Imaginary to gain this insight from creative works and practices that can be easily misunderstood and devalued by simplistic binaries of good or bad, negative or positive, political or apolitical. These are complex works reckoning with the life and death stakes of the ontological violence foundational to Black life and the irreducibility and irrepressibility of that life to social death’s spectral presence, even during a time then-widely and misguidedly interpreted as one marked by progress and mobility. My project reflects how Black artists at the dawn of the nineties were ahead of the curve in their analyses of that historical moment in surprising, unexpected, and at times problematic ways. They harnessed Black music to both articulate and practice fugitive strategies and postures of resistance that were at once unique to their era and as old as the originary violence of the middle passage.

Social Death as Spectral Presence

The concept of “social death,” as elucidated by Orlando Patterson, serves as a foundational pillar of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, illuminating both the multifaceted nature of enslavement and its enduring impact on Black communities. In *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, Patterson establishes the concept

of “social death” as a defining quality of enslavement. Social death refers to a state of total subjection, in which the slave is a social nonfactor in society, excluded from registers of societal legibility that connect persons to communities, familial or parental ties, or any sense of heritage or power to be honored or acknowledged.¹⁵

Patterson outlines three primary qualities of enslavement. First, slaves are utterly powerless, mere extensions of their master’s power. Second is natal alienation. Slaves are denied any claims to birth rites or lineage, parental rights, living blood relations, or remote ancestors or descendants. They are genealogical isolates--social zeroes that can be removed from their social setting, location, or communal dynamic at any moment. Finally, the slave is dishonored in a generalized and permanent way.¹⁶

Patterson does acknowledge that slavery is a complex and interactional process in which many situations exceed these conditions, or perhaps challenge and undermine them. Relatedly, Patterson says there is no evidence to assert that slaves internalized the degradation they received.¹⁷ Thus, I choose to focus on the capacity of slaves to resist total subjection. The various forms of radical resistance enacted by slaves—and by those under the conditions of social death since so-called emancipation—reflect an unwillingness to accept their condition. Enslaved Black people never actually allowed their lives to be reduced to a perfect iteration of social death. This important distinction is foundational to my emphasis on the lived experience of Blackness in which social death is a *spectral presence* slaves resisted, rather than the totalizing condition outlined by a strict reading of Patterson. This

¹⁵ Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, pgs. 5-7, 10, 13.

¹⁶ Patterson., pgs. 5-7, 10, 13

¹⁷ Patterson., pg. 13.

distinction is key because the Black Nightmare Imaginary foregrounds the nightmares of antiblack violence constitutive to the condition of social death. However, the Black Nightmare Imaginary's relationship with the modes of resistance performed by the artists featured in my project reflect that social death is a spectral presence that haunts Black life without successfully reducing it to its properties.

The Stuff of Nightmares: Living Blackness Amid Slavery's Afterlives

The close relationship between Blackness and violence is key to the Black Nightmare Imaginary concept. The pervasiveness of violence as a constant possibility in the lives of Black people is quite literally “the stuff of nightmares” that circulate in the Black Nightmare Imaginary. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers contends that despite emancipation, there are still frameworks and epistemological constructs for understanding Black life that are tied to the originary violence of the Middle Passage. She makes an important distinction between “flesh” and “body” in relation to the capture of African slaves. According to Spillers, before the Black body there is “flesh,” the liberated African male or female subject kidnapped and made captive aboard the slave ship. It is under this process of captivity that the Black “body” is formed—the “ungendered” and socially dead nonperson made manifest and legible to any and every need of the master.¹⁸ After and despite the event of emancipation, the Black body-become-flesh-again is always available to violence and the potential for its fungible return—even through stereotypes and microaggressions—to the objectified, ungendered, and negated Black

¹⁸ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” pg. 67.

body.¹⁹ Of paramount significance for my theorization of the Black Nightmare Imaginary is the inescapability of this originary violence that can be done again and again to the Black subject at any moment, centuries after emancipation. The Black Nightmare Imaginary emerges from a shared recognition of the omnipresence of antiblack violence that can always manifest in a seemingly endless array of forms and configurations.

Spillers's work is a foundational precursor to and influence on the work of Saidiya Hartman. In Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-making in Nineteenth-Century America*, she argues the all-consuming forces of degradation and inferiorization that shaped the lives of enslaved Blacks transformed and persisted well beyond the moment of emancipation into the present day. She would later call this phenomenon the "afterlife of slavery,"²⁰ the enduring legacy of slavery transformed and made manifest in the antiblack conditions of today's world. Hartman examines the various forms of violence heaped upon the enslaved in the antebellum period, turning our attention away from spectacles of brutality toward the mundane and seemingly trivial moments that reveal the pervasiveness of racial domination—from all sides, and in ways great and small—that is central to the reproduction of social death.

Hartman establishes a continuum of subjection that connects these various "scenes" into a larger picture of abasement so all-consuming and powerful that its force and influence persisted beyond emancipation.²¹ This is the stuff of our

¹⁹ Spillers., pg. 68.

²⁰ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother.*, pg. 6.

²¹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, pg. 4.

nightmares—the full spectrum of violence that persists through slavery’s afterlives. The scenes of subjection across the vast terrain of terror Black Americans traverse comprises the scope of the Black Nightmare Imaginary; it includes the horrors of the auction block, the degradation of the social services visit, the unbearable tension of a traffic stop, the brutality of sexual violence, the precarity felt awaiting test results at the clinic, and the abject humiliation of the minstrel show, to name just a few.

The concept of slavery’s afterlives greatly influences Afropessimism, a theoretical paradigm spearheaded by Frank Wilderson that is a key reference point for my conceptualization and exploration of the Black Nightmare Imaginary. In *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Wilderson posits Blackness as the zero degree of beinghood, lacking any ontological analogy within western modernity.²² Wilderson is joined by other Afropessimists, including Jared Sexton, David Marriott, and Patrice Douglass²³ in arguing that Blackness is uniquely degraded, debased, and entwined in pervasive antiblack violence, existing in an antagonistic relationship with society at large. Afropessimists believe Blackness is the ontological nothingness that clarifies beinghood in our society. As such, no social category of difference can supersede the fundamental Blackness—marked by Nonhumanness, valuelessness, and ontological nothingness—of the Black body. This concept, which Wilderson terms the "ruse of analogy," renders Blackness incomparable and coalition politics largely futile. In essence, Afropessimists believe that Blackness is a problem that cannot be solved, short of the end of the world.²⁴

²² Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, pg. 19.

²³ Some key works from these scholars include Sexton’s “The Vel of Slavery,” Marriott’s *On Black Men*, and Douglass’s “Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying.”

²⁴ Wilderson, pg. 38.

I think Afropessimist thought is deadly accurate about the ontological nothingness Blackness signifies, and its function as a tool of metaphysics to shore up existential questions of belonging and beinghood in Western thought. I also embrace their critique of the post-Civil Rights era political landscape, in which the politics of hope, change, and respectability can often serve to perpetuate Black suffering. Where we diverge is my emphasis on the agential relationship between the lived experience of Blackness and the spectral presence of social death that threatens to, but never succeeds in fully engulfing Black life. I'm interested by what exceeds death, even if just momentarily, within a framework of Black studies rooted in the multifaceted and dynamic tradition of Black radical resistance. This tradition, marked by continuous struggles, both monumental and nuanced, informs my exploration of its manifestations in Black popular music. In this way, I depart from Afropessimism's rigid, totalizing characterization of social death, viewing it instead as a spectral presence that is always resisted and often exceeded by Black social life.

Racial nightmares are the moments in which various forms of antiblack violence are imminent, immanent, or in-progress—moments that can elicit the fight-or-flight impulse in its potential recipient. Christina Sharpe's concept of "the weather" is useful here, which I interpret as the elasticity of social death's hold on Black life that manifests differently across various coordinates of Black life but is always an extension and reflection of the spectral presence of social death that all Black folks are available to in some form and capacity.²⁵ With that shared availability comes a shared wariness of moments when lightning strikes, or where tornadoes

²⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, pg. 106.

touch ground. These are the nightmares conjured by the Black Nightmare Imaginary, like the frightening images of extreme weather and natural disasters by which one does not have to experience to be gripped with the fear of their power and possibility. The nightmares of the Black Nightmare Imaginary haunt in a shared terrain of terror that, frightening and frustrating as it may be, can be faced and harnessed to fuel the modes of resistance reflected in the works covered in this dissertation.

Generativity of Violence

A key assertion of my dissertation is that engagement with the Black Nightmare Imaginary can reflect how the pervasive violence that threatens to consume Black life can be generative for Black creative works that reflect the irrepressibility of Black life despite social death's spectral presence. The Black Nightmare Imaginary is an opportunity to face down the racial nightmares that do the work of strengthening what Abdul JanMohamed calls the "conditionally-commuted death sentence" of the death-bound Black subject that is formed from infancy by the constant looming threat of violence and death.²⁶ I argue the persistence of racial nightmares are a key psychological component of the death contract that maintains the Black subject's death boundedness.²⁷ Direct engagement with the Black Nightmare Imaginary reflects the radical will to face down death's spectral presence and negate its power, if even fleetingly. Black creative works that conjure the Black Nightmare Imaginary reveal the ineffectiveness of the threat of death as a means of social control, and how—in Black life broadly, and through Black musical

²⁶ JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject*, pg. 17.

²⁷ JanMohamed, pg. 15, 267.

performance in particular—Black people can and do resist this threat of violence by living in defiance of its coercive power.

I engage the scholarship of Adam Gussow, Aime Ellis, and Francesca Royster to consider how the consistent possibility of antiblack violence is an important fuel for Black cultural production. Adam Gussow foregrounds antiblack violence in *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition*, where he asserts that the emergence of the blues in the late 1800s came in response to the harrowing rise of lynchings across the South.²⁸ Gussow contends that lynching is “the ontological ground out of which blues expressiveness arose.”²⁹ It is in the face of an overarching threat of violence, on an immediate and phantasmic level, that Black people asserted a counter subjectivity through musical expression.³⁰ For my work, I widen Gussow’s scope to argue the pervasive violence that accompanies the spectral presence of social death broadly—not just lynching—is foundational and formative to Black musical expression. Engaging Hartman’s concept of the afterlife of slavery, I believe the specificity of Gussow’s argument is unnecessary. Just as slavery’s violence is enforced in various forms today, so too is the threat of violence constitutive to Black creative expression then, now, and until the end of the world. Chapter one of my project is deeply informed by this fact. I argue that over a century after the rash of lynchings during what is often called the nadir of American race relations, the deathly conditions of Black life inspired and generated radical performances of Black

²⁸ Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here.*, pgs. 3-4.

²⁹ Gussow, pg. 23.

³⁰ Gussow, pg. 23.

vigilantism in the incendiary early nineties works of Public Enemy, 2pac, and Sister Souljah.

In *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*, Aime Ellis argues Black men operate in a “space of death” that should make them fearful and docile, but instead catalyzes disidentification with its looming presence.³¹ Heavily influenced by Abdul JanMohamed’s theorization of the death-bound subject, Ellis locates the presence of a “death-bound imaginary” in Black popular culture that reflects how Black men generate works that revel in and rebel against the looming possibility of death to resist the pervasive threat of racial terror and violence.³² His work is especially relevant to chapter two of my dissertation, where I explore how N.W.A’s nihilistic artistic approach fuels their irreverent and defiant relationship with the deathliness of Black male life at the dawn of the nineties.

However, I diverge from Ellis’s ideas by broadening my scope beyond Black men to engage the unique nightmares of Black women, and by thinking specifically about shared identification with scenes of antiblack violence in all its many forms and manifestations—material, psychological, spiritual, economic, and emotional. For example, chapter three foregrounds the many forms of antiblack violence experienced by young Black women at the dawn of the nineties to frame Mary J. Blige’s use of opacity as a radical mode of resistance to the antiblack machinations of racial capitalism. Thus, my research turns toward a broader spectrum of subjections Black

³¹ Ellis, *If We Must Die.*, pg. 6.

³² Ellis., pg. 11.

people experience, and the importance of attending to all forms of antiblack violence to have a full accounting of its pervasiveness across time into the present.

In *Sounding Like a No-No: Queer Sounds and Eccentric Acts in the Post-Soul Era*, Francesca Royster locates a cohort of artists who, in the face of omnipresent antiblack violence, queer Black expression and Blackness itself by performing “eccentrically.” According to Royster, eccentric performances—by artists as diverse as Stevie Wonder, Eartha Kitt, and Grace Jones—tap into the trauma visited upon the Black body, in ways both painful and pleasurable, that retrieve it from the clutches and control of that trauma.³³ Royster locates the “Black fugitive imagination” in post-soul eccentricity—fugitive efforts to escape constraints of objectification and social death, but without transcending the enduring resonances of its violence.³⁴

I share Royster’s interest in the relationship between Black musical fugitivity and violence. Chapter four of my dissertation explores the fugitive performances of what I call *creative marronage* employed by Prince to challenge the antiblack machinations of the recording industry and seize contested freedoms in his conflict with Warner Bros Records during the early nineties. My research will make the case that the radical potential of Black musical works and creative practices can be unlocked and fully explored through direct engagement with the nightmares of antiblack violence that correspond to and catalyze them. This project explores the artistic strategies of Black artists whose work also reflects a return to moments of

³³ Royster, *Sounding like a No-No.*, pg. 10.

³⁴ Royster., pg. 12.

collective trauma, which I conceptualize as the shared racial nightmares of imminent, immanent, and in-progress antiblack violence.

On Cultural Trauma and Melancholy

The terrorizing scenes of violence that populate the Black Nightmare Imaginary span the spectrum of social death's many forms and configurations, but one clear and foundational manifestation of the Black racial nightmare is the shared memory of lynching, a haunting distillation of the precarity of the Black body, and its constant availability to mutilation and destruction. David Marriott's *On Black Men* engages with the continued resonances of lynching photography as a means of reiterating again and again the forced spectatorship and victimhood Black people experience in relation to their own suffering. According to Marriott, lynching photos send a clear message to Black people that "this could be you." Speaking specifically about Black men, he argues it is not necessary for them to individually experience lynching to feel its effects.³⁵ In other words, and central to my conceptualization of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, is that Black people are haunted by shared trauma of violence they may never have witnessed or experienced directly. Lynching creates traumatic, nightmarish memories that haunt the minds of Black people across generations.

The term "nightmare" finds its roots in the Old English word "mare," which denoted a demon or goblin thought to induce feelings of suffocation and unease during sleep.³⁶ The prefix "night" accentuates its connection to sleep and darkness.

³⁵ Marriott, *On Black Men.*, pg. 10.

³⁶ "Definition of NIGHTMARE."

Within the framework of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, this term assumes deeper significance, symbolizing the relentless and lingering shadow of antiblack violence that pervades Black communities, akin to a sinister presence lurking in the darkness.

Psychoanalysis, particularly as articulated by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, offers insights into the concept of the nightmare and its potential connection to the Black Nightmare Imaginary. Sigmund Freud viewed nightmares as expressions of repressed desires, anxieties, and unresolved conflicts from the unconscious mind. He believed that nightmares served as a pathway for the unconscious to communicate with the conscious mind, offering glimpses into suppressed traumas or fears.³⁷ Carl Jung expanded on Freud's ideas by emphasizing the symbolic and archetypal nature of dreams, including nightmares. He viewed nightmares as potentially transformative experiences, suggesting that they could offer insights into the collective unconscious and the broader human experience. Jung believed that nightmares could reveal deeper truths about the psyche and the individual's relationship to the collective unconscious, serving as a catalyst for personal growth and individuation³⁸. In the context of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, these psychoanalytic perspectives offer a framework for understanding the symbolic and psychological dimensions of the collective traumas experienced by Black people and their communities, and their generative possibilities when confronted and explored.

In Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*, she builds on psychoanalytic insights to explore the ways in which trauma manifests in the psyche and resists

³⁷ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

³⁸ Jung, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung, Volume 8.*, pg. 53.

articulation. Caruth argues that trauma disrupts the normal processes of memory and narrative, leading to fragmented and disjointed recollections that evade comprehension. Drawing on Freud and others, she contends that trauma often remains unprocessed and unresolved, lingering in the unconscious and surfacing in unexpected ways, such as nightmares.³⁹ Caruth's work suggests that nightmares, as manifestations of unresolved trauma, can serve as a form of testimony—a haunting reminder of past violence and a call to bear witness to experiences that resist easy assimilation into conscious awareness. In this context, the Black Nightmare Imaginary becomes a site of collective trauma and memory, where the nightmares of antiblack violence are rendered visible and demand recognition and reckoning.

Caruth's work suggests that creative endeavors may serve as a pathway to illuminate the underlying traumas fueling the Black Nightmare Imaginary, prompting a necessary confrontation with the ongoing violence against Black bodies. Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* examines the challenge of articulating pain and suffering and the role of art in addressing it. Scarry contends that pain eludes verbal description, impeding our capacity to communicate and address individual and collective anguish. She suggests that art can confront and articulate violence, providing a platform for its examination.⁴⁰ I posit that this perspective highlights the significance of Black popular music as a potent medium for expressing and grappling with the enduring trauma of pervasive antiblack violence. Within the Black Nightmare Imaginary, art becomes a crucial instrument for addressing and

³⁹ Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, pg. 4.

⁴⁰ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, pg. 22.

articulating the horrors of antiblack violence, potentially fostering healing and fortifying movements for Black liberation. In essence, Black art holds the potential for political power as it confronts the cultural trauma of Black Americans and performs perseverance in the face of that trauma.

According to Ron Eyerman, the term cultural trauma refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting an entire group of people across generations. The entire group does not need to have experienced the trauma directly for it to become a collective trauma for the group.⁴¹ The Black Nightmare Imaginary circulates because the trauma of omnipresent antiblack violence can serve to shape and cohere Blackness as a collective identity. Past instances of violence are endlessly reiterable and thus always present, engendering a shared sense of precarity and danger at every step.

Undoubtedly, grappling with the reality of shared trauma and unyielding antiblack violence can be uncomfortable and challenging, often conflicting with narratives of hope, respectability, and progress. However, the Black Nightmare Imaginary serves as a crucial intervention in Black politics by shifting focus away from these narratives that too often perpetuate the status quo by glorify Black suffering and death. Instead, it confronts the ongoing nature of racial trauma, emphasizing that solutions cannot be found solely through conventional means such as voting or passing legislation. Rather, true resolution requires confronting the looming threat of violence head-on. The Black Nightmare Imaginary provides a space where Black artists and audiences confront the myriad scenes and scenarios of

⁴¹ Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma*., pg. 1.

antiblack violence that haunt their collective nightmares. By tapping into these shared traumas, they transform them into a wellspring of inspiration for creative endeavors that serve as powerful modes of resistance.

Recent work by Jermaine Singleton is relevant to my ideas here. In *Cultural Melancholy: Readings of Race, Impossible Mourning, and African American Ritual*, he argues Black people are bound by the shared memory of racial trauma and loss, and thus share a hidden affect of grief and loss that manifests in Black rituals, cultural practices, and performance. Making visible the hidden dialogues of grief that shape the present can allow for an interruption of the influence of racial trauma.⁴² I embrace Singleton's analysis. The Black Nightmare Imaginary reflects how collective grief is reinforced by a shared repository of nightmarish scenes of antiblack violence and death. Overt engagement with the Black Nightmare Imaginary reflects a process Singleton calls "impossible mourning" that makes our hidden traumas visible to interrupt the stranglehold of that shared trauma on the present.

Joseph Winters's *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* delves into the pervasive discourse surrounding "progress" in America, exploring its role in shaping notions of nationhood, conflict, and respectability. Winters challenges the uncritical embrace of progress as an inevitable trajectory. Instead, he advocates for a more nuanced understanding that incorporates "melancholic hope"—a recognition that sadness and loss can coexist with hope to inspire political mobilization.⁴³ The theoretical framework of the Black Nightmare

⁴² Singleton, *Cultural Melancholy*, pg. 26.

⁴³ Winters, *Hope Draped in Black*, pgs. 22-24.

Imaginary aligns with Winters's call to engage with the persistence of antiblack trauma and disappointment without succumbing to hopelessness. By confronting the specter of death inherent in antiblack violence, Black musical works and creative processes gain radical potency, becoming tools in the ideological struggle for liberation. These works serve as poignant reminders of the ongoing nightmares of antiblack violence, urging action to confront, dismantle, and uproot the status quo.

Relatedly, reconciling the thrilling victories of the Civil Rights era with the disappointing persistence of anti-blackness in the ensuing decades can engender what Anne Cvetkovich calls "political depression," a collective disappointment sparked by the sense that customary forms of political engagement no longer work.⁴⁴ However, political depression can be generative of a renewed, reinvigorated mobilization for justice, rather than something destructive or debilitating. Cvetkovich asserts we should not pathologize negative feelings; instead, they can be harnessed and used as a vital resource toward mobilization.⁴⁵ This is central to the Black Nightmare Imaginary's transformative power. The negative feelings engendered by reckoning with the nightmarish scenes of antiblack violence do not foreclose upon its radical potential. Quite the opposite, those feelings of dread and disappointment can fuel a truly robust movement that rejects outdated strategies and ideologies that too often only reinforce the status quo.

Foregrounding the nightmares of antiblack violence can serve to catalyze the freedom dreaming that reanimates stalled imaginations and reinvigorates movements

⁴⁴ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, pg. 2.

⁴⁵ Cvetkovich, pg. 2.

for change. Justice and social change are only possible when feelings of grief, melancholy, fear, and pain are harnessed as motivation to act. The Black Nightmare Imaginary is a theoretical tool that foregrounds racial nightmares to situate artistic works by Black artists in the context of these feelings to reveal the fugitive modes of resistance they inspire, and thus fully articulate the radical ideological messages they contain.

The significance of the Black Nightmare Imaginary is particularly pronounced in the realm of creative expressions by Black youth. Whether it's blues, jazz, trap, or drill music, the innovative musical genres pioneered by Black youth are often stigmatized as dangerous, antisocial, and indecent. However, the Black Nightmare Imaginary serves as a theoretical tool that demands the contextualization of Black youth expression within the pervasive presence of death across time into the present. This lens allows for a deeper understanding of the perilous landscape that Black youth navigate as they come of age in America. In the conclusion of my dissertation, I ruminate on the profound implications of the Black Nightmare Imaginary for engaging and honoring the creativity and resilience of Black youth.

Furthermore, the Black Nightmare Imaginary illuminates the interconnectedness of seemingly diverse generations and musical genres within the Black community. It reveals that beyond the enduring threat of violence, there exists a tradition of radical creativity that fosters social cohesion and resilience in the face of social death's spectral presence. What renders the Black Nightmare Imaginary indispensable as a conceptual framework is its assertion that a legacy of Black radical

creativity can be found not only through freedom dreams but also by confronting the nightmares that can inspire innovative modes of resistance and liberation.

Black Radicalism

The Black Nightmare Imaginary is directly engaged with Black radicalism and the Black Radical Tradition. By Black radicalism, I refer to acts of resistance, in ways both great and small, that are the links connecting a radical continuum of behavior spanning micro and macro-level modes of resistance enacted by Black communities. This radical activity encompasses the most quotidian manifestations, like work stoppage or the development of non-normative familial bonds and structures, all the way up to and including armed rebellion. Crucially, this continuum requires recognition of the heterogeneity that challenges western classism, sexism, and homophobia, and thus gives Blackness its most radical thrust. The Black Nightmare Imaginary is unique because it foregrounds harrowing scenes and scenarios of antiblack violence to locate radical performances of resistance across this continuum in perhaps unlikely Black musical performances.

My research is inspired by Cedric Robinson's work on Black radicalism. In *Black Marxism*, Robinson coined the term "Black radical tradition," arguing that Africans arrived in the new world possessing an epistemology that was naturally opposed to the degraded, dehumanized condition of enslavement.⁴⁶ This radical spirit of resistance has inspired radical actions, ideas, and movements since the Middle Passage into the present. Fred Moten's *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black*

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Black Marxism*, pgs. 122-125.

Radical Tradition further develops Robinson's concept of the Black radical tradition by arguing that the essence of Blackness and Black performance is resistance to enslavement and to the ontological nothingness to which Black people are subjected, a metaphysical condition foundational to modernity. According to Moten, the Black radical tradition is thus the collective force of ontological presence that persists despite impossible odds.⁴⁷ My research extends this framework by exploring how the Black Nightmare Imaginary amplifies and contextualizes the radical acts of resistance within Black musical expressions.

My conception of Black radicalism as a spectrum of resistance is reflected in its broad history and plethora of manifestations from slavery to the present. David Walker's "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World"⁴⁸ and Martin Delany's "The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States, Politically Considered"⁴⁹ are seminal works in Black radicalism, advocating for Black liberation, challenging white supremacy, and even promoting Pan-African solidarity. W.E.B. Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* was groundbreaking for how it reinterpreted the Reconstruction era, highlighting the agency of the formerly enslaved in shaping their own destinies and challenging prevailing narratives of Reconstruction as a failure.⁵⁰ The Civil Rights and Black Power eras mark important ideological divides concerning key questions, including the effectiveness of integration and the role of violence in the struggle for Black

⁴⁷ Moten, *In the Break*, pgs. 16-18.

⁴⁸ Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America*.

⁴⁹ Delany, *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*.

⁵⁰ Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880*.

liberation.⁵¹ I adopt an iteration of Black radicalism that addresses antiblackness and white supremacy at its roots, recognizing the necessity of developing counterhegemonic ideologies and clearing space for the full spectrum of radical resistance, including the potential necessity for revolutionary violence.

Black feminist thought is also central to my work. Angela Davis's *Women, Race and Class* is unique for its analysis of Black women at the intersection of racist and sexist oppression via a Marxist analysis that centers their status as workers in American society—from chattel slavery to the present day.⁵² I am inspired by scholars like Barbara Smith⁵³ and Audre Lorde,⁵⁴ whose works champion a complex, heterogeneous vision of Blackness, and the necessity of working across difference. Cathy Cohen is another key interlocutor, as her work shifts the focus of Black radical politics from organizations and unions to the everyday acts of deviance and resistance that can expand our understanding of what counts as “political,” or “radical.”⁵⁵ These ideas shape my understanding of a Black radical spectrum of resistance, which transcends ontological barriers and encompasses diverse forms of resistance, both significant and subtle, loud and soft. Rejecting modes of existence that accommodate antiblackness represents a radical stance that fuels political struggle, even amidst the immediate challenges imposed by social death's spectral presence.

⁵¹ Some key texts: X's “The Ballot or the Bullet,” King's *Where Do We Go From Here?: Chaos or Community*, Baraka's “What Does Nonviolence Mean?,” and Newton's *Revolutionary Suicide*.

⁵² Davis, *Women, Race, & Class*.

⁵³ Hull, Bell-Scott, and Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*.

⁵⁴ Lorde, *Sister Outsider*.

⁵⁵ Cohen, “DEVIANCE AS RESISTANCE.”

My research uses the Black Nightmare Imaginary to locate Black artistic works and creative practices that perform some of these fugitive modes of resistance to racial subjection, including opacity, marronage, vigilantism, and nihilism. I have chosen these four tactics because they are responses to imminent threats of violence in various manifestations enacted at different times by Black people since the originary violence of the middle passage. At different times and for various reasons Black people harnessed opacity to hide emotions, ideas, materials, and even themselves.⁵⁶ Black people stole away and started maroon colonies, enacting a contingent form of freedom as flight, and a homebase of operations to interrupt the machinations of the plantation.⁵⁷ Black people took up arms and sought retributive justice outside the antiblack laws that not only excluded them but served to enshrine their non personhood.⁵⁸ Finally, and perhaps most problematically, many Black people have adopted a nihilistic posture toward their oppression, choosing to not give a fuck, and let the cards fall where they may.⁵⁹

My research is intentional about engaging with this broad array of tactics that span from confrontational postures to those that require discretion and stealth. Vigilantism and nihilism may manifest loudly in the works of Public Enemy and N.W.A. However, Blige's use of opacity and Prince's utilization of marronage demand evasive and even silent forms of protest. For instance, Blige may refuse to answer a journalist's invasive question, while Prince's silent statement with

⁵⁶ Kelley, *Race Rebels*.

⁵⁷ James, *The Black Jacobins*; Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*.

⁵⁸ Texts for further reading on this might include *American Negro Slave Revolts* by Herbert Aptheker, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* by Eric Robert Taylor, and *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* by Vincent Brown.

⁵⁹ West, *Race Matters*, pg. 22.

"SLAVE" scrawled onto his cheek speaks volumes. The Black Nightmare Imaginary underscores the significance of nightmares as a lens for understanding radical postures of resistance. Rather than dismissing nightmares as unpleasant memories, this framework recognizes their utility in fueling the ongoing project of Black radicalism. Nightmaring generates friction that strengthens the bonds of resistance in its many forms and manifestations, propelling movements forward.

Ideology, Racial Capitalism, and Black Popular Culture

Black popular culture is a critical terrain for ideological struggle with white supremacist hegemony, and within Black intraracial politics as well. The ideological front of Black liberation is necessary for the critical transition from what Antonio Gramsci called a war of position—struggle conducted on the terrain of civil society—to a war of maneuver, a full-blown, frontal assault on the state.⁶⁰ Black popular culture is uniquely suited for this task, and it is its radical potential that makes it so dangerous to the status quo. Popular culture matters because it is ideologically contested terrain that, in the right hands and with designs for social change, can be an effective vehicle for radical ideas, including those necessary to strengthen and fuel a robust movement for Black liberation. The Black Nightmare Imaginary as a theoretical lens foregrounds the nightmares of antiblack violence to situate us in the crises that require the modes of resistance performed by the Black artistic works and practices analyzed in this dissertation. In other words, this project intervenes in Black

⁶⁰ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*.

popular culture studies by offering a new way to interpret Black cultural artifacts whose radical possibilities can be easily undervalued or misunderstood.

Both Mark Anthony Neal and Robert J. Patterson have written extensively about the misperception of R&B music as politically benign since the rise of hip hop in the 1980s.⁶¹ I join them in challenging this fallacy by exploring the work of Mary J. Blige, specifically how she harnesses opacity in ways that surrogate the experiences of Black women under constant threat of antiblack violence and death at the dawn of the nineties. When we foreground the role of social death's spectral presence that has inspired Black women to harness various forms of opacity, Blige's performances take on even greater significance as part of a radical tradition of Black women who refuse the knowability that makes them available to the violent needs of racial capitalism.⁶²

This is significant because it highlights concerns regarding how racial capitalism can erode the counter-hegemonic potential of Black media representations. In *The Black Culture Industry*, Ellis Cashmore argues that Black culture emerged out of the experience of white supremacist domination to reproduce racist tropes that serve white tastes and corporate interests, thus undermining its authenticity and its potential as a tool for political struggle. Instead of challenging hegemony, Cashmore says Black culture and its practitioners inevitably maintain it.⁶³ Richard Iton's *In Search of the Black Fantastic* offers a contrasting perspective, urging a reevaluation

⁶¹ Patterson, *Destructive Desires*; Neal, *Songs in the Key of Black Life*.

⁶² Cedric Robinson established the concept of “racial capitalism” to describe the interconnected relationship of racialization and capitalism emerging from post-feudal Europe. Robinson asserts they emerged concurrently and operated together to create racial capitalism, in which both racialization and capitalism are constitutive of one another in contouring the modern world system, including the creation of the Negro and the perpetuation of the myth of whiteness.

⁶³ Cashmore, *The Black Culture Industry*, pg. 167.

of how we view Black popular culture in relation to politics altogether. Iton contends that Black cultural expression inherently carries political dimensions that should be embraced rather than bemoaned. Fully reckoning with the unique power of Black popular culture requires a broader understanding of political engagement beyond conventional frameworks.⁶⁴ The concept of the "Black fantastic" embodies this idea, representing a fusion of Black political and cultural spaces that transcends boundaries imposed by modernity.⁶⁵

The Black Nightmare Imaginary synthesizes these two perspectives by conveying that the political power of Black popular culture is always imperiled yet never defeated by the demands of capital. Although the antiblack violence done by corporate interests threatens to undermine its integrity, it is never successful. It is possible to approach Black popular culture with both facts in mind—its deep political resonance and its inherently compromised condition. The theoretical lens of the Black Nightmare Imaginary models this dichotomy of being at once embattled and resistant; it foregrounds violence to situate us in the radical modes of resistance Black artists enact with their works and creative practices.

Black Music and the Politics of Black Cultural Production

On a fundamental level, the power of Black American music rests in how it affirms and fuels Black life and survival despite the seemingly insurmountable challenges that lay before it. Black music reflects the will to forge social life in a context in which it should not be possible. Amiri Baraka makes the crucial point that

⁶⁴ Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, pg. 17-19.

⁶⁵ Iton, pg. 290.

Black music is grounded in the experiences and perspectives, worries and fears of the Black community— “a central body of cultural experience”—but it is always shifting and changing. Hence the term “the changing same,” which signifies both an entrenchment in the condition of Blackness in America *and* a constant process of collective artistic exploration, experimentation, and evolution.⁶⁶ This is a testament to a collective experience of growth and change, *not* stagnation. In other words, Black music reflects the dynamism of Black life despite the ominous clouds of violence that circle endlessly above it.

Black music is embedded into the very fabric of Black life and thus an important site of political struggle and contestation over the meaning of Blackness itself. In *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, Guthrie Ramsey argues Black music—and popular culture, more broadly—is a site of Black political struggle and contestation, where both internal and external concerns are sorted out, expressed, and debated.⁶⁷ According to Mark Anthony Neal, historically and into the present day, Black popular music has functioned as a public square of sorts, where at different historical junctures, African Americans harnessed music to engage in cultural dialogue and critique.⁶⁸ Conflicts around respectability, progress, and Blackness itself play out in both the performance and reception of Black music. The Black Nightmare Imaginary can serve to catalyze these debates by foregrounding the antiblack violence that persists despite the enforcement of bourgeois values and respectability politics that often serve to weaken Black radical politics and perpetuate

⁶⁶ Baraka, *Black Music*, pg. 187, 203.

⁶⁷ Ramsey, *Race Music*, pg. 106.

⁶⁸ Neal, *What the Music Said*, pg. 13.

the status quo. As such, applying the Black Nightmare Imaginary to Black musical expression is fruitful for scholarship on the tension between the intransigence of structural antiblackness and the politics of Black cultural production.

Rap music is the latest and perhaps most transgressive iteration of Neal's Black musical public square. In *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose frames hip-hop as both of and a departure from the musical traditions of Black America. According to Rose, rap music—in all its conflicts and contradictions—is not an aberration; it continues a musical legacy in which many themes and tropes that might offend older, more conservative members of the Black community have always been communicated and contested.⁶⁹ Imani Perry expounds on Rose's contributions in *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop*, where she argues hip-hop's most important and challenging feature is its “reunion ethos” or aesthetic. According to Perry, rap is an artistic space that is radically democratic. It eschews the line between respectability and disreputability for complexity and contradiction.⁷⁰

Hip-hop's brashness and boldness lends itself to the Black Nightmare Imaginary lens, as artists of the hip hop generation refused to shy away from the pervasive violence engulfing their communities in the decades following the Civil Rights Movement. Artists like Public Enemy and N.W.A—two groundbreaking groups that came of age during the late 1980s—forced the issue, demanding a reckoning with the deathliness of Black life in the Reagan and Bush eras. This makes

⁶⁹ Rose, *Black Noise*, pg. 24-25.

⁷⁰ Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, pgs. 6-7.

for an unforgiving listen for some, but it also offers honest and fruitful insight into life under the compounding pressures of antiblack and patriarchal hegemony in the post-Civil Rights era. The reunion ethos offers a space where unfettered artistic expression is more important than the monitoring of what are acceptable or appropriate representations of Black life.

According to Rose, the power and integrity of rap lies in its commitment to both young Black people and potent cultural resistance—but maintaining that commitment in the face of the influence of capital can also be its greatest challenge.⁷¹ The scenes of violence that circulate in the Black Nightmare Imaginary include the iterations of racial capitalist exploitation faced by Black artists themselves. In Chapter three, I read Blige’s use of opacity against the material, psychological, and economic violence that hounded Billie Holiday. In Chapter four, I argue that Prince’s decision to change his name and scrawl “SLAVE” on the side of his face can be foregrounded by the dark legacy of coerced enjoyments on plantations, including the forced smiles and oiling of Black limbs on auction blocks during slavery. Black music is a fascinating and fruitful way to explore how nightmares inform Black creative work conceptually and thematically, as well as on an immediate and material level for artists themselves.

Methodology

For this project, I am influenced by Robert J. Patterson’s “entangled networks” methodological approach, in which he conducts research on artists by

⁷¹ Rose, *Black Noise*., pg. 19.

reading across a variety of platforms, materials, and contexts to develop analyses that make meaning of their greater cultural footprint.⁷² In each chapter, I establish entangled networks to analyze the unique ways the Black Nightmare Imaginary elucidates radical performances of resistance in Black popular musical works and creative practices. Artists like Mary J. Blige and Prince are cultural icons, with diverse representations across studio recordings, live performances, interviews, film soundtracks, album covers, music videos, and press materials. Consequently, my research utilizes a variety of methods, including literary, visual, film, discursive, and sonic analyses, to comprehensively examine their cultural contributions.

Examining how specific nightmares are applied to the artists involves a historical approach to contextualize their works, focusing on the late eighties-early nineties. This period in American history informs the attachment of particular nightmares to artists and cultural works. For example, in the case of Sister Souljah's album cover, based on the year of its release (1992), one might consider the beating of Rodney King, the shooting of Latasha Harlins,⁷³ the murder of Yusef Hawkins,⁷⁴ or the Atlanta Child Murders⁷⁵ as just some of the nightmares conjured through the Black Nightmare Imaginary to situate us in the crisis that contextualizes Souljah's brand of Black vigilantism. Foregrounding different figures like Yusef Hawkins or Latasha Harlins in our analysis of Souljah's cover can yield varied interpretations. While emphasizing Hawkins straightforwardly highlights systemic violence against Black boys, foregrounding Harlins prompts questions about Souljah's decision to

⁷² Patterson, *Destructive Desires*, pgs. 3-4.

⁷³ Kashanic, "Remembering Latasha Harlins, Whose Death Helped Setoff Unrest in Los Angeles."

⁷⁴ Blumenthal, "Black Youth Is Killed by Whites; Brooklyn Attack Is Called Racial."

⁷⁵ Burch, "Who Killed Atlanta's Children?"

feature a little boy, rather than a little girl, in the image. Applying an intersectional frame for our analysis raises important provocations about the intentionality of Souljah's artistic choices and clarifies whose nightmare is depicted in the image. This intersectional lens complicates our understanding, urging consideration of how such representations impact the strength of a Black radical movement that centers the diversity of Black experiences.

Finally, biographical information about each artist is also a critical element of my application of the Black Nightmare Imaginary. While the artists featured share the commonality of Blackness, their individual experiences vary widely, mirroring the diverse manifestations of antiblack violence within the Black Nightmare Imaginary. Biographical information helps to properly place and contextualize nightmares by establishing their relevance to a particular artist's story and work. For example, central to N.W.A's biographical narrative is police violence. By establishing and then locating the theme of police violence across their entangled networks, I can credibly argue that the key nightmare that best frames the radical potential of the group's brand of nihilism is the nightmares of police brutality that wreaked havoc on the lives of young Black people in Compton in the late eighties, let alone in cities across the country.

Chapter Summaries

The structure of this dissertation aligns with the four tactics of resistance previously outlined—vigilantism, nihilism, opacity, and marronage. The deliberate ordering of these chapters moves from overt expressions of Black radical resistance to subtler forms that require a deeper engagement with the Black Nightmare Imaginary.

Chapters on vigilantism (chapter 1) and nihilism (chapter 2) highlight loud and confrontational stances, while opacity (chapter 3) and marronage (chapter 4) demand stealth, evasion, and ambiguity from both artists and, at times, the audience. This dissertation serves as a journey through the diverse range of nightmares and tactics, illustrating the breadth of the Black Nightmare Imaginary and the resilience of Black social life to transcend the pervasive antiblack violence that seeks to negate its existence.

Chapter one, titled “I Love It When They Fear Me,” delves into the theme of vigilantism by examining the works of a cohort of radical hip-hop artists during the early nineties, including Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and 2Pac. Amidst the backdrop of rampant antiblack violence in the preceding decade, these artists executed bold performances of Black vigilantism against systemic oppression. Through analyses of three banned music videos—Public Enemy’s “By the Time I Get to Arizona,” 2pac’s “Holler If Ya Hear Me,” and Sister Souljah’s “The Final Solution: Slavery’s Back in Effect,”—I uncover how these artists employed the Black Nightmare Imaginary to advocate for revolutionary change. I argue these performances hold radical power to fuel ideological shifts toward revolutionary action among many Black audiences who share identification with the nightmares of Black life and the desire to fight back against structural antiblackness. However, their messages of rage and rebellion are limited by the constraints of popular culture itself, an ideologically contested terrain where efforts to censor or ban their videos for their radical power often succeeded. Furthermore, the shortcomings in how these artists addressed gender, sexuality, and other categories of difference reveal problematic

notions of normativity, exclusion, and homogeneity within the Black "community" they aim to galvanize.

Chapter two, titled "Niggaz Dream About Dying" explores the tactic of nihilism by engaging with the work of legendary gangsta rap group, N.W.A., whose shockingly violent second album *Niggaz4Life* is permeated with an overwhelming sense of apathy, hopelessness, and lovelessness. I complicate that narrative with *aesthetic nihilism*, a theoretical approach that allows Black artists and listeners to disidentify with nihilism to both recognize its understandable circulation in Black life, while also gesturing toward the need for stronger, more radical tactics to upend the status quo. Through a comprehensive analysis of their media presence, selected music videos, lyrics, and controversial second album *Niggaz4Life*, I argue that N.W.A's nihilistic approach mines the Black Nightmare Imaginary as primary source material for harrowing depictions of police brutality in ways that hold radical possibilities as an aesthetic practice. However, their nihilistic approach is imbued with misogyny in ways that only exacerbates the nightmares experienced by Black women. This underscores the imperative of adopting an intersectional framework, even within realms of cultural production deemed irredeemable, to fully assess and harness their generative cultural power.

Chapter three, titled "My Life is Not the Sunshine" engages with the tactic of opacity in relation to the work of Mary J. Blige. Inspired by the theorizing of Eduoard Glissant, I use opacity to refer to a general unknowability and ambivalence that can be made to manifest visually or otherwise; a refusal to be legible according to social,

political, or cultural standards that flatten the complexity of Black womanhood.⁷⁶ By harnessing this ambivalence and unknowability visually, thematically, and discursively, Blige forges a subject position that resists the violence of legibility to a dehumanizing, antiblack hegemonic social order. Haunted by the specter of one-dimensional and tragic portrayals of Billie Holiday projected onto her by the media early in her career, I examine how Blige utilizes opacity, ambivalence, and ambiguity across her music, videos, performances, and interviews. These strategies shield her from the violence of racial capitalism and channel the experiences of young Black women in the hip-hop generation through her art.

Chapter four, titled “If You Don’t Own Your Masters, Your Masters Own You” considers the concept of marronage as it relates to Black popular music. In Neil Roberts’s recent text, *Freedom as Marronage*, he asks that we do away with the strict binary between freedom and slavery and consider the possibility of freedom *as flight*.⁷⁷ I aim to apply this framework to Black musical works and practices, particularly focusing on the activities of Prince during the early nineties. By highlighting the harrowing experiences of coerced enjoyments endured by the enslaved at auction blocks and on plantations, alongside the music industry’s historical exploitation of Black artists, I delve into Prince’s efforts to break free from his record label. These efforts included making his name unpronounceable, undermining the sales potential of his albums, publicly displaying “SLAVE” across his face, and persistently demanding ownership of his master recordings. I refer to

⁷⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

⁷⁷ Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*.

these actions as *creative marronage*—a strategy of artistic flight from racial capitalist exploitation. Through this lens, I explore the contested freedoms that Prince's actions brought about, shedding light on the possibilities and limitations of Black artistic freedom within the music industry's racial capitalist machinations.

Chapter 1: I Love it When They Fear Me: Performance of Black Vigilantism in Early Nineties Hip-Hop

Introduction

Toward the end of a 1992 Public Enemy concert at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, the group's S1W (Security of the 1st World) soldiers dragged an effigy of a Klu Klux Klan member onto the stage. As they did this, Chuck D addressed the crowd, exclaiming, "It's time to realize that we ain't a part of that other family. Let's find a way to stick together as a family."⁷⁸ By that *other* family, Chuck is referring to the "American," i.e. white American family, a distinction he draws to suggest that Black people exist as noncitizens of the United States. Rather than strive for inclusion, Chuck wants Black people to embrace their shared positionality and collective power.

As the S1Ws place a noose around the effigy's neck, he continues, asking, "Is he guilty?!" The audience roars approvingly. "Do he owe you anything?!" The audience again responds in the affirmative. "What is the penalty for Black people's

⁷⁸ Public Enemy *The Enemy Strikes Live 1992 Apollo Theatre*.

damage in the United States?!” The audience quickly catches on, screaming “death!” Chuck continues, “The penalty is death, right? Is he guilty?! Is he guilty? Somebody say YEAH!” The crowd is riotously enthusiastic, collectively affirming an alternate reality in which actual consequences for damaging Black communities is foundational to American culture and society. It is a seemingly unthinkable prospect that, by performing a Black vigilante lynching and thus turning the tables on the antiblack machinations of America, is given life through this performative moment of shared rage and catharsis. When Chuck screams, “Here come the drums!” the hard-hitting beat for their then-new single “Can’t Truss It” drops and the KKK effigy is yanked into the air—the audience erupts.⁷⁹

By encouraging their predominantly Black audience to participate in the mock lynching of a white racist, Public Enemy fosters a radical climate of shared identification for a community living under shared conditions of oppression, with a shared investment in exercising vigilante violence against the antiblack hegemonic order made manifest in effigy. Rather than horror at this spectacle of violence, their performance of Black vigilantism is received by the crowd as a justifiable action. I argue that understanding and acknowledging the validity of violent retribution, along with knowing that others do as well, is cathartic and can foster a sense of belonging for many Black people.

Performances of Black vigilantism, such as this one, serve the crucial ideological function of affirming shared experiences of oppression while fostering a sense of shared purpose and unity among Black audiences. They do not necessarily

⁷⁹ *Public Enemy The Enemy Strikes Live 1992 Apollo Theatre.*

advocate for literal violence but rather embody collective resistance against the nightmarish realities of Black existence, challenging the isolating and silencing effects of social death. Unlike conventional vigilantism, which upholds existing laws and norms, Black vigilantism challenges the inherently antiblack nature of the American legal system. It seeks to establish counterhegemonic norms and laws that protect and potentially liberate Black communities. Artists like Public Enemy recognize the power of rage and defiance as transformative forces, capable of catalyzing solidarity, community, and pathways to liberation.

"I Love It When They Fear Me" delves into the exploration of Black vigilantism in the works of Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and 2Pac—three artists whose contributions stand as some of the most politically charged in hip-hop history—to argue that Black vigilante revenge fantasies serve to clarify and forge community. By tapping into the Black Nightmare Imaginary to foreground the horrors of state and vigilante violence against Black people in the post-Civil Rights era—including police brutality, mob violence, and extrajudicial murder—these artists provide riveting context through groundbreaking music videos to justify and encourage performances of Black vigilantism. Their art highlights the generative power of performances of Black vigilante violence to foster belonging and community among Black audiences, many of whom share identification with the nightmares of Black life and the desire to fight back against structural antiblackness. However, their messages of rage and rebellion are limited by the constraints of the pop cultural landscape, an ideologically contested terrain where efforts to censor or ban their videos for their radical power often succeeded. Furthermore, the

shortcomings in how these artists addressed gender, sexuality, and other categories of difference reveal problematic notions of normativity, exclusion, and homogeneity within the Black "community" they aim to galvanize.

On Black Vigilantism

Black vigilantism, both on a local and broader scale, is a justifiable means by which Black people challenge and resist, rather than enforce, the antiblack laws and policies of the state to protect Black communities from antiblack violence. For many Black people, Black vigilantism emerges from a deep-seated sentiment that seeking help from the state is futile and may even exacerbate the vulnerability of the larger collective Black community.

Within and beyond the legal system, Black people are structurally excluded from the realm of humanity, and thus ineligible to the state as anything other than criminals and undesirables unworthy of protection. Christina Sharpe gets at this point with her concept of “anagrammatical blackness,” in which the meaning of words like “human,” “boy,” or “girl” fall apart when coupled with the Black body, transforming into grammars like “criminal,” “thug,” or “animal,” a violent process that reflects the denial of any form of metaphysical grace to Black people within the context of modernity.⁸⁰ Broadly put, this pervasive condition of bodily dispossession and degradation—what Sharpe calls Black being “in the hold”⁸¹—fuels a justifiable reluctance to involve the police in their communities, let alone rely on the state for any meaningful form of redress. As such, I argue performances of Black vigilantism

⁸⁰ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, pg. 77.

⁸¹ Sharpe, pg. 27.

foreground nightmarish scenes of antiblack violence from the hold to contextualize the legitimacy of Black vigilantism in defense of Black communities.

This sentiment is further solidified by the understanding that imprisoning fellow Black people only serves to bolster the power and reach of the carceral state, thereby exacerbating the peril faced by the broader Black community. James Baldwin articulates this stark reality in *No Name in the Street*, asserting that within the framework of America's deeply entrenched antiblack paradigm, it is the law itself, rather than the purported criminal, that bears true guilt.⁸² As more Black bodies are ensnared within this oppressive system, the machinery of Black dispossession grows increasingly formidable and unyielding. Consequently, it is rational for Black communities to avoid engaging with law enforcement—or relying on conventional political avenues for recourse—opting instead to address internal and external challenges autonomously, even if it necessitates resorting to drastic measures such as violence.

Thus, Black vigilantism, whether in revolutionary contexts or in the daily lives of Black people, serves a crucial purpose by allowing communities to voice grievances, defend themselves, and address injustices without reinforcing or empowering what Chuck D refers to as the "Anti-Nigger Machine" – the law enforcement and carceral systems of the state. Black vigilantism acknowledges that law enforcement and the state operate structurally as racial adversaries. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor delves into the discriminatory role of law enforcement in *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation*, writing, “The racism of the police is not the

⁸² Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, pg. 148.

product of vitriol; it flows from their role as armed agents of the state. The police function to enforce the rule of the politically powerful and the economic elite: this is why poor and working-class communities are so heavily policed.”⁸³ Historically and institutionally, police have functioned as agents of the American hegemonic order in which racial oppression is foundational. As long as they serve as the enforcers of state violence, this dynamic between police and Black communities will persist. This understanding underscores the necessity for Black people to act outside of established norms and challenge the oppressive structures of the state, even through performances or acts of vigilantism.

An essential and contentious aspect of vigilantism revolves around the use of violence as a rational and effective means of resistance for Black people. While Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. vehemently denounced violent methods as a byproduct of a corrosive sense of hopelessness and tantamount to suicide in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*⁸⁴, Malcolm X encouraged Black people to embrace violent tactics to defend themselves and as potential avenues of resistance when facing white vigilante or state violence, or when traditional political engagement proves futile.⁸⁵ X echoed Frantz Fanon, who regarded violence as fundamental to achieving liberation, acknowledging its role in dismantling the oppressive and inherently violent structures erected and perpetuated by the oppressor. In “On Violence,” from *Wretched of the Earth*, he asserts, “In its bare reality, decolonization reeks of red-hot cannonballs and bloody knives. For the last can be the first only after

⁸³ Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation.*, pg. 101.

⁸⁴ King, King, and Harding, *Where Do We Go from Here.*, pg. 47.

⁸⁵ X and Breitman, *Malcolm X Speaks.*

a murderous and decisive confrontation between the two protagonists.” He contends that a successful liberation movement “can only succeed by resorting to every means, including, of course, violence.”⁸⁶

This ideological posture of armed vigilante resistance requires a stark transformation of attitudes within Black communities about the relationship between resistance and violence in the struggle for Black liberation. According to Assata Shakur, one of the key necessities for a successful liberation movement is its alignment with the will of the people. No truly liberatory movement, violent or otherwise, succeeds against the will of the community it claims to serve. She writes, “Since we did not own the TV stations or newspapers, it was easy for the news media to portray us as monsters and terrorists. The police could terrorize the Black community daily, yet if one Black person successfully defended himself or herself against a police attack, they were called terrorists. It soon became clear to me that our most important battle was to help politically mobilize, educate, and organize the masses of Black people and to win their minds and hearts.”⁸⁷ To this end, the impact of performances of Black vigilantism cannot be overstated, as they possess the potential to instigate profound ideological shifts that prepare communities for revolutionary action.

The early nineties saw the emergence of music videos as a powerful medium, coinciding with the growing influence of the Black culture industry. This convergence created an opportune moment for radical Black hip-hop artists—

⁸⁶ Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth*, pg. 3.

⁸⁷ Shakur and Davis, *Assata*, pg. 242.

including Ice Cube, X-Clan, KAM, Paris, KMD, and Poor Righteous Teachers—to utilize both the sonic and visual aspects of music videos to inspire a mass revolutionary consciousness amongst young Black people. These artists harnessed the medium to its fullest potential, leveraging its dual nature to amplify their messages and provoke critical dialogue about the urgent need for societal transformation. Thus, I argue music videos are a necessary space to center analyses of the circulation of radical Black politics, especially through popular culture, during the post-Civil Rights era.

In “On Violence,” Fanon says the embrace of revolutionary violence can serve as a catalyst for the colonized to assert their humanity, drive history, and seize control of their own destinies.⁸⁸ I argue that does not just apply to material acts of violence but also to performances of vigilantism as well. For example, the actions of the Black Panthers elicited powerful reactions from young people who found empowerment and pride in the Panthers' bold display of weaponry and surveillance tactics against the very authorities tasked with monitoring them. Even their style of dress and manner of presentation was intentional to strike a chord with young people. Victoria Rollins writes, “The Panthers were public relations geniuses who purposefully utilized aesthetics and fashion to produce media spectacles and gain more publicity to further their political aims.”⁸⁹ These performances of vigilantism, characterized by their distinctive afros, berets, and leather jackets, were simultaneously confrontational and cool, instilling a feeling of communal solidarity and empowerment among many

⁸⁸ Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth*, pg. 6.

⁸⁹ Rollins, “The Revolutionary Aesthetics of the Black Panther Party & Its Impact on Fashion Today – .”

Black youth. Being young themselves, the Panthers had a unique capacity to connect with their peers in ways that older generations could not. Their ability to ignite and mobilize youthful energy in the struggle for Black liberation only heightened their perceived threat.

Whether expressed through music, fashion, or community defense initiatives, performances of Black vigilantism can engender vicarious feelings of catharsis and foster a shared sense of identification among many Black people. By challenging the notion of Black isolation and silence enforced by hegemonic structures, they help restore a sense of collective belonging and unity. While the actions of figures like the Panthers, Angela Davis or Malcolm X may appear more overtly impactful, the visual, sonic, and lyrical expressions of revolutionary musicians such as Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and 2pac can be equally instrumental in inspiring and mobilizing communities. Through their efforts, these artists undertake the crucial ideological work of urging Black youth to unite, confront, and subvert the oppressive authority of antiblack laws and policies—that is what makes their work so dangerous.

Black vigilantism functions as a mode of resistance that confronts and destabilizes the power structures responsible for perpetuating Black subjugation and death. It represents a refusal to recognize the legitimacy of the state's authority and an acknowledgment that adherence to its laws merely reinforces the cycle of oppression. Through performances of Black vigilantism, artists and their audiences alike can identify shared experiences and assert their collective agency in enforcing counter hegemonic justice in the face of systemic racism and violence.

Nightmares of Extrajudicial Murder

In 1999, James Allen authored and curated *Without Sanctuary*, a chilling exploration of the gruesome practice of lynching photography during America's darkest era of race relations. This period was characterized by the widespread circulation of postcards adorned with images depicting the brutal lynching of Black bodies.⁹⁰ The title of the collection, "Without Sanctuary," speaks to the stark reality that Black Americans had no refuge or protection from the scourge of white violence during this time, from police, mobs, or lone wolves. Local law enforcement and judicial systems routinely failed to arrest or prosecute perpetrators, from the state level to the federal level. This lack of accountability meant that Black people were constantly vulnerable to the horrors of vigilante violence, regardless of their location, circumstances, or social status. This pervasive threat of violence serves as a grim reminder of the enduring antiblack status quo that continues to scaffold American society to this day. Black people truly were without sanctuary, living in constant fear and precarity under the spectral presence of social death.

In the tumultuous landscape of the eighties, a chilling series of extrajudicial killings of Black people unfolded, leaving a trail of devastation across age, gender, and class lines. During this harrowing era, both police and white vigilante individuals and mobs perpetrated acts of violence that would later become the stuff of our nightmares. These killings underscored the absence of sanctuary for Black bodies, highlighting their constant vulnerability to pervasive antiblack violence—a legacy of what Saidiya Hartman describes as the "afterlives of slavery," entrenched in the very

⁹⁰ Allen, *Without Sanctuary*.

fabric of American society.⁹¹ Against this nightmarish backdrop, a wave of Black vigilante performances emerged in the early nineties, drawing from the Black Nightmare Imaginary. These performances aimed to spotlight scenes of antiblack violence, emphasizing its seeming intransigence across time, to foster unity by acknowledging shared oppression and advocating for more radical strategies toward Black liberation.

In the New York City area alone, the birthplace of Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and 2pac, the catalog of racially motivated violence is extensive and deeply disturbing. One harrowing incident took place in June of 1982 in the Gravesend section of Brooklyn, where 34-year-old transit worker Willie Turks and two companions became the targets of a white mob. Armed with bottles, cans, and even a steel rod, the mob brutally beat Turks to death as he and his friends were simply trying to make their way home from work.⁹²

On September 15, 1983, 25-year-old Michael Stewart was arrested and brutally beaten by police officers while in custody for graffitiing on a subway platform in lower Manhattan.⁹³ Left brain dead and hemorrhaging from the ordeal, he died thirteen days later on September 28. So traumatized was a young Jean Michel Basquiat by the event that he painted his famous work *Defacement* in the days following the beating on a wall in Keith Haring's art studio, remarking to a friend, "That could have been me."⁹⁴

⁹¹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother.*, pg. 6.

⁹² Basler, "BLACK MAN IS KILLED BY MOB IN BROOKLYN."

⁹³ Nielson, "'It Could Have Been Me.'"

⁹⁴ Schjeldahl, "Basquiat's Memorial to a Young Artist Killed by Police."

On October 29, 1984, 66-year-old Eleanor Bumpurs was shot to death in her home in the Bronx after a standoff with police over an eviction notice. Bumpurs was in the midst of a mental health crisis. After barricading herself in her apartment, officers broke down the door, struggled to subdue her, and shot her twice—once in the hand and once in the chest with a shotgun.⁹⁵

On December 22, 1984, 37-year-old Bernard Goetz shot four Black teenage boys, later alleging that they attempted to rob him on a subway train. Although all four teens would survive, one of them, Darell Cabey, was left paralyzed and with severe brain damage.⁹⁶ After shooting all four boys, Goetz confessed he walked over to a stricken Cabey and said, “You don’t look so bad. Here’s another,” before shooting him again, that final bullet severing his spine. Dubbed the “Subway Vigilante,” Goetz was widely celebrated for taking the law into his own hands against marauding Black youths. Charged with attempted murder, assault, and reckless endangerment, Goetz was only found guilty of one count of carrying an unlicensed firearm and acquitted of the remaining charges. He served just eight months in jail.⁹⁷

On December 20th, 1986, 23-year-old Michael Griffith and two friends were brutally attacked by a white mob in Howard Beach, in Queens after visiting a pizza parlor in the neighborhood. The white youths ambushed the friends with an assortment of weapons, including sticks, tire irons, and baseball bats. Badly injured

⁹⁵ “NYPD Shooting of Mentally Ill Woman Invokes Memory of Eleanor Bumpurs.”

⁹⁶ “Before Daniel Penny, Bernhard Goetz Shot Four Black Men on NYC Subway - The Washington Post.”

⁹⁷ “Before Daniel Penny, Bernhard Goetz Shot Four Black Men on NYC Subway - The Washington Post.”

and desperate to escape, Griffith ran onto a nearby highway, where he was struck by a passing car and killed.⁹⁸

On December 3rd, 1987, Yvonne Smallwood sustained serious and ultimately fatal injuries while in police custody.⁹⁹ Smallwood had two altercations with police—one during an arrest for assault, and the other upon returning to police custody after being released from the hospital due to the first assault. Witnesses said the officers beat Smallwood unconscious. After being shuttled from jail to the hospital to court hearings and then back to jail over the course of several days, she died from her injuries on December 9th.¹⁰⁰

Perhaps most famously, on August 23rd, 1989, 16-year-old Yusef Hawkins was beaten to death in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn by a white mob armed with baseball bats.¹⁰¹ According to reports, Hawkins and his companions were attacked because it was assumed they were in the neighborhood to visit a local white girl. Amid the ambush and ensuing chaos, one of the white youths pulled out a gun and shot Hawkins twice in the chest, killing him.¹⁰² Hawkins's murder made headlines across the country, inspiring a slew of protest marches, murals, and musical tributes.

While the murder of Yusef Hawkins remains most widely etched in collective memory, it represents merely one instance among a myriad of nightmarish scenes of antiblack violence in which Black bodies were subjected to brutal violence at the

⁹⁸ Roberts, "A Racial Attack That, Years Later, Is Still Being Felt."

⁹⁹ Verhovek, "Role of the Police Studied In Death of Bronx Woman."

¹⁰⁰ Verhovek.

¹⁰¹ Horton, "Storm Over Brooklyn."

¹⁰² Horton.

hands of law enforcement, lone wolves, or white vigilante mobs. This violence persisted despite nominal legal consequences, if any, for the perpetrators, regardless of the particularities of each incident. This grim reality continues to haunt the Black community (especially native New Yorkers), encapsulated within the Black Nightmare Imaginary—a repository of shared traumas and fears undergirding the works of political rap acts like the ones featured in this chapter. As observed by Basquiat and echoed by countless others, the threat of such violence loomed ominously over all Black people, a constant reminder of the precariousness of Black existence from the Middle Passage to the present.

Though occasionally perpetrators may have faced imprisonment, the unrelenting stream of Black bloodshed persisted, underscoring the systemic nature of antiblack violence that defied the victories of the Civil Rights era. In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Sharon Holland argues that despite the abolition of slavery, the transition of Black people from enslaved to free persons never fully materialized in the collective imagination of white society. This enduring perception of Black people as inherently subordinate, coupled with the ongoing effects of white supremacy, led to the pervasive presence of antiblackness throughout all aspects of society, irrespective of the legal frameworks that may, at least nominally, acknowledge the humanity of Black people.¹⁰³ It is a status quo that was painfully and tragically evident during the eighties when the crack era, gutting of social programs, racist dog whistles, and the aforementioned killings of Black people compounded to delineate a harrowing condition of degradation and dispossession,

¹⁰³ Holland, *Raising the Dead*, pg. 15.

even despite the hard fought legal and political victories of the sixties. For many young people, the ineffectuality of prior efforts necessitated a new kind of action, both materially and ideologically, a sentiment affirmed through the powerful medium of hip-hop music.

In response to this stark reality, artists like Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and 2pac harnessed the persistence of these nightmares to contextualize their performances of Black vigilantism to galvanize communities, circulate counter hegemonic ideologies, and hopefully safeguard Black lives. Through their work, they sought to confront and challenge the structural forces perpetuating antiblack violence, providing a voice for a community under siege to reimagine notions of justice and protection in a society where mainstream political tactics like marching and voting had failed them time and again.

A Call to Arms

As discussed in the introduction, a journalist queried Sister Souljah shortly after the Los Angeles Uprising ended, asking her opinion on the wisdom of "Black-on-white" violence during the unrest. She was infamously quoted as offering the following response: "Yeah, it was wise. I mean, if black people kill black people every day, why not have a week and kill white people?"¹⁰⁴ Her words sparked a media frenzy when then-presidential candidate Bill Clinton seized the opportunity to excoriate Souljah for her out-of-context remarks to align himself with centrist voters. With that, the political stunt known as the "Sister Souljah moment" was born.

¹⁰⁴ Mills, "SISTER SOULJAH'S CALL TO ARMS."

While much attention has been given to Sister Souljah's infamous quote and the political tactic it catalyzed, not enough scrutiny has been directed at the actual article in which it was published. During a press conference following her mention by Clinton, Souljah rightly pointed out one reason to be skeptical about the quote: the outlet itself, *The Washington Post*, which she described as a conservative paper with a clear agenda.¹⁰⁵ Titled “Sister Souljah’s Call to Arms” with the subheading, “Sister Souljah says the riots were payback. Are you paying attention?” the article served as a warning to white America about the potential of radical hip hop to incite Black vigilante violence.¹⁰⁶ In it, the writer, David Mills, pays scant attention to the structural and material conditions of oppression discussed or dramatized in the music of artists like Sister Souljah and 2pac. Instead, he focuses largely on the increased power and influence of radical rappers, especially in the aftermath of the Los Angeles Uprising.¹⁰⁷

The article acts as a “It’s 10 o’clock—do you know where your children are?” wake-up call to White America regarding the radicalization of Black youth through hip hop. Mills writes, “Whose analysis of the violence in Los Angeles, in the months and years to come, will matter more? The conservative pundits, placing blame squarely on young criminals who ‘terrorized’ a city? The liberal politicians, bemoaning poverty and the neglect of our cities? Or the radical rappers, asserting that white people and Korean merchants had it coming? Ask the kids who watch MTV.”¹⁰⁸ Mills simplifies the complexity of politically charged hip hop to categorize

¹⁰⁵ “Rap Artist’s Response to Clinton Remarks | C-SPAN.Org.”

¹⁰⁶ Mills, “SISTER SOULJAH’S CALL TO ARMS.”

¹⁰⁷ Mills.

¹⁰⁸ Mills.

it amongst a host of other sensationalist political camps influencing the American ideological landscape at the dawn of the nineties, to suggest ominously that white America should pay closer attention to what the rappers are saying, and how their messages circulate. While much attention was given to groups like N.W.A and artists like Dr. Dre for their nihilistic gangsta rap, this article stands out for its alarm about “conscious” rappers. It is no wonder Souljah's words were seized upon by the Clinton campaign, as his team didn't need to read between the article's lines to develop their plan of attack.

The early nineties marked a critical moment for hip-hop, highlighting the serious power and influence political rappers held, which clashed with the antiblack hegemonic order of the day. Artists like Ice Cube, Ice T, Chuck D, and Souljah herself were frequently featured on nightly news and talk shows, offering unfiltered perspectives on race relations in America. In the aftermath of the Uprising, rappers were asked to interpret the events for white audiences stunned by the unleashed rage in Black communities. Eric Harvey from *The Ringer* writes, “As the smoke cleared and the nation tried to piece together a coherent narrative for the largest incident of civil unrest in a generation, the press was treating Ice Cube and Ice-T less like vulgar hip-hop shit-stirrers and more like the street reporters and political pundits they'd been calling themselves for years.”¹¹⁰ It was not far-fetched to suspect that hip-hop not only helped explain Black rage but also fanned its flames. That fear and dismay over the influence and widespread circulation of artists like Souljah lies at the core of Mills's article.

¹¹⁰ Harvey, “Reality Meets Rap.”

I argue that the incendiary politics of rappers like Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and 2pac posed a substantial threat to the social order by using their music, and particularly music videos, to actively engage in an ideological war of position for Black liberation. In Public Enemy's "By the Time I Get to Arizona" video, civil rights-era antiblack violence is foregrounded to emphasize the persistence of antiblackness despite past civil rights victories. These nightmarish scenes from the past contextualize their performance of Black vigilante retribution for Arizona's refusal to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Meanwhile, 2pac utilizes the nightmarish imagery of extrajudicial police violence in the present to contextualize "Holler If Ya Hear Me," a revolutionary tour-de-force calling for vigilante mobilization to unite Black communities and protect Black lives. Finally, Sister Souljah's "The Final Solution: Slavery is Back in Effect," paints a dystopian future where chattel slavery is reinstated. By tapping into the ongoing legacies of slavery, Souljah's nightmarish imagery and message resonate to urge Black people to arm themselves and build the necessary infrastructure for revolutionary action to protect their communities.

Collectively, all three artists used the music video medium to foreground the nightmares of antiblack extrajudicial violence to advocate instead for Black communities to unite, arm themselves, and take revolutionary action to protect their communities. In other words, these artists utilized the concept of the Black Nightmare Imaginary to highlight the atrocities of state and vigilante violence against Black people and to mobilize collective action. However, the censoring or outright banning of all three music videos examined in this study by MTV underscores the

complexities and constraints inherent to the pop cultural landscape for radical Black artists aiming to spread counter hegemonic ideas through their work.

Ghosts of Violence Past

In 1986, Democratic Governor of Arizona, Bruce Babbitt, established Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a paid holiday in the state as he was leaving office. However, his Republican successor, Evan Mecham, swiftly overturned Babbitt's decree shortly after taking office, later reinstating it as an *unpaid* holiday.¹¹² This reversal was perceived by Black people in Arizona and across the nation as a profoundly racist insult. Following intense public pressure and the NFL's threat to relocate the 1993 Super Bowl, which was slated to be held in Arizona, a ballot measure was introduced in 1990 to allow Arizona citizens to decide the fate of the holiday. When the measure failed, prompting the NFL to withdraw, a nationwide boycott of Arizona was initiated.¹¹³

Enter Public Enemy, America's premier politically charged rap group. Released in October of 1991, their fourth album, *Apocalypse 91: The Enemy Strikes Black*, garnered widespread acclaim as the group's fourth-straight creative masterpiece. Among its tracks, "By the Time I Get to Arizona" stood out for its unyielding condemnation of the Governor and the racism of Arizona for refusing to recognize Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a paid holiday in the state. While the song was notable, it gained national infamy in 1992 when Public Enemy released a music video to accompany it, which remains one of their most provocative and controversial

¹¹² "The Long Road to Recognition."

¹¹³ "The Long Road to Recognition."

works to date. Aired once and then removed from regular rotation on MTV¹¹⁴, the “By the Time I Get to Arizona” video presents a Black vigilante fantasy of violent retribution against the Arizona state government for its refusal to honor Martin Luther King Jr. Day. It utilizes the Black Nightmare Imaginary to evoke nightmarish scenes of antiblack violence during the Civil Rights Movement, albeit not in a solemn or honorific manner. Instead, these images serve to underscore the disillusionment and frustration amongst Black people stemming from the unfulfilled promises of that era's activism, advocating for a collective embrace of more radical tactics, including Black vigilantism, to attain liberation for Black people.

Directed by Eric Meza, the video for “By the Time I Get to Arizona” begins with an opening monologue from the Governor of Arizona, set at a press conference where he is flanked by his staff and surrounded by a sea of white journalists. Despite opposing the MLK holiday, the Governor adamantly claims he is “not a racist.” Public Enemy strategically intercuts his words with black-and-white recreations of 1960s civil rights protests, highlighting the enduring legacy of racism despite the Governor's assertions. Public Enemy suggests that even 2-3 decades after the Civil Rights Movement, while respectable discourse on race may have shifted away from overtly white supremacist language and symbols like white sheets or burning crosses, the underlying strain of antiblackness remains virulent and entrenched. The overarching message conveyed is that the little that has fundamentally changed since the days of nonviolent protest render the Governor's words hollow, and that Black people need more assertive and proactive measures toward liberation.

¹¹⁴ Serpick, “Public Enemy Look Back at 20 Years of ‘By the Time I Get to Arizona.’”

Moreover, the initial scenes of the video serve to underscore the gravity of Public Enemy's message by illustrating that racism manifests in various forms, both physical and discursive, which are interconnected and demand attention. The Governor's refusal to acknowledge MLK Day is depicted as far from innocent, instead stemming from a deeper well of antiblackness that continues to inflict harm on Black people. Public Enemy contends that relying on the state or white sympathy for solutions has proven ineffective, necessitating the consideration of stronger and more radical tactics, including vigilantism.

As the video continues to depict various scenes from fifties and sixties protests, the moments highlighted are fraught with a sense of impending doom, anticipating the inevitable violence against participants. While such scenes are typically portrayed with sentiments of pride, courage, and valor in mainstream narratives, PE reframes them as impending defeats by emphasizing the horror of state violence and the resulting sense of helplessness before its eventuality. Thus, these scenes take on the qualities of a nightmare. In this way, "By the Time I Get to Arizona" performs the rejection of the politics of hope and change by forcing viewers to confront the nightmares of antiblack violence to underscore the necessity of Black vigilante actions.

Additionally, the black-and-white images in the video accentuate three other themes: religion, as evidenced by protest signs proclaiming, "segregation is sin" and the presence of clergy members among the protestors; labor solidarities, reflected in signs referencing labor rights and wages; and cross-racial solidarities, represented by the participation of whites in these marches and activities. However, when viewed

through the lens of the nightmarish framing of these moments, the video suggests the ineffectiveness of these solidarities in the face of the inherent and ongoing denial of dignity and justice to Black people in America. Their incendiary approach gestures toward the futility of centering these three concerns, and the perceived necessity of vigilante violence as a means of effectively addressing systemic oppression and violence against Black communities.

As the music video seamlessly transitions from its opening sequence to the main song, the camera at the press conference pulls back to reveal PE members positioned at the back of the room, facing the camera and, by extension, the viewers (Figure 2). This deliberate positioning suggests their complete indifference to the Governor's remarks, signaling the end of any possibility for dialogue with the oppressor.



Figure 2: Public Enemy video - press conference scene

The introduction of the group is aptly complemented by the music, featuring a mesmerizing sample of Mandrill's "Two Sisters of Mystery" slowed down slightly to enhance its hypnotic allure. The song engenders an atmosphere of intrigue and

introspection, evoking the sense of plans being unraveled and new possibilities emerging. This is reflected in the song's incendiary lyrics, as Chuck D uses clipped, impressionistic imagery to paint a picture of simmering rage that will find ultimate catharsis by the time he arrives at the Governor's doorstep. He openly threatens violence when he raps,

The sucker over there, he try to keep it yesteryear
The good old days, the same old ways that kept us dying
...what he need is a nosebleed.
I'm on a mission to get a politician to honor
Or he's a goner
By the time I get to Arizona

With these words, Chuck establishes his vigilante mission to make Arizona honor King, or the consequence will be death. Public Enemy astutely anticipated that this musical backdrop would serve as a fitting accompaniment to a visual narrative of clandestine rebellion, resonating with audiences on both ideological and visceral levels. Even when experienced independently of the video, "By the Time I Get to Arizona" stands out as one of PE's most captivating compositions, drawing listeners into its provocative narrative and evocative sonic landscape.

A central and riveting aspect of the video is its juxtaposition of imagery from the civil rights movement with scenes portraying Public Enemy and their S1Ws preparing for armed struggle in the present day. The black-and-white footage depicts iconic moments of struggle, including King guiding an elderly woman on and off a city bus during the Montgomery boycott, courageous sit-ins at lunch counters, and Ruby Bridges navigating through a hostile crowd on her way to school. Interspersed with these historical scenes are glimpses of the S1Ws honing their skills in karate, constructing bombs, and engaging in target practice. The stark contrast between these

older, outdated tactics and the modern-day preparations underscores the urgency and vitality of PE's militant call to action.

In a pivotal moment of the music video, the tone dramatically shifts as both the sonic and visual elements undergo a radical transformation. Sonically, the song's slow, menacing beat collapses into nine sharp snare hits, evoking the sounds of gunshots amidst the screams and cries of a distressed crowd. This auditory shift conjures haunting echoes of historical atrocities like Bloody Sunday, the Birmingham Church bombing, and the assassinations of King, X, and Medgar Evers—iconic and nightmarish scenarios of antiblack violence that now contour our experience of the song and music video.

This sonic transformation is anchored by a striking sample of the Jackson 5's cover of "Walk on By," characterized by a heavy bass line, a haunting organ, and Chuck D's intense delivery, where he essentially declares war on the state. He seethes,

Make the state pay, I'm looking for the day
Hard as it seems, this ain't no damn dream
Gotta know what I mean, its team against team
Catch the light beam

Here, Chuck trades in the “dream” of liberation for the harsh realities of revolutionary violence, communicating that the time is right to pick up a gun, train its beam on the target, and seize justice from the clutches of white supremacist power. Overall, the musical and lyrical elements of the song combine to create a harrowing sonic landscape that complements the violent imagery depicted on screen. Nightmarish scenes of racist violence against Black protestors unfold, with hoses and dogs used to

thrash their bodies, while individuals at a lunch counter, including a figure resembling King, are subjected to humiliating treatment as food is poured over their heads.

A powerful shot captures King's reaction to the degradation, portrayed in a medium closeup with noodles dangling from his face (Figure 3). Here, King breaks the fourth wall, glaring directly at the viewer, conveying a visceral sense of rage and disillusionment. Unlike traditional depictions of King that convey his calm and composure under pressure, this portrayal of King is raw and emotive, highlighting the profound impact of systemic racism on his sense of dignity and self-respect. In these images, King appears defeated and full of rage, underscoring the devastating toll of racial injustice, and gesturing toward the ineffectiveness of nonviolence as a tactic.



Figure 3: Public Enemy video - Dr. King lunch counter

Interposed with harrowing images of dogs attacking Black protestors, King and his companions are forcibly removed from the lunch counter by the police. A particularly striking scene shows Chuck D rapping in front of prison bars, with King positioned just to the right, still covered with food remnants from the sit-in (Figure 4). Although King's body is obscured by shadows, the unmistakable expression of rage

on his face resonates like that of an angry and unfulfilled ghost, yearning for liberation.



Figure 4: Public Enemy video – Dr. King behind bars

With King now depicted behind bars, and thus agentially limited, the music video takes a dramatic turn. As the song's original beat resumes, the S1Ws are shown infiltrating a government building, stealthily navigating its halls armed with guns. They confront a group of white police officers, breaking one officer's neck. Meanwhile, King, portrayed in black and white, leisurely walks onto the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, foreshadowing his impending assassination. In a parallel scene, a white state senator relaxes in his government office, unaware of the lurking S1Ws. When Chuck D presents him with a box of chocolates as a gift, the senator snatches them and rudely slams his office door in Chuck's face. Simultaneously, another group of S1Ws plant a car bomb beneath the Governor's limousine, setting the stage for the video's calamitous final moments.

As the video reaches its climax, multiple narrative threads unravel simultaneously: King is assassinated on his hotel room balcony, the senator succumbs to the poison-laced chocolates in his office, a group of white politicians are gunned

down by the S1Ws while exiting an elevator, and Chuck detonates the car bomb, resulting in the explosion of the governor's limousine and the demise of everyone inside.

The final minute of the video is a whirlwind of rapid editing and pacing, akin to a runaway train hurtling towards its destination, with scenes seamlessly bleeding into one another before abruptly culminating in a cacophony of bloodshed, bullets, and explosions. "By the Time I Get to Arizona" emerges as a violent fever dream of Black vigilante justice and retribution, showcasing a thematic brilliance that unsettled critics, both white and Black, then and now.

Public Enemy made a bold artistic choice by engaging with King's legacy while distancing themselves, and viewers, from his advocacy for nonviolence. Instead of portraying King as an ultimately triumphant martyr, they present him as a symbol of disillusionment and unfinished business. They argue that King's perceived failure, evidenced by the persistence of antiblack violence decades after his death, should prompt Black people to consider more radical avenues for liberation, including vigilantism. The song and video are a call to arms for Black communities to see how past nightmarish conditions have persisted into the present, and to take radical action toward true liberation.

Throughout the video, even King himself appears to align with Public Enemy's stance. This departure from traditional portrayals of King as an unwavering beacon of hope underscores their provocative call for vigilantism. As Public Enemy's spokesman, Harry Allen, candidly remarked to disgruntled reporters, "we wonder what [King] would have stood for, if he had been able to stand after that bullet ripped

violently through his neck. Being assassinated, it's been said, will often change your political viewpoint."¹¹⁵

Visions of the 2Pacalypse

In 1992, 2Pac's debut album, *2Pacalypse Now* sparked controversy when 19-year-old Ronald Ray Howard shot a Texas state trooper and attributed his actions to one of the album's songs.¹¹⁶ The track in question, "Souljah's Story," narrates the tale of a young Black man who, after being stopped by a police officer, is triggered by memories of Rodney King's nightmarish ordeal, and ends up shooting the officer before going on the run. Later, his little brother attempts to free him from bondage, but his efforts fail, and he is killed. The song ends with a final lament:

The fast life ain't everything they told ya
Never get much older, following the tracks of a souljah

"Souljah's Story" draws inspiration from the real-life story of legendary Black Power figure, George Jackson, whose 17-year-old brother, Johnathan P. Jackson, led an armed guerrilla mission to free him through a dramatic courthouse kidnapping in August of 1970.¹¹⁷ Armed with a gun registered to Angela Davis, the younger Jackson was killed during the attempt, leaving the older Jackson to languish in prison¹¹⁹ and forcing Davis to go on the run.¹²⁰ Thus, upon close listening, "Souljah's Story" is a sober, clear eyed meditation on Black vigilantism, in which 2pac both

¹¹⁵ Sanders, "Public Enemy's Rap War."

¹¹⁶ Anderson, "The Moment Tupac Became America's Most Dangerous Rapper."

¹¹⁷ Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, pg. 251.

¹¹⁹ George Jackson would be killed one year later during a failed prison escape.

¹²⁰ Joseph, *Waiting 'til the Midnight Hour*, pg. 252.

honors the bravery of his subject while weighing the value and consequences of such a risky tactic.

However, when news of Howard's accusation broke, politicians and media outlets chose to frame the song differently. Vice President Dan Quayle seized upon the controversy, condemning the song and the *2Pacalypse Now* album during a press conference, asserting, "There is absolutely no reason for a record like this to be published by a responsible corporation."¹²¹ Pressure mounted on Time Warner, the parent company of 2Pac's label Interscope Records, to remove the album from shelves. Additionally, the family of the slain trooper brought a wrongful death lawsuit against 2pac for "inspiring" their loved one's murder.¹²²

Although the initial fervor eventually subsided, it marked an early instance of conflict between 2Pac's artistry and law enforcement, a theme that would persist throughout his tragically short life. Rather than shying away from addressing the question of vigilantism on his next album, 1993's *Strictly 4 My N.I.G.G.A.Z.*, 2pac delved even deeper and more overtly into the subject matter, starting with the album's first track and lead single, "Holler If Ya Hear Me." The video for "Holler If Ya Hear Me" is a powerful statement challenging the antiblack status quo and affirming his commitment to mobilizing Black communities toward revolutionary action through his ongoing portrayal of Black vigilantism. Throughout, 2pac conjures the Black Nightmare Imaginary to foreground the nightmarish conditions of Black life during

¹²¹ Anderson, "The Moment Tupac Became America's Most Dangerous Rapper."

¹²² Anderson.

the nineties, particularly regarding police violence, to draw in his Black audience through recognition of their shared trauma, and to contextualize his call to arms.

Directed by Stephen Ashley Blake, the sepia-toned video for “Holler If Ya Hear Me” opens at the scene of a gruesome crime. The camera scans the concrete sidewalk and front yard of a home in a cinema vérité-inspired fashion, guiding us through the nightmarish aftermath of a police shooting. A Black man’s lifeless body is sprawled across the concrete as flashlights blink and move across the scene. The man’s young son is found hiding in the vicinity, handcuffed, and dragged toward a squad car. As he passes the scene, and his crying mother inconsolable on the front steps of their home, he cries out in grief at the sight of his dead father. The boy is stuffed into the back seat.

Through this opening, a voice over by 2pac clarifies the stakes of the nightmare we are witnessing, and the larger condition of dehumanization and death that Black communities face at the dawn of the nineties: “Too many families have been affected by a wrongful death. This system and this country has tore apart my family and our families. And you can’t have a Black family and be together. How many more funerals do we got to go to? And how many more scenes of the crime do we got to watch them chalk out Black figures on the concrete before we realize that the only way for us to ever get out of this predicament is to struggle to survive. You want a change? We gotta fight for it. Ain’t nobody going to give it to us. We just gonna have to take it.”

Coupled together, the video’s opening scene and voiceover harness the nightmare of wanton police violence on Black communities—specifically its impact

on Black families—to argue for the necessity of radical resistance to the antiblack machinations of the state. 2pac mines the Black Nightmare Imaginary to situate us in the crisis of ongoing and consequence-less Black death to contextualize his message of rage and rebellion.

Notable in the voiceover is a brief allusion to 2pac's own family, lamenting its fragmentation and thereby adding a personal dimension to his message. As is widely known, 2Pac comes from the lineage of the revolutionary Shakur family, which includes Mutulu Shakur, 2pac's step father and member of the incarcerated Black Liberation Army; Assata Shakur, 2pac's godmother and a Black liberation fighter in exile; and his mother Afeni Shakur, a former high-ranking member of the Panthers who stood trial and was acquitted of fabricated charges in the 1960s.¹²³ 2Pac's family history is marked by state-sanctioned violence, encompassing unjust trials, extrajudicial killings, and various forms of sabotage and repression orchestrated by government programs like COINTELPRO.¹²⁴ Therefore, when 2Pac speaks of America's assault on Black families, he draws from a deeply personal nightmare of surveillance and political violence that devastated movements like the one he aims to ignite with songs such as "Holler If Ya Hear Me." Understanding 2pac's personal nightmare enhances the credibility of his message and reinforces the sincerity behind it.

Following the chilling introduction, the song and accompanying visuals burst forth with unbridled energy. The video employs rapid and disorienting cuts,

¹²³ Blain et al., "How the Shakurs Became One of America's Most Influential Families."

¹²⁴ Blain et al.

interspersed with flashing police lights and fleeting glimpses of stern white police officers, badges, American flags, prison bars, and other symbols of state authority. Amidst these visceral images, the song's sonic backdrop erupts with raw intensity. "Holler If Ya Hear Me" features relentless rhythms, blaring sirens, and sampled fragments of Chuck D's vocals from "Rebel Without a Pause" that coalesce into a powerful musical force. The arrangement moves rapidly and relentlessly, evoking the sense of chaos unleashed. It serves as the perfect complement to 2Pac's politically charged and incendiary message.

As the camera lingers on a horizontal shot of the father's lifeless face, a flashlight swiftly pans over him, illuminating a scattering of playing cards strewn across the scene (Figure 5). While the implication may be that he was engaged in a game of cards or had them in his possession at the time of the shooting, there's a deeper symbolism at play. The cards serve as a poignant metaphor for the precariousness of Black life—a constant gamble where one never knows when their luck will run out. It suggests that while the father's luck may have ended tragically that night, it was through no fault of his own, highlighting the pervasive uncertainty and vulnerability faced by Black people under the deathly conditions of their daily lives in America.



Figure 5: 2Pac video – scattered playing cards

The central narrative of the video follows the poignant journey of the young son of the slain man, in which he quickly transitions from a traumatized child to a resolute Black vigilante. Following his apprehension and placement in the police car, the boy finds liberation at the hands of a hooded figure, brandishing a gun, whose appearance eerily mirrors that of one of the arresting officers. This juxtaposition prompts contemplation: did the officer (who is Black), faced with a pivotal choice, prioritize racial solidarity over professional allegiance? As explored in this chapter, Black vigilantism operates outside the realm of conventional American hegemonic law. Instead, it serves as a vehicle for asserting and enforcing counterhegemonic laws that vehemently reject the antiblack structures ingrained in American culture. Thus, the video's narrative offers a potent counter hegemonic ideological message to viewers, highlighting the compromised position that Black people often find themselves in when collaborating with law enforcement. It underscores the notion that choosing community solidarity over the allure and illusion of authority vested in a badge represents a principled stand for the greater good, rather than a criminal act of

betrayal or dereliction of duty. Applying the lens of Black vigilantism, the officer's duty is to free the young boy, not aid in his incarceration.

According to the video's director, this scene of escape initially featured the hooded gunman shooting the police officer, but Interscope Records demanded it be cut from the final version.¹²⁵ This initial vision unsurprisingly scared corporate power because it aligned 2pac's vision with a counter hegemonic ideological message that challenged the prevailing notion that the lives of young Black people are disposable while valorizing those of law enforcement. In questioning why the lives of police officers should be deemed more valuable than those of young Black people, 2pac's work echoes a Fanonian vision where traditional power dynamics are upended. By removing the perceived exceptionality and authority of law enforcement, "Holler If Ya Hear Me" disrupts the American hegemonic status quo, positioning Black agency and resistance at the forefront.

When the boy returns home, he steals money from his mother's purse and buys a handgun. He works on his marksmanship. In one arresting scene he stares into a mirror holding the gun and lip syncs to 2pac's words, "One way or another you'll be givin' it up, huh!" Visible in the mirror is an image of a police car and flashing lights, literally reflecting his nightmarish engagement with police back at him—the traumatic episode that contextualizes his turn toward vigilantism (Figure 6).

¹²⁵ Steinfield, "Interscope Records Censored Tupac's 'Holler If Ya Hear Me' Message, Video Director Alleges."



Figure 6: 2Pac video – mirror of trauma

In the video's final moments, the boy goes to a shooting range and removes his hat. As long hair cascades from beneath the cap it is revealed the video's protagonist is actually a young girl. She points the barrel of the gun directly at the audience. This is followed by a closeup of a police light flashing, symbolizing the ongoing state of emergency that inspired her turn toward vigilantism. It serves as a poignant, final reminder that the fight for Black liberation is far from over and will continue until true freedom is achieved. With this, the scene fades to black.

The gender reveal at the conclusion of the video is a thought-provoking if imperfect exploration of how gender intersects with Black radical ideologies. During the early nineties, political rap often centered on Black manhood, while simultaneously policing Black women's cultural and sexual choices. Examples include Public Enemy's critique of Black women's alleged addiction to daytime talk shows in "She Watch Channel Zero," and Sister Souljah's guidance on Black motherhood in "Umbilical Cord to the Future." "Holler If Ya Hear Me" stands out as a rare instance where Black women and girls are portrayed as driving forces behind the vigilante violence necessary for a Black revolutionary movement.

Although the reveal moment exploits the audience's gendered presumptions, 2pac's vision of Black vigilante revolution not only acknowledges but necessitates the recognition of the shared suffering and rage of Black women. Black girls also lose their fathers, mothers, and families to various forms of antiblack violence. However, the narrative still reinforces a masculinist perspective. This raises the question: Why couldn't it have been made clear that the protagonist was a young girl from the beginning? Or why couldn't the gender of the protagonist have remained ambiguous and nonbinary throughout? "Holler If Ya Hear Me" offers a rare, albeit flawed, examination of gender in relation to Black liberation that touches on substantive analysis and critique, only to retreat into a safer, less boundary-pushing resolution by reifying the boundaries of gender itself.

While the video's narrative is compelling, its undeniable focal point is 2pac, whose on-screen presence is magnetic throughout. The video is interspersed with performance scenes featuring a daring and charismatic 2pac, who effortlessly commands attention while playing with various props, including guns, badges, and police hats. These scenes collectively reflect his now-legendary willingness to boldly court confrontation with law enforcement.

What makes the performance of Black vigilantism in "Holler If Ya Hear Me" most galvanizing is 2pac himself. He seamlessly combines the lyrical prowess of a revolutionary poet with the physical presence of a leading man, encapsulating what made him such an iconic and polarizing figure. While songs like "Hit 'Em Up" and "Ambitionz Az A Ridah" portray him as the supreme immortal thug of gangsta rap,

“Holler if Ya Hear Me” showcases 2pac as the Black vigilante renegade who faced off against law enforcement and earned their ire.

One of the most striking scenes in the video depicts 2pac leading a march of community members through the streets, surrounded by police cars and flashing lights (Figures 7,8). Unlike traditional protests, there are no signs, no linked arms, and no singing of “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing.” Instead, the participants march forward with a confrontational gaze, following 2pac’s lead as he raps about the imperative of armed resistance. He raps,

But right now I got my mind set up
Lookin' down the barrel of my nine, get up
'Cause it's time to make the payback fat
Tell my brothers on the block—better stay strapped, black



Figure 7: 2Pac video - leading a march



Figure 8: 2Pac video - leading a march (close up)

Later, he alludes to the LA Riots as anything but a discrete event. Instead, the uprising is indicative of an emerging consciousness amongst Black youth and a growing commitment to revolutionary violence and rejection of nonviolent resistance:

I bring truth to the youth tear the roof off the whole school
 Oh no, I won't turn the other cheek
 In case ya can't see when we burned the other week
 Now we got 'em in a smash, blast

Next, 2pac expresses his willingness to face incarceration in solidarity with his comrades, whom he regards as political prisoners, by rapping from behind bars,

Much love to my brothers in the pen
 See ya when they free you
 Or if not when they send me in

These lines reflect a revolutionary demand for the release of incarcerated Black men.

2Pac is committed to their liberation so much so that he would rather join them in prison than let them rot in a cell. At core here is his lack of fear of the repercussions that can follow his words and stance. His sentiments are reminiscent of Huey P.

Newton's concept of "revolutionary suicide," in which the revolutionary must be so committed to the movement that they are willing to face any and all repercussions for waging war on the state, including death. Far from mere suicidal ideation,

revolutionary suicide is a commitment to victory at all costs.¹²⁶ 2pac alludes to this by performing fearlessness before the possibility of state reprisal. Even the ire he earned from Dan Quayle isn't enough, as he raps, "Quayle ain't do nothing but blow my name up!" If anything, the notoriety he has received for his incendiary work only strengthens the circulation and ideological impact of his performances of Black vigilantism.

In a warehouse setting, another series of performances unfolds, alternating between scenes of 2pac seated at a table with comrades loading weapons and a frenetic, 360-degree shot where the camera spins rapidly around him as he delivers his verses. Amidst flashing lights and swirling surroundings, 2pac offers a mix of sneers, indictments, laughter, dance, and tough posturing to the camera—he appears almost possessed. Embodying the eye of a storm of resistance, 2pac effortlessly commands his troops and holds the viewer's attention amidst the chaos. Watching "Holler If Ya Hear Me," one genuinely feels galvanized and led toward revolution by 2pac. In my opinion, his performance represents the greatest, most overt, and confrontational challenge to the antiblack hegemonic order of any hip-hop artist of his generation.

Throughout these scenes, 2pac interacts sarcastically with a police hat, at times rubbing the shiny badge pendant affixed to its front and even twirling it around his finger with a playful demeanor (Figure 9). In other instances, he stands behind Black militant shooters at a shooting range (Figure 10), brandishing his gun and reveling in the chaos conjured by his art as he raps:

¹²⁶ Newton, Blake, and Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide*., pg. 3.

'Cause nobody else'll give a damn
So we live like caged beasts
Waitin' for the day to let the rage free
Still me 'til they kill me
I love it when they fear me
Holler if ya hear me!



Figure 9: 2Pac video - police hat twirl



Figure 10: 2Pac video – gun range

His demeanor, simultaneously amusing, terrifying, and inspiring, resonates with viewers who identify with his rage while presenting a brazen challenge to police and the broader power structure. When 2pac expresses his satisfaction in being feared, it underscores the power and intentionality of his art in preparing Black communities for revolution by embodying White America's greatest nightmare. As a

young Black man with a big platform, 2pac used his voice to indict America for its ongoing oppression, destruction, and murder of Black people. Notably, the only element censored by Interscope besides the violent scenes is a final voiceover from 2pac—“revolution is the only way”—as the screen fades.¹²⁷

“Holler If Ya Hear Me” serves as a rallying cry, contextualizing 2pac's performance of Black vigilantism within the framework of the Black Nightmare Imaginary. In this narrative rebellion, his real-life conflicts with law enforcement intertwine with his artistic expression in a captivating and painfully raw and real dance of destruction. 2pac's art was designed to resonate with his peers' experiences, encouraging them to critically assess their world and consider radical methods to confront the antiblack structural conditions of their lives. In life and death, his work remains a testament to the enduring struggle for justice, and the ongoing question of Black vigilante violence as a viable tactic for Black liberation.

Souljah's Ultimate Nightmare

Released in 1991, Sister Souljah's music video for "The Final Solution: Slavery's Back in Effect" depicts a dystopian nightmare where slavery has returned, serving as a backdrop to convey its radical message about Black vigilantism. In this vision, Black people revolt against their oppressors, challenging the status quo and advocating for radical action in the face of systemic oppression. Through striking visuals and provocative lyrics, the video serves as a call to unity and preparedness for struggle, and a warning against complacency in the fight for Black liberation.

¹²⁷ Steinfield, “Interscope Records Censored Tupac’s ‘Holler If Ya Hear Me’ Message, Video Director Alleges.”

The song's title, particularly its use of "The Final Solution," directly alludes to Nazi Germany's genocidal campaign against Jewish people. By employing this terminology in the context of Black struggles in America, it underscores the deep-rooted and systemic oppression endured by Black communities throughout history, from the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary times. This juxtaposition highlights the potential for a future where slavery resurfaces, emphasizing the existential threat faced by Black people in America. By drawing this parallel, the song gestures toward the pervasive nature of antiblackness and the necessity of struggle against a social order that seeks to eradicate Black life, akin to the genocidal intent witnessed in the Holocaust.

Directed by Lionel C. Martin, "The Final Solution: Slavery's Back in Effect" begins in an interrogation room. The slightly tilted camera angle gives the scene (and the rest of the music video) a surreal effect as Souljah is questioned by a white official (Figure 11). With her head tilted to her right and supported by her index finger, her lips pursed, and her distrustful eyes glaring at the officiant, Souljah looks like a force to be reckoned with, and like she would rather be anywhere else. The officiant asks her if she is a racist, to which she responds, "You can't call me or any Black person any place in the world a racist. We don't have the power to do to people what white people have done to us. And even if we did, we don't have that low down, dirty nature." When the officiant follows up, "Do you believe that there are any good white people?" the camera slowly zooms in on Souljah's face as she leans in and replies, "If there are, I haven't met them. Where are they?"



Figure 11: Souljah video – interrogation room

With this opening, Souljah is intentional about beginning with two very clearly articulated, incendiary messages about race relations in America, sentiments she must know most white people will not like. I argue that this was a way of “clearing the room,” if you will. Souljah has said in multiple interviews that her music is not made for white people, and that she does not care how they feel about it. In fact, in the *Washington Post* interview, Mills quotes her from an interview with Bill Moyers: “I don’t make my work for you to interpret it. I make it for black young people so that they can understand that we are at war, that we have to be strong-minded, that we have to be productive, that we have to be unafraid of expressing ourselves and getting what we want in this society.”¹²⁸ By opening the music video for “The Final Solution,” a song about the necessity of Black revolutionary organization, with a clear rebuke of both white people and the most common of their accusations about her fiery rhetoric (i.e. that she’s a “reverse racist”), Souljah is at least implicitly dismissing the white gaze from the proceedings.

¹²⁸ Mills, “SISTER SOULJAH’S CALL TO ARMS.”

The screen briefly flickers to static before returning with a close-up of the shoes of a group of young Black men on asphalt. As the camera pans to the right, we settle on a boombox blaring “The Hate that Hate Produced,” Souljah’s second single. The music is abruptly interrupted by a newsflash from the President of the United States, announcing the reinstatement of slavery in America. As he rationalizes this decision with claims about Black people’s perceived shortcomings, including technological advancement, test scores, welfare reliance, and family size, and outlines the logistical steps for rounding up Blacks into concentration camps, the video cuts between various reaction scenes. A large Black family dining on fried chicken stares at their TV in astonishment, a Black couple abruptly halts their lovemaking, and the young men gathered around the boombox begin to panic, accidentally dropping and shattering a forty-ounce bottle of beer. Interspersed with these scenes, a set of hands with bright red nail polish—presumably Souljah’s—methodically loads bullets into a Glock handgun. Rather than remaining idle and dumbfounded, Souljah demonstrates what she believes to be a productive response: arming oneself and preparing to fight.

With its visual emphasis on alcohol, television, fried foods, and sex, the video subtly critiques what Souljah perhaps regards as key distractions that have left Black people unprepared for battle. In broader terms, she suggests that unnecessary and (in her opinion) unhealthy forms of consumption have obscured our awareness of the dangers of state violence and its potential to intrude on Black life. Now, it may be too late to prevent the impending terror. This nightmare scenario represents a departure from Public Enemy’s exploration of the recent past in “By the Time I Get to Arizona,” or 2pac’s nightmarish engagement with present conditions in “Holler If Ya

Hear Me.” In “The Final Solution,” Souljah opts for a dystopian vision of Afrofuturist horror in which the most terrifying and unfathomable of Black nightmares—the return of chattel slavery—is realized.

As the song’s raw, pummeling beat rages—complete with air sirens, hard-hitting percussion, and synthesizers gone mad—Souljah raps/shouts while in what looks like an underground bunker, surrounded by barbed wire, ammunition, radio equipment, and a world map. We are at the nerve center of an armed vigilante movement against the government. She has two ammunition belts strapped across her chest as she raps,

It’s time for us to take a stand
Woman to woman and man to man
Blood rushes through your veins you feel the fear
Who would’ve thought that it could happen here
In the land of the free, home of the brave
The year is ’95, you’re a slave!

The video cuts quickly between shots from various disorienting angles of storm trooper police brandishing guns and standing guard as a seemingly endless stream of Black women and men are led across a dark, industrial bridge in chains. Various violent and nightmarish interactions with the storm troopers follow. The young men that surrounded the boombox are ambushed by a truckload of officers and a massive brawl ensues. The Black family from the earlier scene cowers in fear as search lights invade their living room and storm troopers enter to take them away. The Black couple, now in post-coital panic mode, hide under their bed as their home is raided. Collectively, these scenes convey a tragic sense of hopelessness and unpreparedness. Caught off guard, the victims make the jobs of the troopers easy, underscoring the

urgency of Souljah's message about the necessity that Black communities be prepared to defend themselves against state violence.

During this section of the music video, Souljah's lyrics delve into the ideological complexity underlying her mission, cutting through the pervasive imagery of guns and ammunition. She explicitly emphasizes that the crucial development needed for Black resistance against the reinstatement of slavery is ideological, not merely increased firepower.

Why can't they see we couldn't win by the gun?
I told you how to win but now it's too late
The enemy's on the rise and he sealed your fate
Brain is the weapon, technology second
The war drum is soundin, the tool is the record:

Here, Souljah argues for the importance of raising consciousness. Drawing from Gramscian thought, I interpret Souljah's words as a call for a war of position to establish counterhegemonic ideologies that prepare the oppressed for revolution.¹²⁹ When she shouts, "the tool is the record," Souljah highlights the profound power of Black music as a vessel for ideological shifts that prepare Black communities for a war of maneuver that takes the battle from the radio to the streets. In essence, Souljah suggests that the failure of the Black people depicted in "The Final Solution" is rooted in the absence of the revolutionary mindset necessary for effective defense against the antiblack agenda of the state.

At this point, the music video takes a slight turn. Shots of armed Black men, some of them directly armed by Souljah (who is clearly prepared for this battle) signify the development of a makeshift rebel force prepared for war to protect its

¹²⁹ Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*.

community from slavery 2.0. This idea, of a new make or model of slavery, is underscored by a closeup of a sign hanging on the chain link fence of a concentration camp that says, “Sector 5: The Plantation.” Rather than depicting outdated images and notions of what a plantation looks like, the one presented here is a high-tech, post-industrial work camp designed to fulfill the antiblack needs of the late 20th century and beyond. As a young Black man attempts to escape along the edge of the fence, the video abruptly cuts to a close-up of a white officer pointing his gun directly at the camera. He fires, striking the young man in the back and killing him. This visual strategy literally places us, the viewer, in the crosshairs of this nightmarish dragnet of antiblackness.

In the following harrowing scene, a young Black woman carrying her daughter navigates cautiously through a dimly lit corridor in an empty apartment complex. As she moves stealthily, a close-up of jackboots signals that she is being hunted by a stormtrooper. A tense cat-and-mouse game unfolds, with the woman and girl gliding in and out of doorways as the trooper trails closely behind. A long shot of the officer peering into one doorway fades out, replaced by a closeup of a gunshot wound to the young woman’s torso and next to her the lifeless body of her child, both tragically killed in the confrontation (Figure 12).



Figure 12: Souljah video – mother and child

The video frames this as the event’s ultimate tragedy—the coldblooded murder of a mother and her child, suggesting that the ultimate sin of Black America is its inability to protect its women and children. Her lines immediately following this scene underscore that this is the price Black communities will pay for not preparing themselves to meet violence with violence. She raps,

Could you imagine if we had it all together
 We’d have an umbrella for the stormy weather
 ... see the war, smell the war, hear the war
 You’d better fear the war!

Still, her treatment of the role of women in this revolution reflects her shaky, antiquated gender politics. The video visually and lyrically emphasizes Black manhood as the most critical piece of the Black liberatory puzzle. She raps,

The will and the skill of the black man, exact man
 Giving a hand to his brotherman
 A word to the wise and I’ll tell you once again
 Know your enemies from your friends

By casting men as the majority of armed participants in “The Final Solution,” and by only addressing Black male unity in the song’s lyrics, Souljah exalts agential and

armed Black manhood as the most paramount consideration for a successful movement for Black liberation, at the expense of any substantive engagement with the unique challenges and agency of Black women beyond their roles as child bearers and supporters of Black men.¹³⁰ Despite the radical power of Souljah's message, her inability to see how such sexist gender politics also scaffold the antiblack system she seeks to challenge weakens its power.

The video intensifies with a flurry of images of military boots, nightsticks, guns, armed Black resistance fighters, and marching captives leading up to its final confrontation. Three stormtroopers approach and corner Souljah. They swiftly take a knee and train their guns on her. Positioned behind Souljah, the camera captures the stone-faced troopers facing the viewer, while Souljah remains defiant, folding her arms across her stomach and cocking her head with unwavering resolve. Suddenly, four armed young Black men appear in attack formation behind the officers, their guns aimed at the unknowing troopers' heads. More young men join them, creating a satisfying moment of checkmate (Figure 13). The video concludes with Souljah slowly turning toward the camera as it zooms in on her face, with a focused and determined expression, signaling the unyielding spirit of Black resistance against seemingly impossible odds.

¹³⁰ One exception to this is a scene in which a Black woman at police gunpoint after being caught looting turns and fires on one of the officers. While this is an example of a Black woman participating in counterhegemonic violence, her action is an in-the-moment act of desperation. It is framed differently from the disciplined and trained vigilantism taken up by the male figures in the video. Her violence is situational, while theirs is foundational to the movement.



Figure 13: Souljah video - checkmate

Souljah deliberately ends the video with her having the upper hand against the troopers, even if momentarily, to underscore her insistence that Black people be prepared mentally and physically to defend themselves by any means necessary against the ongoing antiblack violence perpetrated and condoned by the state. A repeated refrain of "I thought I told ya!" during the song's chorus emphasizes this message. "The Final Solution" utilizes the ultimate nightmare of antiblack violence—the return of slavery—to highlight the urgent and tangible stakes for Black people, and her unapologetic and direct approach leaves little room for interpretation. As outlandish as its premise might seem, the video succeeds in challenging Black viewers to question what they are willing to accept, emphasizing that if the answer is “no” to slavery 2.0, then it must also be no to the everyday instances of antiblackness that continue to plague Black communities and lay the groundwork for further tragedy. Banned outright by MTV¹³¹, the video's performance of Black vigilantism serves as a call to consciousness by foregrounding the shared nightmare of slavery's

¹³¹ “A Look At 33 Years’ Worth Of Controversial Videos On MTV | HuffPost Entertainment.”

return to contextualize its core message: the imperative of Black unity and the determination to do whatever it takes to attain liberation, even if it means resorting to violence.¹³²

Da Struggle Continuez

In September of 1995, 2pac was in prison and desperate for bail after being convicted in 1994 of two counts of sexual abuse in the first degree for “inappropriate touching,” in a highly publicized trial that dovetailed with him being shot five times during an attempted robbery outside the Quad City recording studio in Times Square. While incarcerated, 2pac received tons of letters of support from many of his music industry peers. One of those peers was Chuck D. 2pac wrote back in a letter, which was posted online by Chuck himself in 2014.¹³³ In it, he pays tribute to his idol for being a treasured influence on his life and career, writing, “Back in the dayz, on tour with u, I learned so much from what u did and how u did it. It may be hard 2 C but u have always played a major role in what it is I do 2day.”¹³⁴

Later, 2Pac asked Chuck if he would be willing to collaborate with him after his release from prison. He proposed a song called “Da Struggle Continuez” that would feature himself, Chuck, and Sister Souljah. “If God will,” he added, “so let me know.”¹³⁵ Unfortunately, “Da Struggle Continuez” never came to fruition. Shortly after writing the letter, 2Pac was released from prison, signed with Death Row

¹³² It bears mentioning that while Public Enemy’s video was aired once, and 2pac’s video was aired after being censored, Souljah’s was never aired. I argue that while her diminished stature as a very new artist might have played a role, her gender was likely impactful in the outright dismissal of her music video by the network.

¹³³ Grow, “Read Tupac Shakur’s Heartfelt Letter to Public Enemy’s Chuck D.”

¹³⁴ Grow.

¹³⁵ Grow.

Records, and embraced a reckless, celebratory gangsta rap sound and lifestyle. Tragically, he was murdered in Las Vegas a year later.¹³⁶ Nevertheless, it is intriguing to ponder what "Da Struggle Continuez" might have sounded like, given the unique approaches yet common goals of these three revolutionary artists.

I like to think that it would have been a powerful and incendiary anthem that seamlessly blended the signature styles and lyrical prowess of each artist into a unified call to action. Musically, the song might be produced by Public Enemy's Bomb Squad production team, giving it a hard-edged, percussively relentless sound. Or maybe Dr. Dre would handle the production duties, pairing the trio's radical ideas with an uncharacteristically melodic, G-funk sound that could cross over and bring Black vigilantism to the pop charts.

Thematically, the song might delve into the ongoing fight against systemic antiblackness, the enduring legacies of slavery, and the necessity of more radical tactics to upend the system, including Black vigilantism. Chuck D would bring his politically charged rhymes, addressing issues of institutional racism, police brutality, and economic inequality. Sister Souljah's verse might add a perspective rooted in the experiences of Black women, and inject brutally honest, fiercely militant Black nationalist rhetoric into the proceedings. Meanwhile, 2pac would infuse the track with his trademark intensity and emotional candor, drawing from personal experiences and street knowledge to offer a riveting testimonial that underscores the urgency of the struggle and the need for collective commitment and action toward Black liberation. As he *wanted* to say in the "Holler If Ya Hear Me" video, revolution is the only way.

¹³⁶ Anguiano and Levin, "Tupac Shakur."

With its potent blend of social commentary, raw emotion, and unapologetic defiance, the song's overall performance of a hip-hop informed Black radical politics of resistance, retribution, and redemption would resonate deeply with Black audiences and fuel a necessary ideological shift for the development of a revolutionary movement for Black lives. However, "Da Struggle Continuez" might have limitations in its engagement with gender and sexuality. It's possible that problematic gender norms, such as expectations of subservience to the needs of Black men or rigid notions of "respectable" Black womanhood, could hinder the song's transformative potential. The song might conveniently sidestep addressing 2pac's conviction for sexual abuse, or simply blame his alleged victim and move on. Additionally, the song's treatment of sexuality might demonize and denigrate Black queerness, portraying it as destructive and counterrevolutionary, or it might overlook it entirely. In other words, the song might suffer from the common pitfall of attempting to build a revolutionary movement without fully embracing the diversity within the Black community it aims to serve.

The struggle indeed continues, and it is crucial to acknowledge the various fronts of Black liberation, both within and outside our communities. I argue that performances of Black vigilantism do vital ideological work by corroborating shared nightmares of antiblack violence and harnessing collective rage at its persistence. These performances can serve to galvanize Black communities towards collective action and radical resistance. However, it is essential to recognize that true liberation requires an intersectional approach that embraces the diversity of Black experiences. Without inclusivity and a commitment to addressing intersecting forms of oppression,

the dream of liberation will remain elusive, and the nightmares of antiblack violence will persist.

Chapter 2: Niggaz Dream About Dying: Aesthetic Nihilism and the Ideological Minefield of N.W.A's *Niggaz4Life*

Introduction

On September 28, 1990, N.W.A made a memorable appearance on the Arsenio Hall Show. During a wide-ranging discussion touching on topics from their controversial track "Fuck the Police" to American foreign policy, the group, with Eazy-E notably clad in a straitjacket and horror movie hockey mask, revealed to Hall that local police had prohibited them from performing their new single, "100 Miles and Runnin'," on his show that evening. Dr. Dre explained, "We was gonna perform for y'all right? But [the police] said we're too radical, we can't perform tonight. So we're just giving the interview."¹³⁷

Amidst disapproving jeers from the crowd, Hall pledged to uncover the truth during a commercial break. Upon returning, viewers witnessed the group engaged in a backstage scuffle with law enforcement. Eventually breaking free, they dashed back onto the stage and launched into their scheduled performance. The entire incident, a cleverly orchestrated stunt, underscored their reputation as pioneers of the then-cutting-edge gangsta rap genre and highlighted their role as outspoken critics of police brutality, a rarity among Black public figures at the time. While other networks and media platforms may have shied away from allowing their performance, the implicit message was clear: their controversial perspective mattered. Arsenio Hall

¹³⁷ N.W.A *On Arsenio Hall*.

believed it mattered to his viewers, and as the first Black late-night show host, he welcomed their radical views on a national stage.

However, when Dre says the police barred their performance because they were deemed "too radical," it prompts the question: what exactly constitutes the radical nature of N.W.A's brash, nihilistic brand of rap? And how did this perception of radicalism change between their groundbreaking debut, 1988's *Straight Outta Compton*, and the release of their second full-length album, *Niggaz4Life*, just three years later—a divisive album widely derided as exploitative, virulently misogynistic, and largely irredeemable?

Nihilistic Black music like N.W.A's engages with the nightmarish conditions of Black life without solutions or remedy. Black art as corroboration of reality is important; what we do about the nightmare, and our posture toward such works, is up to us. N.W.A's refusal to soothe or offer peaceful solutions to Black suffering presents interesting questions about both the necessity of Black musical uplift, and what that actually entails. At least on record, the group seemed far more focused on painting an unvarnished and harrowing depiction of street life, and getting paid for it. So seemingly integral to Black cultural politics is the function of Black music as an engine for social change that N.W.A's approach understandably feels counterproductive, even downright destructive.

However, I argue that their nihilistic approach is generative as an aesthetic—what I call *aesthetic nihilism*—that can force a necessary reckoning with the intransigence of antiblackness in our society and can gesture toward the need for more radical tactics toward Black liberation. What is destructive and untenable is the

group's insistence on themes and tropes that subject Black women to nightmarish forms of violence, on and off record, that became too numerous and nauseating to ignore or excuse on *Niggaz4Life*. Misogyny is so intertwined with their brand of nihilism that it ultimately collapses its radical power.

“Niggaz Dream About Dying: Aesthetic Nihilism and the Ideological Minefield of N.W.A's *Niggaz4Life*” delves into the multifaceted legacy of N.W.A, an iconic rap group whose influence is unparalleled in the evolution of gangsta rap, a subgenre often associated with nihilistic rebellion. Through a comprehensive analysis of their media presence, selected music videos, lyrics, and controversial second album *Niggaz4Life*, I argue that N.W.A's nihilistic approach mines the Black Nightmare Imaginary as primary source material for harrowing depictions of police brutality in ways that hold radical possibilities as an aesthetic practice. Firstly, they shed light on the entrenched nature of anti-blackness without providing concrete remedies or solutions. Secondly, they establish an alternative Black subject position that subversively both embraces and transcends the deathly conditions of Black life. Lastly, their work compels us to contemplate the imperative for stronger and more radical strategies in the pursuit of Black liberation. However, their nihilistic approach is imbued with misogyny in ways that only exacerbates the nightmares experienced by Black women. This underscores the imperative of adopting an intersectional framework, even within realms of cultural production deemed irredeemable, to fully assess and harness their generative cultural power.

Aesthetic Nihilism and Gangsta Rap

Gangsta rap, often criticized for its purportedly negative influence on Black youth, is deeply rooted in a tradition of grappling with nihilism within Black artistic expression. This tradition spans from the blues to contemporary trap music, reflecting the enduring relevance of Black nihilism in the sociopolitical landscape. Emerging in the post-Civil Rights era, gangsta rap's bleak and nihilistic tone became a prominent feature of hip-hop, challenging prevailing narratives of progress and political participation for Black Americans. While it is commonly dismissed as glorifying hopelessness and destructive behavior, this overlooks its nuanced critique of the politics of hope and change, which often fails to address the systemic antiblackness entrenched in American society. Ironically, despite criticism of the genre for glorifying violence and suffering in Black communities, gangsta rap highlights the paradoxical valorization of Black suffering and premature death within a mainstream American political paradigm that fails to provide true citizenship and belonging for Black people.

I argue Black nihilism is typified by the rejection of conventional morality as a guiding force in Black life, and is marked by a deep sense of despair, meaninglessness, and indifference towards societal norms, both within and beyond Black communities. Instead of advocating for shared purpose, unity, and the importance of love, compassion, and hope, N.W.A's work adopts a defiant and unapologetic stance towards the oppressive realities confronting Black youth. Rather than seeking solutions through these values to combat structural antiblackness, N.W.A perceives antiblackness as an enduring and unchangeable aspect of their

existence. Consequently, their nihilistic worldview prioritizes agency and survival amidst these oppressive conditions, regardless of the consequences.

I argue that this form of nihilism provides a fertile ground for exploring the profound existential despair experienced by Black people, particularly among Black youth, under the spectral presence of social death. Such expressions of nihilism challenge fundamental assumptions about identity and purpose for Black Americans within a society where antiblack violence persists as an unyielding force, spanning from the horrors of the middle passage to our contemporary moment. By openly acknowledging the enduring nature of this violence, N.W.A compels us to reconsider traditional notions of "freedom," "agency," and "beinghood" within the context of social death. They achieve this, in part, by adopting an alternative subject position that transcends the grasp of death itself by embracing its omnipresence as a means of resistance and empowerment.

However, they also achieve this by shamelessly embracing misogyny in its most grotesque and extreme forms. Among the moral principles they discard is gender equality. Their rationale seems to be: if they don't have equality, then nobody should. While their nihilistic stance may have qualities that are intellectually stimulating and thought-provoking, it necessitates a brutal onslaught on the bodies of Black women that mirrors the relentlessness of the antiblack conditions they brazenly confront. This, the inherent flaw in their nihilistic politics, does not outright invalidate Black nihilism. Instead, it underscores the importance of adopting an intersectional perspective, even within the realm of what many might perceive as a destructive or

detrimental political stance. This approach allows us to fully realize the potential of Black nihilism as an alternative and legitimate political posture toward Black life.

It comes as no surprise that nihilistic works are usually controversial. In Cornel West's "Nihilism in Black America," West describes Black nihilism as "the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness;" a spiritual dead end antithetical to Black community, let alone a successful Black liberation movement.¹³⁸ However, West specifically differentiates the above description of Black nihilism from one that engages nihilism as a "philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority."¹³⁹ I argue it is useful to turn our attention to the latter perspective. West's concern regarding the abandonment of hope, love, and meaning stems from his belief that such rejection imperils Black existence and undermines collective endeavors toward achieving full citizenship and recognition as fully human in America. However, my project introduces a space for the Black nihilistic counterargument, suggesting that perhaps, on an ontological level, Blacks are perpetually excluded from being fully human within an inherently antiblack American political system. It proposes acknowledging the futility of traditional avenues for political redress and advocating for a departure from Western metaphysical paradigms altogether.

Calvin Warren ruminates at length on the legitimacy of Black nihilism, arguing American politics sustains a white supremacist, antiblack system where

¹³⁸ West, *Race Matters*, pg. 22.

¹³⁹ West., pg. 22.

Black suffering is foundational and necessary. According to Warren, the politics of hope is the pursuit of an impossible object. America's antiblack political system functions because it keeps Black people invested in an endless quest for justice that only strengthens that very system. Thus, the nihilistic desire to reject the politics of hope is not only understandable, but necessary to upend this vicious cycle of despair.¹⁴⁰

In *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation*, Warren argues that Blackness is an ontological abyss; the Black body assumes the function of metaphysical nothingness and—by sustaining relentless forms of antiblack violence in perpetuity—satiates the western world's impossible desire to control and obliterate nothingness. He writes, “Every lynching, castration, rape, shooting, and murder of blacks is an engagement with this nothing and the fantasy that nothing can be dominated once and for all.”¹⁴¹ This fantasy defines the perpetual, never-ending nightmare of Black existence—a (non)existence without ontological clarification, in which true emancipation is but a fantasy. Voting, or marching, or making money, or electing a Black president cannot change this reality. Antiblackness is necessary for the world; emancipation requires the end of the world as we know it.

In recognition of the generativity of Black nihilism at the intersection of philosophy and Black creative expression, I have developed the concept of *aesthetic nihilism*, an artistic strategy and theoretical lens that disidentifies with nihilism by operating within a black nihilistic worldview not as an endorsement of apathy,

¹⁴⁰ Warren, “Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope.”, pg. 8.

¹⁴¹ Warren, *Ontological Terror*., pg. 9.

hopelessness, and withdrawal; rather, it reflects the persistence of anti-blackness—and the ineffectiveness of Civil Rights-era strategies to combat it, like marching and voting—and demands a vision of Black survival outside of the dangerous and dogmatic political paradigms of hope and change. Aesthetic nihilism unlocks a new and more substantive discourse about N.W.A, including their second and final album, *Niggaz4Life*, and can fuel nuanced readings of Black music that address the predicament of Blackness in the ongoing aftermath of chattel slavery.

Aesthetic nihilism allows both listeners and Black artists to disidentify with nihilism toward a larger critique of white supremacy and structural antiblackness, as well as flawed notions of “progress” that can potentially perpetuate Black suffering and premature death. Jose Esteban Muñoz coined and theorized “disidentification” as a process by which queer people of color can identify with race or queerness despite problematic ideas or perspectives in both spaces.¹⁴² That concept is taken up by GerShun Avilez in his book, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*. Avilez explores the ways Black artists of the Black Arts Movement and beyond engage and disidentify with Black Nationalist rhetoric. Avilez calls this larger strategy *aesthetic radicalism*—Black art that values Black nationalist demands to reimagine Black sociality and identity, while also drawing attention to how nationalistic ideologies and rhetoric can fall short regarding gender and sexuality.¹⁴³ Influenced by Avilez’s approach, I conceptualize aesthetic nihilism as an artistic strategy and critical lens where critiques come from a position of affiliation. Black

¹⁴² Muñoz, *Disidentifications*.

¹⁴³ Avilez, *Radical Aesthetics and Modern Black Nationalism*, pg. 11.

artists and listeners work within a Black nihilistic frame in recognition of its very real presence and relevance to their lives, while gesturing toward the necessity of more radical tactics toward Black liberation.

Gangsta rap is known for its unapologetic depictions of street life and gang culture that are often intertwined with themes of nihilism. Artists like N.W.A, the Geto Boys, and Snoop Dogg employed blunt and controversial language to address the controversial topics of violence, crime, sex, poverty, drugs, the criminal justice system, and police brutality. A key hallmark of gangsta rap is the artists' ability to embody diverse personas within a single album or song, shifting between nihilistic perspectives to self-aware critiques and laments for the circumstances that give rise to nihilistic sentiments amongst young Black people in the first place. Despite some valid critiques, the genre's intentional craftsmanship and depth of storytelling are too often overlooked.

The brazen engagement with nihilism in gangsta rap, though intermittent, provides a vital and complicated medium for exploring Black nihilism as a philosophical concept and aesthetic tool. By seamlessly incorporating nihilism into their music, artists offer nuanced reflections on Black life that can both challenge and adhere to hegemonic norms and ideologies. While not every aspect of gangsta rap is explicitly nihilistic, it is the overarching posture and engagement with nihilism that shapes the genre's dynamic and unapologetic expression.

I argue that aesthetically nihilistic Black music taps into the Black Nightmare Imaginary to confront the ontological abyss at the center of Blackness. Rather than celebrating helplessness, these works clarify the deathly stakes of Black existence.

Artists like N.W.A elucidate the necessity for radical liberation tactics and/or alternative notions of beinghood within Black social life, challenging conventional narratives of progress and respectability. By both rejecting the threat of death *and* misogyny and queerphobia, nihilistic Black music can be a vital form of Black radical performance that liberates the Black subject from the coercive power of antiblack violence.

Nightmares of Police Violence / Dreams of Revenge

During N.W.A's interview with Arsenio, the subject of their incendiary classic "Fuck the Police" and police brutality more broadly takes center stage. Released as part of the *Straight Outta Compton* album in 1988, "Fuck the Police" became a lightning rod for both adoration and fear, depending on one's perspective. For many Black youth, the song encapsulated their simmering anger towards the increasingly militarized law enforcement, who could bully, brutalize, and kill Black people with impunity. For others, "Fuck the Police" was (and still is) a dangerous and unacceptable endorsement of violence against law enforcement. The FBI most certainly agreed with the latter perspective, famously writing a letter to the group admonishing them for releasing the song.¹⁴⁸

MC Ren sheds light on the song's resonance with Black youth, stating, "Once in everybody's lifetime, they get harassed by the police for no reason, and then everybody wants to say it, but they can't say it on the spot because something will happen to them, you know?" He continues, "In the ghetto or in the Black community,

¹⁴⁸ Pollack, "Wanted for Attitude."

you get harassed by the police just because of what you wear. Nine times out of ten, you can't help what you got on because that's all your family can afford, but they still type you as a gang member."¹⁴⁹ Ren's words highlight the pervasive experience of police harassment faced by countless young Black men.

Drawing from the Black Nightmare Imaginary, I argue that a significant portion of N.W.A's music can be understood within the context of the nightmarish reality of Black life under siege in a police state. Framed in this manner, the impulse to resist and show resilience in the face of this threat is both empowering for young Black people and deeply unsettling and dangerous for law enforcement. Songs like "Fuck the Police" are exercises in drawing from the nightmarish experience of police violence to craft an even scarier one for the oppressor, amplifying the urgency of the message and the magnitude of the resistance.

The history of racist policing is long, but the 1980s were an especially tumultuous period for "relations" between Black communities and law enforcement, particularly in N.W.A's hometown of Los Angeles. Following the 1965 Watts Riots, a combination of factors made everyday life increasingly difficult for young Black people. The deindustrialization of cities, including Los Angeles, coupled with cuts to social programs, ongoing white flight, housing segregation, and the rise of street gangs like the Crips and Bloods during the seventies created a perfect storm for the upheaval to come.¹⁵⁰ Impoverished, under-resourced, and over policed Black communities like South Central and Compton were particularly vulnerable to the

¹⁴⁹ N.W.A *On Arsenio Hall*.

¹⁵⁰ Westhoff, *Original Gangstas.*, pg. 10-13.

ravages of crack cocaine during the eighties, which not only tore apart social and familial bonds through addiction but also made gang life lucrative, and thus deadlier for a new generation of young men and their communities.¹⁵¹

Amid what should have been recognized as a public health crisis, the state opted for punitive and inhumane measures to address the issue. The implementation of mandatory minimum sentencing for crack cocaine possession had a disproportionately harsh impact on Black and Latino youth. This disparity stemmed from the fact that punishments for possession of "rock" cocaine were made more severe compared to powder cocaine, which was both more costly and more widely used by whites. Consequently, these laws funneled community members, particularly from Black neighborhoods, into prisons at an alarming rate.¹⁵² Like a malevolent behemoth, prisons devoured Black lives with the stroke of a million pens, exacerbating a nightmarish blend of fear, isolation, and rage in Black communities nationwide.

In Los Angeles, the heavily militarized and radicalized LAPD resorted to extreme measures to exert control over communities of color. This included the implementation of "Operation Hammer," a campaign of gang "sweeps" that placed entire neighborhoods under siege, resulting in the mass arrest of hundreds of alleged gang members, despite many of the arrestees having no gang affiliation whatsoever.¹⁵³ Numerous corrupt officers planted drugs and illegal firearms on young people or literally kidnapped and relocated them to rival gang territory, exposing

¹⁵¹ Westhoff., pg. 10-13.

¹⁵² MADEO, "Oct. 27, 1986 | Anti-Drug Abuse Act Creates Racially Biased 100 to 1 Crack/Powder Disparity."

¹⁵³ Mitchell, "The Raid That Still Haunts L.A."

them to severe beatings or worse. One of their notorious tactics involved using a literal battering ram to raid properties suspected of being drug houses, actions that were sensationalized on nightly news broadcasts and even celebrated by figures like then-First Lady Nancy Reagan.¹⁵⁴ Reagan famously rode shotgun for one raid that, despite causing immense destruction, yielded minimal amounts of contraband.¹⁵⁵

Beyond these high-profile tactics, campaigns, and publicity stunts, the everyday reality for communities of color involved routine and egregious police brutality. As MC Ren told Ben Westhoff in his book *Original Gangstas*, “They’d shoot people in the back. They beat your ass for nothing.”¹⁵⁶ Black youth were routinely subjected to unwarranted stops, merciless beatings, and fatal shootings, with little to no accountability for the officers involved. In essence, young Black people were enduring a state-sanctioned war on their very existence. It is within this nightmarish context of terror and repression that N.W.A wrote and recorded “Fuck the Police.”¹⁵⁷

What is intriguing about “Fuck the Police” goes beyond its explicit sentiment; it is the song’s uniquely theatrical presentation. Sandwiched between the song’s three verses are vignettes set in an imagined courtroom, where a role reversal occurs—the young Black members of N.W.A act as judge and jury, while a corrupt cop stands trial. This dramatization serves to illustrate a radical notion: that the structural conditions of life for young Black men could place them in positions of authority rather than dispossession. Rather than simply recounting the nightmare of police

¹⁵⁴ Westhoff, *Original Gangstas*.

¹⁵⁵ Platt, “Remember When Nancy Reagan Raided a South Central Crack House?”

¹⁵⁶ Westhoff, *Original Gangstas*.

¹⁵⁷ Westhoff.

violence or hurling countless expletives at law enforcement, the song serves as a counter-nightmare to the oppressive reality shared by young Black men.

In "Fuck the Police," the police officer isn't just experiencing the powerlessness felt by Black youth in the presence of law enforcement; he is also experiencing the profound injustice of a system intentionally designed to railroad him. In the end, when the officer is convicted and screams "No! I want justice!" his incredulity stems not only from the conviction itself but from the realization that he never had a chance in the first place. This aspect of the song underscores its nightmarish quality and highlights why "Fuck the Police" is a subversive masterpiece. It both embraces and transcends nihilism, gesturing towards a reordering of society akin to Frantz Fanon's vision—the end of their world as we've been forced to know it.¹⁵⁸

In addition to "Fuck the Police" and its incendiary lyrical content, many of N.W.A's music videos offer another dimension to their exploration of the all-consuming nature of police harassment and brutality in Black communities. These videos, often banned due to their controversial content, offer a stark portrayal of the struggles faced by young Black men, particularly in Los Angeles, against systemic oppression and police violence. They repeatedly depict intense conflicts and daring confrontations between the group and law enforcement. Through these visual representations, N.W.A deliberately sheds light on the pervasive and relentless nature of police harassment and brutality, providing crucial context for their nihilistic brand of rap. They serve as powerful visual commentaries, immersing viewers into the

¹⁵⁸ Fanon et al., *The Wretched of the Earth*.

nightmarish realities of life for young Black men during the tumultuous era of the eighties to contextualize their defiant stance against the oppressive forces that sought to make their very lives impossible.

At its core, the video for "Straight Outta Compton" depicts an ongoing conflict between the police and the young Black men of Los Angeles. The visual narrative initially alternates between scenes of the group members casually hanging out in urban settings like alleys or around trash can fires, and intense close-ups of police officers preparing for action—they are putting sunglasses on, gripping nightsticks, loading guns, and adopting ominous poses as they prowl the streets in search of the group and other Black youth. The video immerses viewers in a tense moment when the police spot N.W.A, triggering chaos. With guns aimed at their heads and hands restrained behind their backs (Figure 14), the group members are loaded into a police truck and taken away, except for Eazy-E, who defiantly leans out of a convertible, rapping directly at the officers driving the truck containing his bandmates (Figure 15).



Figure 14: Straight Outta Compton – N.W.A arrested



Figure 15: *Straight Outta Compton* – Eazy raps to the cops

The video maintains a singular focus on the dynamic between the group and young Black men broadly, and Compton law enforcement, despite not all the lyrics directly addressing this relationship. In their inaugural music video, N.W.A deliberately emphasizes this triangular relationship between the group, the city of Compton, and the police as the central narrative of their collective mythology. And in their version of events, they brashly and boldly defy the cops and the threat they pose to their life and limb.

In "We Want Eazy," the first single from Eazy's solo album *Eazy-Duz-It* (1988), released less than a year after *Straight Outta Compton*, the music video begins with Eazy strolling down the street and encountering an altercation between a Black police officer and a young Black man. As Eazy passes by and turns a corner, the young man points at him, seemingly accusing him of involvement in the situation. Upon realizing he's being implicated, Eazy breaks into a sprint. The subsequent scene terrifyingly captures Eazy running at full speed, pursued by a police officer maniacally waving his baton behind him (Figure 16). The imagery then shifts to a medium close-up of Eazy behind bars.



Figure 16: *We Want Eazy*: police foot chase

This depiction not only foregrounds the nightmare of police violence for the video's opening scenes, but also purposefully features a Black officer, highlighting another triangular relationship involving the group, law enforcement, and members of the Black community who may oppose their message and/or side with the oppressor. This shift in emphasis from Compton to Black politics still incorporates law enforcement, reaffirming the centrality of police mistreatment and brutality as the primary themes contextualizing their work.

The music video for "100 Miles and Runnin'," from their EP of the same name, released in 1990 a year prior to *Niggaz4Life*, is entirely focused on the group's conflict with law enforcement. It stands out for its compelling visuals, arguably among the group's most inspired. The video opens with a striking close up shot of an officer's hand placing a siren on the roof of their police car, followed by what appears to be a routine traffic stop. However, in Compton, "routine" translates to the group being forced out of their car and onto their knees, hands restrained behind their backs by the police. When the officers least expect it, the group suddenly rises and bolts away, initiating a thrilling, blaxploitation-inspired chase through the city.

The climax of the video features a remarkable shot of the group positioned on the back of a flatbed truck. As the camera captures the four remaining members (Ice Cube having left the group at this point) facing the viewer and delivering their verses, a procession of police cars trails behind them (Figure 17). Despite being outnumbered and pursued like prey by a heavily armed police force, the group occupies a surreal position of authority, elevated above the chaos below.



Figure 17: 100 Miles and Running – trail of police cars

This and the abovementioned scenes exemplify N.W.A's visual fixation on portraying their antagonistic and defiant relationship with law enforcement. I argue that collectively, these images underscore the centrality and pervasiveness of police harassment and brutality in their lives. N.W.A intentionally foreground the nightmares of police violence to contextualize their work, including their aesthetically nihilistic approach, for their audience.

Ren encapsulates their focus on police violence during the interview with Arsenio, highlighting their quest for retribution amidst relentless dehumanization. He declares, “We’re getting back at them for the times they got back at us and we

couldn't do nothing about it. Cause it's a million times, you know, I used to get harassed in front of my house, my mother comes out, and she's asking what's going on, and they tell her to shut up or something... stay out of it. They ain't got no right to do that."¹⁵⁹ Through their art, N.W.A reversed the roles, portraying police officers as horror movie villains lurking around every corner, ready to strike at any moment, and themselves as fearless iconoclasts standing up to their unjust abuses of authority.

Niggaz4Life

Analyses of N.W.A's highly influential yet relatively small body of work typically focus on *Straight Outta Compton*, and understandably so. While predecessors like Schoolly D's "PSK (What Does It Mean?) and Ice T's "Six in the Morning" paved the way, *Straight Outta Compton* stands as the cornerstone of gangsta rap, serving as a catalyst for the hardcore hip-hop movement of the following two decades.¹⁶⁰ Songs like "Fuck the Police," "Dopeman," and "Gangsta Gangsta" are regarded as trenchant expressions of the pain and frustration experienced by Black youth at the end of the eighties. These groundbreaking tracks brought marginalized perspectives and attitudes toward state violence to the forefront of Black cultural discourse. *Straight Outta Compton* is widely recognized as a crucial examination of the abandonment of impoverished Black communities in the post-Civil Rights era and the transformative potential of hip-hop culture in reshaping Black public discourse and American popular culture at large. Love them or hate them, N.W.A's *Straight*

¹⁵⁹ N.W.A On Arsenio Hall.

¹⁶⁰ Erlewine, "N.W.A Songs, Albums, Reviews, Bio & More | AllMusic."

Outta Compton undeniably stands as a landmark recording in the annals of popular music.

In contrast, *Efil4Zaggin*, (or, *Niggaz4Life* spelled backwards) tells a different story. This album marked the group's first release after the departure of Ice Cube, who had been a driving force behind the lyrical and thematic content of *Straight Outta Compton*. Cube's departure, prompted by a now-infamous financial dispute with Ruthless Records, the group's label co-founded by Eazy-E and manager Jerry Heller, left N.W.A in a precarious position.¹⁶¹ Despite Dr. Dre's emerging stature as a premier production talent in hip-hop (and to be sure, the production work on *Niggaz4Life* is outstanding), Cube's absence created a noticeable void in the group's creative dynamic, and it showed. Where *Straight Outta Compton* struck a balance between raw social realism and creative finesse, *Niggaz4Life* often veered into heavy-handed and exaggerated territory, frequently exploiting the group's most antisocial tendencies for shock value rather than substantive socio-political critique. In a contemporary *Rolling Stone* review, Arion Berger described the album's content as "violent incidents on the first half of the album, and bitches, bitches, bitches on the second."¹⁶² The nihilism present in *Straight Outta Compton* often felt revelatory and vital. Conversely, the nihilism in *Niggaz4Life* functions like a seatbelt made of barbed wire, designed for a controlled and contrived experience of depraved violence and gore.

¹⁶¹ Westhoff, *Original Gangstas*, pg. 108-10.

¹⁶² Berger, "Niggaz4life."

However, I contend that the album remains a fascinating exploration of the possibilities and limitations of N.W.A's nihilistic approach. Despite its seemingly unfocused bombast, a significant portion of *Niggaz4Life*, specifically much of its first half, offers thought-provoking insights, particularly concerning the group's reflections on their role as disruptors of an antiblack status quo and its parameters on what constitutes acceptable forms of critique and resistance within Black American political discourse and cultural production. The group demonstrates a keen understanding of the controversies surrounding their lyrics in the preceding years. Yet, N.W.A too often fixates violently on Black women, to the point of obsession, devoting almost the entire second half of the album to degrading, brutalizing, and killing them.

I argue that *Niggaz4Life* encapsulates the fatal duality of N.W.A's nihilistic approach. On one hand, the album mines the Black Nightmare Imaginary to confront the harrowing realities and repercussions of police brutality on the lives of young Black men, constructing an even scarier nightmare that not only tackles the metaphysical challenges of Blackness but also hints at the necessity for radical strategies to challenge the status quo. This includes the exploration of a posthumous subject position that transcends traditional metaphysical constraints. On the other hand, the album indulges in brutal misogyny that exacerbates the nightmares of Black women, effectively excluding them from the posthumous subject position the group has crafted for themselves. This destructive impulse diminishes the radical potential of *Niggaz4Life* by perpetuating and reinforcing the grammars that continue to marginalize and dehumanize Black women.

Already Dead

The album cover for *Niggaz4Life* is horrific and could not more perfectly encapsulate the album's nihilistic stance on the deathliness of Black male life in the late eighties (Figure 18). Set at a crime scene, the members of N.W.A are seen dead on the sidewalk of a residential area, their bodies under white sheets and scattered amongst various pieces of evidence outlined in chalk. The suggestion is their deaths were violent and in masse, perpetrated by the police or by rivals. Police stand in the background, two comparing notes, and one interviewing a child onlooker. In fact, lining the upper and lower left corners of the image are groups of children—the only onlookers other than police—behind yellow tape, gazing upon the grim scene. We can compare this to the beating of Aunt Hester in Frederick Douglass's *Narrative in the Life of a Slave*. Douglass's bearing witness as a youth to the savage whipping of his aunt is a baptism by fire into the violent and disempowered condition of enslavement: "It was the bloodstained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it."¹⁶³ Similarly, the N.W.A album cover reflects the next generation of Black youth coming into awareness of the nightmarishness of Black life and disposability of Black bodies, and of the constant precarity of their own lives.

¹⁶³ Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.*, pg. 23.

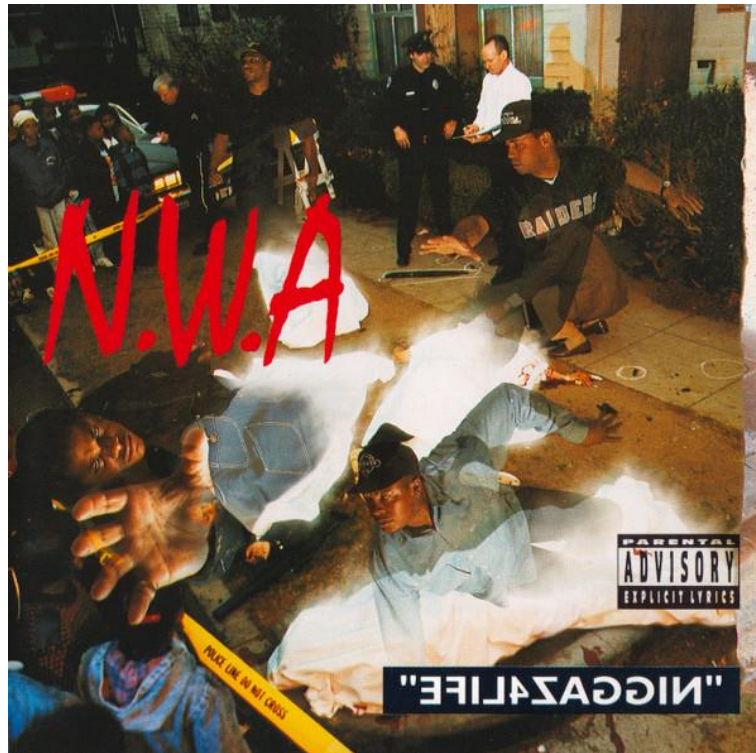


Figure 18: Niggaz4Life album cover

However, what we see—and what the police and children do not see—are the spirits or ghosts of the band members rising from their dead bodies. As young Black men, N.W.A are keenly aware that on a material and structural level, their deaths are welcomed in an antiblack world. They are supposed to die prematurely. However, what could be scarier than for Black men to be unkillable, and to transcend death entirely? America's worst nightmare is also its necessity—that the nothingness Black bodies signify cannot be destroyed. To quote one of the album's key tracks, “real niggaz don't die.” Instead, they haunt this antiblack world in a space of death inhabited by both the living and dead in perpetuity. Drawing from Sharon Patricia Holland's concept of the “space of death”¹⁶⁵ that Blackness occupies, we can locate a

¹⁶⁵ Holland, *Raising the Dead.*, pg. 15-16.

delineation between belonging and mere existence—or “bare life,” as theorized by Giorgio Agamben¹⁶⁶—in America. Real niggas don’t die because they have already reached the threshold of mortality; they inhabit a state of perpetual departure from life. In this context, why harbor fear of death when one’s essence is already steeped in it? N.W.A’s album cover serves as a visual testament to the unbinding of the death bound subject through acceptance of the deathliness of Black life.

On the left side of the cover, the ghost of Eazy-E is the only member of the band to return our gaze. He stares menacingly, reaching his hand out to us like a horror movie villain. He is the boogeyman America created, back for revenge. This is echoed in the group’s interview with Arsenio Hall, in which Eazy-E sits to the far left of his bandmates, wearing a Jason mask and straitjacket (Figure 19), while holding a hunting knife in his hand (Figure 20). Eazy refuses to speak directly to Hall or the audience, instead whispering in MC Ren’s ear for “translation.”¹⁶⁷ These visual and performative motifs across platforms reflect how Eazy harnessed the entangled networks of the group to fully inhabit a haunting, undead persona that wreaks havoc on the antiblack status quo by embodying its greatest fears about young Black men—he is menacing and malevolent, unknowable, and unstoppable.

¹⁶⁶ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

¹⁶⁷ N.W.A *On Arsenio Hall*.



Figure 19: *Eazy on Arsenio* (1)



Figure 20: *Eazy on Arsenio* (2)

In Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters*, she uses the concepts of ghosts and hauntings to consider how oppressive systems persist across time to impact our present world. Similarly to Hartman's theorizing on slavery's afterlives, Gordon says the legacy of enslavement haunts us through oppressive systems that make themselves known and felt in the present in ways that are often hidden or obscured to maintain hegemony.¹⁶⁸ It is the ghost that materializes to evidence the persistence of oppression. She writes that ghosts convey that “what’s been concealed is very much

¹⁶⁸ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, pg. xvi.

alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.”¹⁶⁹ I argue the ghosts of Eazy and his bandmates symbolize the ongoing force of social death that continues to bear down on Black life, specifically during the tumult of the crack era. Being a nigga transcends place and time—niggas for life, in both the here and now and in the afterlife. Eazy reaches out to us ominously because he is as frightening alive as he is dead. With his body destroyed, the ghost of the nigga roams unabated and unimpeded by earthly and biological constraints as a nightmarish reminder of the antiblackness that persists almost supernaturally to structure the world as we know it.

In this way, the ghosts of N.W.A reflect a realization of the agential possibilities of social death. In David Marriott's “On Decadence: Bling Bling” he ruminates on the ontological distinctions between the “nigger” and “nigga.” Marriott asserts that while the “nigga” emerges from social death, they are not synonymous with being socially dead.¹⁷⁰ It is “niggers”—those that strive to conserve themselves and be “useful” to the antiblack conditions of modernity—that are socially dead. The “nigger” adopts a protestant work ethic and labors to be useful in a world that merely exploits and destroys it, like a disposable mask. “Niggas” liberate themselves from the pressure to be “valuable,” “wanted,” and “useful” to antiblack hegemony by embracing the transgressive power of pursuing liberation on their own terms, regardless of the consequences.¹⁷¹ I argue this subversive power is encapsulated by the album cover for *Niggaz4Life*; it signifies how accepting the permanence of social

¹⁶⁹ Gordon, pg. xvi.

¹⁷⁰ Marriott, “On Decadence: Bling Bling.”

¹⁷¹ Marriott.

death allows N.W.A members to undergo a metaphorical rebirth, discovering the agential potential within existence under such conditions. Once one acknowledges and embraces their socially dead state, they can transcend the fear of physical death and locate the emancipatory possibilities that lie beyond it.

Real Niggaz Don't Die

In the face of the helplessness and hopelessness of Black male life in the eighties, N.W.A raised up their middle fingers and rejected the political as a valuable or viable form of redress. Nihilistic performances of state violence convey the nightmare of antiblack violence itself, painting a picture of Black life as an inherently unlivable one. However, in N.W.A's nightmare they are the ghosts that haunt the living, dishing out overwhelmingly ugly and violent fantasies to make an even scarier nightmare for the listener, white or Black.

A key example of this dynamic is the harrowing "Real Niggaz Don't Die." For its opening, a sample from "Die Nigga!!!" by the Last Poets ushers in a descending hard rock riff that barrels from the speakers. Joined by creepy, distant chimes and funky percussion, the song is a behemoth of cynicism and rage—the funkiest thing this side of Public Enemy's "Black Steel in the Hour of Case," and twice as unhinged. The spoken word intro to the track, which further samples the Last Poets, is a shockingly nihilistic summation of the scope of Black suffering.

We are born to die nigga
You've been dying for four hundred years
Niggas know how to die
Niggas don't know nothing else but dying
Niggas dream about dying

Before we hear from any of the group's members, the album's first full track begins by asserting the centrality of death to Black life since the Middle Passage. They are not alone in articulating this assertion. Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* establishes the condition of social death as a structuring force in the lives of the slave¹⁷² and, if we consider Saidiya Hartman's theorizing of slavery's afterlives, in the very ontology of Blackness itself, from enslavement to the present.¹⁷³ Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake* uses "weather" as a metaphor to describe the deathly, all-consuming climate of antiblackness that always bears down upon Black life.¹⁷⁴ And the deathliness of Black life is not merely metaphorical—Karla Holloway's *Passed On* explores the traditions and cultures of death and mourning in Black communities, revealing how the pervasiveness of death can be a generative force in Black life that contours all sorts of social customs and cultural practices.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Vincent Brown develops the concept of "mortuary politics" in *The Reaper's Garden*, arguing that death was so central to the lives of slaves and British colonists in colonial Jamaica that the culture and politics on the island actually emerged from the deathliness of existence on the island.¹⁷⁶ Thus, N.W.A is not alone in asserting that "niggas don't know nothing else but dying." Such is the immanence of antiblack violence, and such is the generativity of death, that the cultural inclinations of Black people often reflect a readiness to prepare ourselves for a seat at death's table.

¹⁷² Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.

¹⁷³ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, pg. 6.

¹⁷⁴ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, pg. 16.

¹⁷⁵ Holloway, *Passed On*.

¹⁷⁶ Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*.

So, then, why (according to N.W.A) don't niggas die? On a literal level, perhaps niggas don't die because in the face of state violence they run from the cops, or trade blows with them, or even shoot back. Niggas maintain a posture of deviance and defiance always, which makes them hard to kill. On a deeper level, niggas don't die because they transcend death's grip by embracing its omnipresence and constant possibility. In *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*, Aime Ellis argues Black men operate perpetually in the shadow of death; while that should make them fearful and docile, it instead catalyzes a disidentification with its looming presence. Ellis locates the presence of a “death-bound imaginary” in Black popular culture that reflects how Black men generate works that revel in and rebel against the looming possibility of death to resist the pervasive threat of racial terror and violence. They embrace the deathliness of their world and decide to survive, even thrive in that deathly climate.¹⁷⁷

Tapping into this death-boundedness, N.W.A don't strive for inclusion, or empathy, or grace from a world that since birth has jettisoned them from humanity. Rather than foundationally alter the nightmarish conditions of their lives—an effort regarded nihilistically as futile—they seek to dominate this nightmarish terrain by being bigger, stronger, and scarier than the biggest, strongest, and scariest monsters the antiblack hegemonic order can fabricate, and then laugh all the way to the bank.

Chief among those antiblack monsters is the police. After the song's harrowing opening, Dr. Dre's first verse on “Real Niggaz Don't Die” immediately drops the listener into a nightmare of deadly police harassment and violence. He raps,

¹⁷⁷ Ellis, *If We Must Die*.

I got a case, from spittin in a motherfucker's face
So me and my ace, we got a taste
Of a motherfucker's billy club, he took his gun
Put it to my head and said, 'Nigga start runnin!'
So tell me what's the next episode?
Is he crazy? Does he want to chase me or waste me?

The very first lyrical picture painted by the group is truly a nightmare, and one that countless Black men can identify with at the dawn of the nineties. Dre establishes this violent scenario, a fight or flight conflict between the police and a young Black man. What do you do with a police officer's gun pointed at your head? Dre chooses to face the nightmare of police violence head on:

I thought, "Run, nigga, run" but I caught myself
Because my secondary thought was death

If his secondary thought was death, then what was his first thought? In the darkly nihilistic world N.W.A conjures on *Niggaz4Life*, not giving a fuck is always the first and foremost approach to danger. In this nightmare world where "real niggaz don't die," Dre wins this deadly game of chicken against a racist cop by meeting its threat of violence with violence.

I've got head and heart real, but still a motherfucker said
"I want another Black motherfucker dead.
Niggaz ain't good for shit to me
Cause it's a race for second class
So get your ass up against the wall bitch"
And then he tried to jump me
But the punk became a victim of a walk by
Fuckin with Dre, you get a foot up in your asshole
...tellin you why, Real niggaz don't die!

The decision to retaliate violently is framed as an act of self-preservation. The refrain, "real niggaz don't die," underscores the survival instinct driving Dre's actions within the confines of a nightmarish existence marked by pervasive antiblack

violence. Ultimately, this opening salvo introduces nihilism as a coping mechanism for the constant threat of violence experienced by young Black men. Dre's act of violence against a potentially deadly cop is portrayed as a pragmatic response to a life-and-death situation, devoid of lofty ideals or broader movements. In the cruel reality of social death, Dre navigates the nightmares of Black life through mastery of its brutal rules, where survival often hinges on embracing the harsh, unforgiving nature of the world.

The song's chorus is a darkly ironic interpolation of "I Just Want to Celebrate" by seventies rock group, Rare Earth. Rather than lament the ontological obliteration imposed on Black bodies, N.W.A celebrates their liberated ulterior subject position as niggas. On the grim streets they navigate, marked by constant tension and adversity, young Black men find catharsis. The norm of living with clenched fists and brows of sweat since birth transforms into a peculiar form of liberation, where embracing and wielding the ultimate authority of death becomes an agential choice to thrive in a seemingly unlivable condition of dispossession.

The second verse, by MC Ren, takes a subversive approach to collective resistance to oppression by at once urging young Black men to arm themselves, while rejecting the political significance of such a demand. In Ren's clear and urgent flow, he calls for continued resilience and resistance against antiblack violence, rapping,

Real niggaz don't die cause they eventually multiply
The niggas I'm with, they take an eye for an eye
Because the times are so wrong, gotta stay so strong
Niggaz gotta keep it goin on and on

However, despite this moving expression of shared anger, suffering, and resilience, Ren swiftly dismisses any suggestion that his stance is aligned with a larger political agenda.

So nigga get smart and rebel back
I'm not with that black shit so I'm not gonna yell that
All I see is niggas getting harrassed
And can't do nothing about it but get a foot in they ass
But if every nigga grabbed a nine
And started shooting motherfuckers it would put 'em in line

Ren's call for retaliatory violence is about self-preservation, not "that black shit," by which he means collective political aims. Instead, Ren's words suggest young Black men simply get guns and start shooting back, perhaps as a gang or clique, but certainly not as a political party or organization. In this unending nightmare, the closest we come to liberation is instilling fear and garnering respect, not participating in marches, delivering speeches, or wearing African medallions. This sentiment is reflected in the group's interviews during their rise to fame. In one with a UK journalist, the group dismissed hip-hop's "Stop the Violence" movement as a waste of time, arguing "conscious" songs cannot remedy the root causes of violence in Black communities.¹⁷⁸ Additionally, in the abovementioned Arsenio Hall interview, the group dismisses African American anti-apartheid activists in hip-hop as bandwagon jumpers that embrace the then-popular Afrocentricity movement in hip-hop without giving back to or considering the needs of Black communities in America.¹⁷⁹ While both perspectives are problematic and flawed, they collectively

¹⁷⁸ N.W.A *Rare Interview In The UK* (1989).

¹⁷⁹ N.W.A *On Arsenio Hall*.

reflect the group's adversarial, ostensibly nihilistic stance toward Black politics across their entangled network of media representations.

The final verse of "Real Niggaz Don't Die" belongs to Eazy-E, who centers his rhymes on his incorrigible nature as a dangerous, nihilistic, and violent young man thriving in a hostile environment by always being bigger and badder than the biggest and baddest monsters of an antiblack world. He raps,

Only the good die young, so that makes me young and bad
Putting ass-kickings on the niggas that never had
So I guess that makes me tough shit
Straight up gangsta, wrong nigga to fuck with

Eazy's verse is the most direct among the three, expressing an ultraviolent posture towards the antiblack conditions of life for young Black men. In the face of this nightmarish reality, Eazy strikes a terrorizing figure, willing to kill at will to thrive in an unending night in hell's fire. His lyrics vividly dramatize the conditions of dispossession and suffering that drive many young Black men to divest from both traditional American politics and communal bonds strained and often shattered under the heavy weight of antiblackness.

How can a nigga die when he's causing the bloodshed
By shooting motherfuckers in the head
Trying to make a nigga extinct because they fear me
But never wanna hear me
So I'mma let them know how a nigga's livin
Taking from motherfuckers because nobody's giving
A damn thang to a nigga, a real nigga
So I'm living by the motherfuckin trigger
Cause a nigga like me ain't afraid of being locked up
I'm out of luck, so why should I give a fuck?

Eazy-E's words encapsulate an unapologetically nihilistic commitment to survival in a world marked by violence and indifference. His defiance against societal

norms and rejection of conventional avenues for change underscore the desperate measures some young Black men take to assert their existence in the face of systemic oppression. This final summation reveals a stark reality where Eazy, like his counterparts, navigates the harsh terrain of antiblackness, armed with a determination to live on his own terms, even if it means embracing the deathliness of an antiblack world in order to thrive in it. However, his intention to “let them know how a nigga’s livin” reflects some awareness of the power of his nihilistic words to hold a mirror to society.

Still, such reflective moments are fleeting on *Niggaz4Life*, a listening experience akin to a roller coaster ride that barrels through cycles of violence and socio-political critique, only to loop back without resolution. Rather than engaging in conventional political discourse, N.W.A embraces raw confrontation with their version of reality, even if it's a hyper-surreal hellscape of guns and drugs, “bitches” and cops.

“Real Niggaz Don’t Die” is followed by the album’s title track, which begins with a sonic collage of various voices critiquing N.W.A’s name and obscene lyrics:

Why you brothers insist on usin' the word nigga?
Don't you know that's bringin down the black race?
Personally I think the lyrics are a bit too harsh
I ain't no nigga, fuck that shit
Does everything come out your mouth got to be a 4-letter word?
The way you talk about women is bullshit, plain bullshit
Motherfucker I got kids, I don't want 'em listenin' to that bullshit

As a heart monitor beeps, a final voice asks, “How can you call yourself a nigga and be proud of it?” The monitor flat lines and Dre says “bullshit” as the beat kicks in.

The brief skit reflects the group's utter indifference to the politics of respectability or uplift. Dre raps,

Why do I call myself a nigga you ask me?
Because my mouth is so motherfuckin' nasty
Bitch this, bitch that, nigga this, nigga that
In the meanwhile my pockets are gettin' fat

The group understands that on some level, in their dispossessed condition as young Black male rappers, their nightmarish experiences are perhaps their most prized possession. Rather than cower in shame, or write lyrics that emphasize structures and systems, or seek political remedy for the persistence of these barriers, the group proudly commodifies them. Dre continues:

Gettin' paid to say this shit here
Makin' more in a week than a doctor makes in a year
So why not call myself a nigga?
It's better than pullin' the trigger and goin' up the river

Dre's reference to "goin' up the river" reflects that, underlying his sneering bravado is a keen awareness of the antiblack machinations of society that inflict what Calvin Warren calls a "metaphysical holocaust"¹⁸⁰ that fixes Black bodies for subjection and subjugation, regardless of their wealth or status in an antiblack world. At one point, a sampled voice explains:

You're a nigga 'til you die
If you're a po' nigga, you're a po' nigga
If you're a rich nigga, you're a rich nigga
But you never stop bein' a nigga
And if you get to be educated you just an educated nigga
("I can dig it!")

¹⁸⁰ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, pg. 13.

The cynical “I can dig it” reflects a perverse catharsis that comes with resignation to the unchanging conditions of social death, and with the realization that there is opportunity in the pain—money to be made from the deathly conditions of our lives. In RA Judy’s “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” he argues that gangsta rap harnesses the Black musical tradition without investment in its liberatory possibilities, or in the “political” at all. Instead, it recognizes and capitalized on the reiterability of the experience of niggadom as both unchanging *and* profitable.¹⁸¹ N.W.A mocks this fact throughout *Niggaz4Life*, including when Eazy mimics the singsong cadence of a nursery rhyme to sing, “I’m a nigga, he’s a nigga, she’s a nigga, we some niggas. Wouldn’t you like to be a nigga too?” at the track’s conclusion. Rather than seek liberation—an impossibility, for themselves or others—gangsta rappers like N.W.A seek cash, catharsis, and consumption. It is an extremely postmodern and late capitalist approach, in which the experience of Blackness can be recontextualized across mass media like a lap dance or action movie car chase. If one is already treated like a commodity, and always will be, why not commodify your commodified experience to financially escape the immediate threats of antiblack violence. Especially when that all-consuming atmosphere of violence functions as the very ontological ground upon which Black people stand as both “other” yet *the* metaphysical necessity for the world as we know it.

Towards the end of the track, the entire collective repeats again and again, “It’s plain to see, you can’t change me, ‘cause I’mma be a nigga for life,” further underscoring the fixed, ontologically negated condition in which they inhabit.

¹⁸¹ Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity.” pg. 228-9.

However, their resignation is belied by a slight double meaning since it is not clear whom they're addressing. Perhaps, in saying this to Black listeners, N.W.A is sneeringly rejecting the pressure to embrace the politics of respectability and uplift in their work. The group is at once nihilistically celebrating the fact of the intransigence of antiblackness *and* their agential capacity to operate from the subject position of the nigga, despite the potential consequences levied their way from the antiblack world around them.

The "Bitch" Side

If we were to consider the first half of *Niggaz4Life* as the album's "nigga" side, then its second half unequivocally represents the "bitch" side, as nearly every song revolves around the themes of sexual abuse, murder, and disposal of Black women's bodies. The group enthusiastically portrays different versions of the same narrative—a young woman (referred to as a bitch) initially feigns disinterest in sex but ultimately submits to their sexual desires. In doing so, she reveals herself to be a promiscuous, sex-crazed jezebel who is endlessly disposable and deserving of murder.

Misogyny in gangsta rap is nothing new. However, what remains strikingly consistent in N.W.A's portrayal of Black women is their complete lack of differentiation and focus on fungibility. In the realm of *Niggaz4Life*, Black women are viewed as interchangeable bodies ripe for exploitation and destruction. Members of the group wield unchecked power over the women they encounter, acting without remorse or consequences. Typically depicted in their songs as sex workers, unfaithful partners, or money-driven groupies, these portrayals serve as N.W.A's justification

for subjecting women to sexual abuse, gang rape, and even murder. Such representations mirror the pervasive antiblack conditions that have shaped Black women's lives since the Middle Ages that deny them the metaphysical dignity of differentiation, complexity, or inherent value beyond their perceived availability for violence and sexual exploitation. What N.W.A accomplishes in the second half of *Niggaz4Life* is a relentless reiteration of this violence (a cycle perpetuated each time the album is played).

Upon its release, the misogyny evident in *Niggaz4Life* was reflected alarmingly in the group's off-record behavior, notably in the case involving Dee Barnes. Barnes served as the host of *Pump It Up!*, a weekly hip hop show on the FOX channel from 1989 to 1992. Initially considered a friend of the group, Barnes incurred N.W.A's wrath after an episode of *Pump It Up!* featured an interview with Ice Cube immediately following one with the group, during which Cube disparaged them.¹⁸² Feeling betrayed, Dre confronted Barnes at a record release party and subjected her to a vicious assault, involving punching and kicking, followed by an attempt to throw her down a flight of stairs. Shockingly, no one intervened to help Barnes, prompting her to seek refuge in a women's restroom, only to be pursued and further assaulted by Dre.¹⁸³

Despite the assault garnering headlines, Dre and the group showed no remorse, responding with language reminiscent of their own lyrics. In a *Rolling Stone* feature on the group following the release of *Niggaz4Life*, facetiously titled "Beating

¹⁸² Light, "N.W.A."

¹⁸³ Light.

Up the Charts,” Alan Light wrote, “Far from denying the attack, the members of N.W.A insist that, as Ren says, ‘she deserved it—bitch deserved it.’ Eazy agrees: ‘Yeah, bitch had it coming.’” Later, Dre is quoted: “People talk all this shit, but you know, somebody fucks with me, I’m gonna fuck with them. Besides, it ain’t no big thing—I just threw her through a door.”¹⁸⁴ Barnes is not the only victim. Michel’le, an R&B singer and Dre’s former girlfriend, says Dre gave her numerous Black eyes during their relationship, broke her nose, and even shot a gun at her.¹⁸⁵ White female rapper Tairrie B, who was at one time signed to Ruthless Records, also accused Dre of assault during this period, alleging he punched her at a Grammys after-party in 1992.¹⁸⁶ Additionally, MC Ren was sued in 1993 by a young woman who alleged he raped her on the group’s tour bus in 1989 when she was 16-years old, impregnated her, and then refused to be tested for paternity.¹⁸⁷ Given these events and headlines surrounding the group—and their apparent indifference to them—it’s not difficult to believe that the sentiments expressed on *Niggaz4Life* stem from as genuine a place as their fiery anger towards abusive police.

“To Kill a Hooker” is the halfway point of *Niggaz4Life*, and the point at which N.W.A turns toward “bitches” as its chief subject matter. The track is a brief skit in which the group is cruising in Los Angeles, looking for women to pick up. They come upon a female sex worker and lure her to their car. When she demands money for their sexual requests, they abduct her instead. Frustrated with her protests, Eazy shoots and kills her. Ren laments that the interior of his vehicle is ruined while Dre

¹⁸⁴ Light.

¹⁸⁵ Westhoff, *Original Gangstas*, pg. 102.

¹⁸⁶ Westhoff, *Original Gangstas*, pg. 116.

¹⁸⁷ Suebsaeng, “When N.W.A Was Sued for Rape.”

suggests they dump the body and find another woman to proposition: "Ay man fuck that, fuck that bitch man, throw her motherfucking ass out. Yo, there go some more bitches over there, blow the motherfuckin' horn!"

There is no prelude to this scene, or even a hint that the album is heading in this direction, until it does. In fact, women are barely mentioned at all until this point. The role of women on *Niggaz4Life* is either in absence or excess, with little to nothing in between. They are either invisible to or jettisoned from the sociopolitical critique N.W.A levies at the antiblack machinations of American hegemony, or they are objectified to a deathly degree as mere bodies useful only for sex or sexual exploitation, killed without consequence for "stealing," resisting abuse, or just for the thrill of it.

Their disposability syncs perfectly with the ungendering process of the Middle Passage that utterly debased Black women. Just as the nightmare of patrolling LAPD officers choosing random young Black men to harass, abuse, and arrest haunts the group and inspires their fiery rhetoric, N.W.A counter that, in part, with a twisted set of fantasies of their own in which Black women are hunted and subjected to their most base whims and desires, including sexual assault, torture, and murder. Dre's final words during the skit, "Yo, there go some more bitches over there, blow the motherfuckin' horn," are especially chilling, suggesting that the hunt continues, and that there will be more victims to come.

I argue that baked into N.W.A's nihilistic and antipolitical response to the intransigence of antiblack violence and a shared sense of powerlessness as young Black men is their shared perpetuation of the perilous condition of Black womanhood

during the crack era. Incarcerated at record levels, victims of violent crime, domestic violence, and rape, and demeaned as "welfare queens" and "crack whores" across media and politics, Black women's living nightmares of antiblackness and misogyny manifested in discursive and literal ways during the crack era that brought unique challenges into their lives and inflamed old ones. They were also particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse from male partners, neighbors, and community members, especially if they were struggling with poverty or addiction themselves.¹⁸⁸ N.W.A. revel in the grammars that did (and continue to do) that deathly work to make themselves look powerful, to sell audiences on their brand of nihilistic rebellion, and to excuse the violences they perform.

In his essay "Onticide: Afropessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," Calvin Warren challenges the central premise of afropessimism, which posits that Blackness represents the complete negation of ontology, surpassing any other social categories of difference. Warren introduces the concept of "onticide" to refer to the process by which different Black bodies experience distinct forms of violence that are not adequately addressed within this framework, including Black women. Warren's theorizing acknowledges and addresses the diversity of experiences of violence within the collective erasure of Black ontology.¹⁸⁹ I argue that N.W.A.'s portrayal of Black women, along with that of other gangsta rappers, constitutes onticidal performances that contribute to a larger crisis of Black female exploitation and erasure from enslavement to the crack era, and into our present moment.

¹⁸⁸ LeBlanc and Wallace, "Sex for Crack Cocaine Exchange: The Continuing Impact of Crack Running On Women and Their Families."

¹⁸⁹ Warren, "Onticide," pg. 12.

"To Kill a Hooker" is followed by "One Less Bitch," in which Dre and Ren trade stories about women they have murdered. In each case, the victim is guilty of some offense that only reiterates grammars of Black female suffering. Verse one details Dre's efforts to pimp a sex worker named Clara. When he suspects her of stealing money, Dre kills her. Luridly, he takes a moment to gush about the details, exclaiming, "Now listen up and lemme tell you how I did it." Dre did it by tying her to a bed and having her gang raped, before shooting her to death. He finishes his verse with, "One less bitch you gotta worry about. She's outta here and that's how it turned out." This insistence on the details of Clara's long, torturous death, and intention to continue to kill more women, reflects Kendall Thomas' concept of "overkill," which describes violence against queer bodies that is over the top and beyond necessity. The excessiveness of the violence and mutilation heaped upon the victim is a performance of power, dominance, and erasure. "The medium is the message," explains Thomas.¹⁹⁰ N.W.A's fixation and repeated lyrical acts of violence reflect this perversely endless and insatiable desire for Black female destruction, which only serves to reinforce the larger antiblack and misogynist machinations of our antiblack world.

In verse two, Dre is sleeping with the wife of the District Attorney. Fearing that she will tell her high-powered husband, Dre kills her because "a dead bitch can't tell a nigga shit." Interestingly, this verse connects Black women to state power, suggesting their complicity in the carceral state that wreaks havoc on the lives of young Black men, as well as Black women. It is a cruelly misleading and misguided

¹⁹⁰ Thomas, "Beyond the Privacy Principle," pg. 1467.

suggestion that has its roots in both Black Nationalist rhetoric and in the Moynihan Report that deviant, nonconformist Black women are to blame for the suffering of Black men and Black communities broadly.

In verse three, Dre details his dealings with another prostitute with whom he loses touch, only to discover she has been murdered. Such is the victim's valuelessness beyond her sexual exploitability that Dre could care less: "By who and what the act would be done? So what? One less bitch you gotta worry about." Seconds later, we find out what happened. Ren chimes in to confess to killing her because she was collaborating with another pimp behind his back.

The song ends with a sermon from Eazy that perfectly sums up the contents of the song:

In reality, a fool is one who believes that all women are ladies
A nigga is one who believes that all ladies are bitches
And all bitches are created equal
To me, all bitches are the same
Money-hungry, scandalous, groupie hoes
That's always ridin on a nigga's dick, always in a nigga's pocket
And when the nigga runs out of money the bitch is gone in the wind
To me, all bitches ain't shit!

Eazy's soliloquy establishes the total fungibility of Black women's bodies. He calls for the eradication of differentiation that affords Black women with the uniqueness of a human, instead demanding they be tagged with a slew of grammars that seize their flesh. His words both do the work of antiblackness to render Black women as fungible and accumulable, and to reinforce gender norms that make all these terms—"groupies," "bitches," "ladies"—untenable in their application to Black women's bodies, even despite the hierarchical scale of value Eazy implicitly places on them. Rather than signaling the destruction of antiblack hegemony, songs like

"One Less Bitch" amplify its sexism and misogyny and ultimately strengthen the antiblack social order that seeks to make *all* Black life impossible.

Niggaz4Life traffics in rhetoric that reinforces the conditions of our antiblack world that deny difference and complexity to Black bodies. The lives of young Black men are utterly expendable at the dawn of the nineties. However, in the process of challenging that nightmarish reality with a defiant embrace of the deathliness of Black life, *Niggaz4Life* reflects a process by which Black men address and assuage their own feelings of precarity and powerlessness by wielding gendered power over the lives and deaths of Black women. This adherence to and reproduction of western patriarchal and misogynistic ideologies undermines the radical possibilities of their iteration of Black nihilistic antipolitics.

What's more, N.W.A's fixation on violence against Black women on *Niggaz4Life* is as foundational to their constructed subjectivity as police brutality. Their relentless portrayal of Black women as disposable objects, worthy only of exploitation and destruction, is integral to their self-image as powerful and dominant figures within the hyper-masculine narrative they perpetuate. In the group's twisted worldview, the degradation and victimization of Black women are not only permissible but necessary for them to assert their own superiority and maintain their desired image of defiance against societal norms. By positioning Black women as less than themselves, N.W.A reinforces and solidifies their own sense of identity as powerful "niggaz" who defy authority and embrace violence as a means of asserting dominance. Thus, the violence against Black women becomes inseparable from their

vision of themselves, serving as a disturbing backdrop against which they construct their own subjectivity.

Eazy's proclamation that "a nigga" sees these "bitches" for what they really are suggests the liberated subject position of the nigga must entail the status of Black woman as a doubly negated one—she carries nonbeinghood both within and beyond her own community. In other words, even with N.W.A's rejection of the conventionally "human" by way of exalting the ulterior subject position of the nigga, so with it must come the expulsion of Black womanhood from this enthusiastically unhuman realm of existence as well. The group's onticidal fantasies are cannibalistic and cruel, not radical.

Die Niggaz!

The “Die Nigga!” at the beginning of “Real Niggaz Don’t Die” is sampled from “Die Nigga!!!,” a landmark recording by The Last Poets, released in 1970. “Die Nigga!!!” is a forceful rejection of the force of nihilism in Black life that compels Black people to become complicit in their own suffering and bodily destruction. Ingeniously, the poem locates nihilism in seemingly “hopeful” or “useful” practices—like living in a mansion, going to church, or working in an office building—that offer short term victories or moments of peace but don’t address (or are even complicit in) the larger antiblack social order that reduces Black life to a form of slow death. Some lines include:

Niggas been dying for 400 years
Niggas dying with conked heads
Niggas dying in Ivy League suits
Niggas know how to die

...Niggas plan beautiful lives, for when they're dead
Die nigga!
Nigga preachers tell niggas 'bout heaven
Got to die first
Die nigga!

As the song progresses, the direction of the group's rage becomes clear. The "niggas" they're referring to are those community members whose fearful inactivity, resignation, or conformity perpetuate the status quo that oppresses Black communities. Per the Last Poets, until the "nigga" mentality dies, Black people will never achieve liberation. "Die Nigga!!!" is a call to action, not a demand to die.

Niggas die!
Niggas die!
Die niggas!
...So black folks can take over!

In an interview and conversation with Ice Cube for *The New York Times Magazine* in 1994, Last Poets member Abiodon Oyewolo recalls his disappointment the first time he heard "Real Niggaz Don't Die," and what he believed was a misappropriation of their song for destructive ends. He lamented, "It really hurt me when N.W.A. sampled us on 'Real Niggers Don't Die,' and they sampled 'Die Nigger' and they had, I think it was, 'Niggers die, niggers die for 400 years. Die, nigger, die, nigger, die, nigger, die.' But then the brother comes in and says, 'Real niggers don't die.' And they missed the most important part, because that poem says, 'Niggers watch Nat Turner die, niggers watch Emmett Till die, niggers watch Medgar Evers die, watch niggers die, die, die. Die, nigger, die, nigger, die; *they can die so*

black folks can take over.' And that's the point. Get rid of the nigger, you get rid of the bitch, so that the beauty of your folks will emerge."¹⁹¹

Oyewolo's disappointment with N.W.A's use of his song for "Real Niggaz Don't Die" is understandable given The Last Poets' view of the "nigga" as a counterrevolutionary, self-hating force in Black life. However, I argue that the song, and the *Niggaz4Life* album more broadly, holds radical potential that collapses under the weight of its own misogyny. Despite the Last Poets' belief that antiblackness is surmountable, N.W.A embraces the "nigga" as an agential figure that survives and thrives within the unchanging conditions of antiblackness. In this context, N.W.A's embrace of the deathliness of Black life offers a radical possibility to defy the fear that can otherwise seal its influence. While the Last Poets hold onto hope, N.W.A's nihilistic politics and aesthetically nihilistic approach acknowledge the pervasive nature of oppression and seek empowerment through defiance and resilience despite its unchanging condition. In other words, N.W.A's work suggests hope is not the conditional ingredient for resistance to antiblackness. Although unsettling for some, nihilism as a creative aesthetic presents transformative opportunities to explore alternative subjectivities that resist social death and reclaim agency within the ontological pressure cooker that degrades but never pervades Black life.

However, a necessary confrontation with the convergence of nihilism and misogyny within N.W.A's work requires engagement with their interconnectedness. While N.W.A's nihilism may fuel their misogynistic expressions, and their misogyny may manifest in nihilistic forms, they are ultimately intertwined aspects of the same

¹⁹¹ Rule, "GENERATION RAP."

set of problematic ideological performances. Nihilism, when coupled with misogyny, can exacerbate the devaluation and objectification of Black women, perpetuating their suffering. Similarly, misogynistic beliefs and actions, when infused with nihilistic perspectives, can reinforce a sense of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and disrespect regarding gender relations that can fuel and excuse gendered violence. By recognizing the intersectionality of these issues, we can better understand how they reinforce and amplify each other and develop more comprehensive strategies for addressing and challenging them within N.W.A's and other aesthetically nihilistic Black music, and more broadly.

We can see the sidestepping of their harsh history with the 2015 biopic *Straight Outta Compton*, which got rave reviews while conveniently leaving out any mention of the women Dre assaulted—or serious engagement with the group's misogynistic lyrics—to assert the group's status as radical voices on the right side of history. In an essay written after the film's release, Dee Barnes wrote, “When I was sitting there in the theater, and the movie's timeline skipped by my attack without a glance, I was like, 'Uhhh, what happened?' Like many of the women that knew and worked with N.W.A., I found myself a casualty of *Straight Outta Compton's* revisionist history.”¹⁹²

Moreover, the film glosses over the content of *Niggaz4Life*, treating it as an afterthought and barely even acknowledging it at all. This selective representation reflects a desire to sanitize the group's legacy and focus solely on what is now seen as its positive contributions. However, N.W.A was a complex entity, and engaging with

¹⁹² Dailymail.com, “Female Journalist Beaten by Dr. Dre Says Film Whitewashes Violence.”

this complexity is essential as it allows us to recognize the pros and cons of their nihilistic approach, rather than whitewashing their legacy into legitimacy.

Niggaz4Life is just as generative and necessary of a text as “Fuck the Police” or “Straight Outta Compton,” even if it delivers to us messy analytical results.

Furthermore, while songs like “Fuck the Police” have become anthems in the era of Black Lives Matter, it is crucial to recognize what they omit, particularly the erasure of Black women from its male-centric narrative. The invisibility it inflicts on Black women’s struggles with state violence persists off-record in our present moment as well, as was the case when Breonna Taylor’s murder in 2020 initially received far less attention than George Floyd’s. In a review of the film, Janelle Hobson opined, “Such glaring attempts at erasing and marginalizing Black women reverberate at a time of violence against us at the hands of police and others.”¹⁹³

The frustrating legacy of N.W.A’s *Niggaz4Life* encapsulates the inherent challenge of Black radical politics, which too often prioritizes male-centered notions of Black uplift while overlooking the necessity of both darker, more transgressive Black cultural works, *as well as* a radically intersectional and inclusive approach. *Niggaz4Life* is a microcosmic performance that both reflects the radical possibilities of nihilistic Black popular music, and nihilistic politics more broadly, while it also serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle to address the complexities of oppression and liberation, and the harm such portrayals can do to the most marginalized amongst us.

¹⁹³ Hobson, “Straight Outta Compton and the Power of Black Women’s ‘Side Stories.’”

Chapter 3: My Life is Not the Sunshine: Opacity in the Nineties Visual Legacy of Mary J. Blige

Introduction

In her book *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (2001), Farah Jasmine Griffin challenges prevailing narratives of Billie Holiday's life and art that reduce her to an archetypal symbol of victimhood, failure, and tragedy. Griffin paints a portrait of Holiday as a complicated and dynamic Black woman artist who made her own choices and lived life on her own terms. Misrepresentations of Holiday, she argues, foreclose on the opportunity to engage with and learn from the radical power of the Black female subjectivity she created for herself, rather than the doom and gloom projected upon her life story.¹⁹⁴

Griffin points to Mary J. Blige, a young artist at the time,¹⁹⁵ who refused widespread comparisons to Holiday for what she saw as a dangerous imposition of tragedy and impending self-destruction. In an interview with *dream hampton*, Blige is quoted as saying, "I refuse to be compared to Billie Holiday. Please compare me to the living. Don't compare me to the dead... I've seen the Diana Ross movie about her life, and I have a collection of her music."¹⁹⁶ Griffin's assessment of Blige's quote bemoans the pervasive influence of inaccurate representations of Holiday that shaped Blige's view of her, including the 1972 biopic, *Lady Sings the Blues*. However, Blige is not necessarily claiming to know Holiday. What she knows is the narrative of

¹⁹⁴ Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*. Pg. 7.

¹⁹⁵ *If You Can't Be Free* was released in 2001, less than ten years after the release of Blige's debut album.

¹⁹⁶ Griffin, Pg. 13.

Holiday that is projected upon her. When she says, “compare me to the living,” she enacts a refusal to be treated as a person in the process of dying. Blige wants to live. Billie Holiday did, too.

Blige is keenly aware that the media and larger hegemonic landscape in which she was born wants control of her life and body. Fame, rather than serving as a shield from antiblack and patriarchal violence, can accelerate or intensify the march toward premature death for Black women like Holiday and Blige. This is but one of the many terrors that haunt Blige and other Black women—the spectral presence of the image of Holiday as a tragic figure destined to die is the stuff of her nightmares. For Blige, the rhetoric comparing them reads as a death sentence, not a compliment.

It is widely understood that the power in Blige’s performances—or as James Baldwin would say, the authority she has over her audience¹⁹⁷—is her emotional candor and relatability that connects with listeners, especially Black women of the hip-hop generation. Her debut album, *What’s the 411?* (1992), combined hip hop beats, confessional lyrics, and soulful vocal stylings to define a new genre, hip-hop soul.¹⁹⁸ Blige articulated the pain of a generation of Black women raised in the aftermath of the Civil Rights era, when its promise for integration and equality soured amid the deluge of deindustrialization, Reaganomics, mass incarceration, the crack epidemic, and the HIV/AIDS crisis—all afterlives of slavery¹⁹⁹ that perpetuated a profound sense of loneliness and lovelessness that engulfed an entire generation of young Black women.²⁰⁰ Daphne Brooks regards Blige’s artistry as an example of

¹⁹⁷ *I Am Not Your Negro*.

¹⁹⁸ *Mary J. Blige - What’s the 411?*

¹⁹⁹ Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*. Pg. 6.

²⁰⁰ Lindsey, “If You Look in My Life.” Pg. 88.

“Black feminist surrogacy,” “...an embodied cultural act that articulates Black women’s distinct forms of palpable sociopolitical loss and grief as well as spirited dissent and dissonance.”²⁰¹ Through her work, Blige circulated as a surrogate voice that, as a survivor of sexual and domestic abuse, poverty, depression, and drug and alcohol addiction, helped to pioneer the inclusion of Black women’s voices and perspectives on love and relationships in hip-hop.

However, in contrast to this narrative of transparency, many representations of Blige during the nineties consistently present her opaquely. Inspired by the theorizing of Eduoard Glissant, I use opacity to refer to a general unknowability and ambiguity that can be made to manifest visually or otherwise; a refusal to be legible according to social, political, or cultural standards that flatten the complexity of Black womanhood.²⁰² This chapter uses the Black Nightmare Imaginary to explore how representations of Blige in songs, music videos, interviews, and album covers invoke opacity in ways that reflect its power as a tactic to resist the violence of legibility to the spectral presence of social death, and, for Blige, to elude the deathly narrative of Holiday that was projected upon her during the nineties.

Close analyses of some of Blige’s media appearances, stills from her music videos for “I’m Goin’ Down” and “Real Love,” and the covers of her nineties studio albums reveal the subtle power of opacity to deny the totalizing kind of access and availability that satisfies the bloodlust of racial capitalist exploitation. It reflects implicit knowledge of the perils of notoriety for Black women, especially in the post-

²⁰¹ Brooks, “All That You Can’t Leave Behind.” Pg. 183.

²⁰² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*. Pg. 190.

Civil Rights era in which MTV expanded access to famous Black people, and in which the politics of respectability demanded Black people be knowable, available, and “relatable” to white audiences. Never has visual presentation been so critical for notoriety in the music world. Thus, photographic and videographic representations of Blige are a rich and necessary site for exploration of her artistic legacy.

Blige was not solely responsible for her appearance, music videos, or discursive representations, and some of her female contemporaries were also visually presented with opacity at times.²⁰³ However, I contend that the consistent theme of opacity in her music and broader cultural presence is not incidental. Its persistence in representations of Blige provides a valuable opportunity to explore its sociopolitical significance within the complex networks surrounding this highly influential Black woman artist. By utilizing the framework of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, we can draw connections between trauma and resistance that resonate with Black women of the hip-hop generation and beyond. This allows us to delve deeper into the ways in which opacity serves as a tool for navigating and resisting the violence and challenges faced by Black women in society.

Gathering Flesh

Opacity serves to interrupt the process of flesh gathering that shapes Black bodies for various forms of antiblack violence. In “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers makes an important distinction between flesh and body in relation to the capture of African slaves. According to Spillers,

²⁰³ Some examples might include the album covers for Janet Jackson’s *Rhythm Nation* and Sade’s *Promise*.

before the body there is “flesh,” the liberated African subject kidnapped and made captive aboard the slave ship. It is under this condition of captivity that the “body” is formed. While both the flesh and body are available to violence, this ontologically zeroed-out body is the slave, the socially dead nonperson made manifest and legible to any and every need of the master.²⁰⁴

Inspired by Spiller’s theorizing, my conception of *flesh gathering* refers to specific moments of imminent or in-progress antiblack violence, when the flesh is collected and shaped into a debased and entirely degraded Black body—a condition that, according to Frank Wilderson, is coterminous with slaveness.²⁰⁵ Flesh gathering occurred at the moment Africans were captured and chained for enslavement. It occurred at the realization of approaching Klan members at the isolated Black homestead. It occurs when red and blue lights flash in our rearview mirrors. It even occurs when lips are fixed, or pen is brought to pad, to utter or scribble one of a seemingly endless array of grammars of Black suffering that reiterate the originary and ongoing violence of the Middle Passage. In these moments the stomach drops, the muscles tense, and fight or flight mode kicks in. The Black Nightmare Imaginary is populated with these moments of terror when the extended hand of antiblackness seizes Black flesh to shape it into any and all things—the full spectrum of violence that persists through slavery’s afterlives.

Critically, these moments were opportunities for slaves to resist, often in subtle, clandestine ways—including the use of opacity. In *Scenes of Subjection*:

²⁰⁴ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Pg. 67.

²⁰⁵ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*. Pg. 102.

Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America, Hartman turns our attention away from extreme spectacles of antiblack violence toward the mundane and seemingly trivial moments that reveal the pervasiveness of racial domination—from all sides, and in ways great and small—and that make the nightmarish moments of flesh gathering central to the reproduction of social death.²⁰⁶ Crucially, Hartman describes the practice of “redress,” which I argue interrupts the process of flesh collection in an attempt to heal the broken Black body and reconstitute its autonomy.²⁰⁷ According to Hartman, redress can take symbolic form in seemingly small ways, like the clandestine sharing of stories, knowledge, resources, or love between partners and other forms of kin. Even feelings of passion and pleasure are forms of redress hidden through opacity to protect oneself from the various forms of violence foundational to Black life. Thus, when we foreground the various nightmares of flesh gathering, performances of opacity can take on a radical and fugitive quality, both then and now.

Black female flesh was gathered in many ways at the dawn of the nineties that are bound to a larger tapestry of terror experienced by Black women since the Middle Passage. During the crack era, dog whistle terms like “welfare queen” and “crack whore” explained, excused, and galvanized support for the denial of social services, wanton police brutality, and mass incarceration of Black women. These terms were merely the latest of what Spillers calls “American grammars” that reproduce the ungendering of the Black female body and mark it for objectification and violence.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. Pg. 4.

²⁰⁷ Hartman. Pg. 77.

²⁰⁸ Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” Pg. 68.

The murder of LaTasha Harlins by shop owner Soon Ja Du, and the light sentence Du received from white judge Joye Karlin, exemplified the inability of Black women to control what happens to their bodies, and the ability for violators of their bodies to go free. Although it was known that her death was a key catalyst for the Los Angeles Uprising, Harlins's death never reached the level of national attention of King's beating, nor did the substance of Harlins's hopes, dreams, and life experiences outside of her killing receive sustained attention.²⁰⁹ Her story reflects how both inside and outside of courtrooms, the lives and deaths of young Black women are too often devalued and disregarded.

The harassment and ridicule of Anita Hill for going public about the sexual harassment she experienced at the hands of then-Supreme Court justice nominee Clarence Thomas reflected that Black women's stories of abuse are often disregarded or disbelieved, especially when they stand to undermine the so-called "progress" of Black representation in American politics. According to Patricia Hill Collins, Hill's experience typified the unique erasure of Black women's voices and experiences under both sexist and racist oppression, and the harsh consequences they face for speaking out.²¹⁰ As a victim of sexual assault and domestic violence, Blige was acutely aware of the fact that for Black women, who experience both race and gender oppression, violence comes both from within and beyond one's community. Thus, the threat of violence, sexual or otherwise, at the hands of fathers, lovers, neighbors, and community members compounds and inflames a nightmare she shares with Black

²⁰⁹ Twitter et al., "How the Killing of Latasha Harlins Changed South L.A., Long before Black Lives Matter."

²¹⁰ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*. Pg. 126.

women across time. Hill's ordeal reflects the grave consequences Black women face for speaking out about the mistreatment they experience, and the indifference these experiences are met with.

That indifference is reflected in the crimes of serial killer, Lonnie David Franklin Jr. Beginning in the mid-eighties, Franklin raped and murdered dozens of Black women in South Central, Los Angeles.²¹¹ Because they were Black women and often involved in sex work and/or drugs, insufficient action was taken to find the killer. The media dubbed him "The Grim Sleeper" because it was initially believed there was a fourteen-year hiatus in the killings. In fact, Franklin simply kept on killing with minimal attention paid to his activities from the police or the media. He was finally captured in 2010.²¹² Franklin's killing spree reflects the degree to which the lives of Black women are degraded and disregarded in America. The deathly conditions of Black life that placed his victims in harm's way without national uproar or sustained action is the true killer, an omnipresent force stalking and haunting Black women like a horror movie villain.

The Black Nightmare Imaginary is a useful framework to understand how this constellation of scenarios—including the narrative of powerlessness, deathliness, and tragedy associated with Billie Holiday—can be shared in a psychic terrain of terror that, while not necessarily experienced by all Black women, is recognizable as a constant possibility because of how that violence transcends the specifics of time and space. Christina Sharpe's conceptualization of "the weather" is useful here. She

²¹¹ Nazaryan, "'The Grim Sleeper' Is the Story of the South L.A. Serial Killer and the Women Who Were His Victims."

²¹² "Only 'Good Victims' Need Apply."

theorizes on weather as the singular and total antiblack climate that always colors, textures, and bears down upon Black life.²¹³ The weather remains a constant, regardless of fluctuations in intensity or context, casting a looming shadow of imminent and inherent danger. This pervasive sense of precarity, akin to a dark cloud of impending death, defines the Black Nightmare Imaginary, binding Black women to collective experiences and shared fears.

While it does not break the system of antiblack degradation and objectification entirely, opacity is a radical tactic that resists the process of flesh collection to which Holiday, Blige, and so many other Black women continue to be subjected. Opacity in representations of Blige reflect resistance to the forces that construct nightmarish and incomplete versions of Black women's lives. Opacity can impede the efforts of hegemonic institutional power to condemn Black women to premature death by reducing them down to archetypes of victimhood, powerlessness, and blame.

Thus, this chapter reflects a different articulation of the Black Nightmare Imaginary framework that is subtler and less intentional than the direct expressions of it in the works of artists like Public Enemy, Sister Souljah, and N.W.A. The manifestations of the nightmare that reveal the radical properties of opacity reflect the durability of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, and how it can manifest in less literal ways. Its elusiveness challenges the primacy of ocular expressions of antiblack violence. The radical tactic of opacity and the forms of subjection it resists suggest one both figuratively and literally cannot rely on the visual, literal, or intentional to

²¹³ Sharpe, *In the Wake*. Pg. 104.

understand the spectral presence of social death that bears down upon Black life. The Black Nightmare Imaginary can be as subtle as racism is at times. In neither case should subtlety justify skepticism of their existence.

When Little Girls Grow Up Unsafe

Blige faced the violence of economic inequality and structural antiblackness from birth, growing up in the Schlobohm projects in Yonkers, New York. As a young girl, Blige lived through the crack epidemic that corroded the fabric of her community. Before Blige even arrived in Schlobohm, the structural violences of urban renewal and deindustrialization already wreaked havoc on the neighborhood. The same year of her arrival, the Justice Department and the NAACP sued the city for its pattern of residential segregation and economic deprivation of Black people within its borders.²¹⁴ In *Mary J. Blige: My Life*, a documentary about the creation of the *My Life* album, she says that upon arriving in Yonkers, her and her younger sister immediately got into a physical altercation with neighborhood kids. Like Holiday and far too many other Black women, from slavery to the present, Blige experienced sexual assault as a little girl. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey, Blige said she hurried home when left alone in her building's hallways to avoid sexual assault or rape. She remembered witnessing an attack on a woman so brutal, "it looked like her head come off when he slapped her." She watched her mother be physically harmed by men.²¹⁵ She recalled hearing women be beaten and abused through the walls of surrounding apartments on a regular basis. Blige says that she "carried their pain," as

²¹⁴ Alexander, *Real Love, No Drama*, pg. 17.

²¹⁵ Alexander pg. 13.

her own. Such was the pervasiveness of antiblack and misogynist violence that Blige learned not to smile or show joy in front of others. Love and happiness were luxuries she could not afford to flaunt under the conditions of her life.²¹⁶

The scenes of fear and violence she described are manifestations of the terror emerging from the Black Nightmare Imaginary's shared psychic terrain of violent possibility. As a result, Blige practiced opacity at a young age, hiding emotions and experiences to protect herself against the hostile conditions that contour daily life for little girls in the projects.²¹⁷ She continued this practice into young adulthood, when both old and new challenges required opacity to resist the racist and misogynistic violence unique to young Black women.

When Blige's star began to rise after the release of her debut album *What's the 411?* in 1993, she developed a reputation in the news media for being volatile, evasive, and temperamental.²¹⁸ David Alexander explains, "She would soon be called out every time she was late to an interview and declared difficult when she reacted negatively to an interviewer's questions. She admitted later that she saw everyone as out to get her, and, to some degree, they probably were."²¹⁹ Journalists began to speculate on her future in the music industry, predicting self-destruction in ways that mirrored narratives about Billie Holiday.²²⁰ Using the Black Nightmare Imaginary to foreground the omnipresent violence surrounding Blige can situate us in the

²¹⁶ Mary J. Blige's *My Life*.

²¹⁷ Mary J. Blige's *My Life*.

²¹⁸ "Mary J. Blige Is the R&B Queen of Vulnerability, But Her New Documentary Keeps Fans at Arms' Length."

²¹⁹ Alexander, pg. 48.

²²⁰ "Most Obligated to Miss Blige"; Sullivan, "My Boyfriend Was Trying to Kill Me. There Were Weapons."

conditions that required her to harness opacity as a mode of resistance to various forms of subjection, including discursive violence. Although Blige was struggling with depression and addiction, she displayed strong instincts about the intentions of journalists and media outlets to frame her life and art in ways that flattened her complexity and condemned her to a future of heartbreak, loss, and even death. In the face of this nightmare, Blige was understandably guarded.

In the abovementioned documentary, audiences witness a mixture of archival and current footage of Blige as she tells the story of the album's creation, and of the young woman who created it. Flashing back and forth between Blige today and the Blige of the early nineties offers a fascinating means to experience her maturation over the intervening thirty years. At one point, Blige says she continues to protect that young woman, and the little girl inside of her.²²¹ Close analysis of Blige's relationship to the media reflects the ways she did (and still does) use opacity to resist antiblack and misogynistic violence.

In one scene, Blige is interviewed by a white female journalist about her then-new album, *My Life*. When the journalist suggests the pain expressed on the album emerged from Blige's personal experiences, Blige deflects, denies this assertion, and becomes visibly frustrated and antagonistic toward the interviewer. Because of our perspective, and with the benefit of hindsight, we know she is lying. Modern day Blige does, too. "I didn't like the interviewer and I didn't want to give her everything," she explains. "I didn't want to tell her what I was really dealing with

²²¹ Mary J. Blige's *My Life*.

because it was none of her fucking business.”²²² Blige was extremely sensitive about the degree to which media and the public should have access to her beyond their engagement with her recorded material. What this scene shows is her intention to protect herself and the little girl inside of her from the destructive energy of a mal-intentioned journalist.

Key here is the primacy of intuition for Blige. After facing the threat of violence in various manifestations for her entire life, her intuition about the intentions, threat, and malice of others is indispensable to her survival. For Blige, opacity was the natural line of defense. Holding back tears, she continues, “So if it was some energy that I picked that was wrong, I was... I withheld. ...I always had a thing where my intuition was strong, and it would make me go into protection mode. ...I didn’t know I would have the courage I do now. So, I guess that is what happens when you grow up in an environment where little girls are not safe. And that’s why my gut is God.”²²³ Enmeshed in America's antiblack and patriarchal hegemonic order since birth, Blige knew intimately the sting of antiblack and misogynistic violence in its many manifestations, but the white-hot glare of media and music industry machinations was a new one. Rather than give herself away to these forces, Blige understandably harnessed opacity to cut them off at the gate.

Blige’s early career is littered with moments like this. One example is an appearance on British television show, *The Word*, in 1995. Sitting on a couch with her hat low enough to obscure her eyes, Blige is guarded but calm. At one point, the

²²² Mary J. Blige’s *My Life*.

²²³ Mary J. Blige’s *My Life*.

white female host (astoundingly) asks Blige why she developed the reputation for being a “super bitch.” Blige responds, “Maybe because I’m not an open person. I don’t deal with everybody. I have sense. ...if that makes me a bitch then whatever.”²²⁴ It is a telling moment. Blige understands instinctively that for Black women living under the precarity of hegemonic violence, candor is *earned*. It is not just shyness that keeps Blige guarded, but rather common sense about the structural forces bearing down on her as a famous Black woman in America.

Out of nowhere, the host questions Blige about her stormy romantic relationship with K-Ci Haley from the R&B group, Jodeci. She cuts to a clip from earlier in the year where K-Ci mocks and dismisses a rumor of impending marriage to Blige, assuring viewers that “K-Ci is not getting married!” to cheers from the audience. Blige is surprised by the clip and clearly hurt by his words. When asked for a comment, she restrains herself and says simply, “Can we please move on? ...I am disgusted.”²²⁵ The host succeeded in blindsiding Blige with the painful stunt, but she failed to bait her into cooperating with the invasion of her personal struggles and exploitation of private pain. Situations like these explain why Blige often stayed mum, even hostile, in media appearances.

The most infamous of these incidents is an interview with model Veronica Webb for *Interview Magazine* in July of 1995.²²⁶ The interview perfectly conveys both Blige’s guardedness and the nightmare of antiblack and patriarchal violence undergirding her behavior. The magazine cover²²⁷ and article both lead with a blurb

²²⁴ Mary J. Blige on *The Word* - March 1995.

²²⁵ Mary J. Blige on *The Word* - March 1995.

²²⁶ “Most Obligated to Miss Blige.”

²²⁷ “Interview Magazine July 1995 Sylvester Stallone Mary J Blige Jon Bon Jovi • \$15.00.”

alerting the reader that the two nearly came to blows, situating us immediately in a representation of Blige—and Webb (who is also Black), and Black women broadly—as violent and dangerous before we read a single word from Blige herself.²²⁸ What follows is Webb’s description of Blige’s behavior on the set of the music video for “You Bring Me Joy,” the fourth single from the *My Life* album. She says, “...I had been warned that she is not at all political. That she is moody. That she can be attacking. When the director calls for a dinner break, I hear her cousin and traveling companion Jamarco rename it a ‘chronic break.’” Just one and a quarter paragraphs into the article, before we hear from Blige herself, Webb reinforces and then adds to the description in the above blurb—Blige also does drugs.²²⁹

Next, Webb says Blige, unaware she would be interviewed that day, instantly ices her out. Instead, she parties with her sister and entourage in the parking lot with forty-ounce beers, weed, and loud music. Webb describes it as a “ghetto extravaganza.” Later, Blige beckons Webb to drive her to a convenience store for cigarettes. In her description of the experience, Webb belittles Blige by juxtaposing ironically her purchase of Newports with her desire to know if the pineapple coconut juice she is buying contains MSG. Webb thus adds a few more descriptors, now framing Blige as unprofessional, gluttonous, and ignorant.

Webb ends her pre-interview description with the following reflection: “The overwhelming thing about Mary. J. Blige is that she does exactly what she wants to do, regardless, or maybe because of, her point of view—that she is constantly under

²²⁸ Harlepolis, “Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]”; LaGrandeDame, “Throwback to 1995.”

²²⁹ Harlepolis, “Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]”; LaGrandeDame, “Throwback to 1995.”

siege in a world that's hostile to who she is. And because of that I won't forget her. She is someone who will be famous whether her story turns out to be a tragedy or a success."²³⁰ Thus, we get a final implied descriptor—Blige is quite possibly doomed. This is the very framing, or nightmare, Blige fears most. Obviously, Blige is choosing to engage in behavior that is potentially harmful to her. What is interesting here is Webb's characterization of Blige's sense of being under siege as a "point of view"—the suggestion being that this "point of view" is mere perspective, baseless or negotiable. This sentiment cheapens Blige's rightful awareness of the omnipresent hostility for who she is as a young Black woman from the streets, especially a newly prominent and influential one. Blige is correct to feel this way; Webb's article betrays and shames her by framing it as paranoia.

What follows is a contentious and bizarre conversation. Blige is clearly intoxicated and frustrated with Webb's line of questioning. She lashes out opaquely at the questions, assumptions, and preconceived narratives that predominate this and other interviews through ambivalence, ambiguity, and deflection. In a discussion about the personal pain that inspired Blige to write the songs on *My Life*, Webb asks if relationships were the source of that pain:

MJB: Yeah. Many relationships where I learned...

VW: What were you trying to achieve in your relationship with your boyfriend, K-Ci, the singer in the soul band Jodeci?

²³⁰ Harlepolis, "Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]"; LaGrandeDame, "Throwback to 1995."

MJB: As far as men [and relationships go], that's where I think respect comes in. I respect you, and you respect me.²³¹

Rather than allow Blige to finish her thought, Webb clumsily interjects for what she is really looking for—specific details on her widely-reported and tumultuous relationship with K-Ci. Rather than open up, Blige maintains her distance. Later, Webb inquires about how Blige copes as a woman in the recording industry.

VW: Do you have different survival skills now?

MJB: I have survival skills, period.

VW: Did you add new ones?

MJB: Uh-uh.

VW: What about the etiquette course you enrolled in with Angelo Ellerbee from [the public relations firm] Double Exxposure?²³²

Rather than engage Blige on the survival skills she already has developed over the course of her young but turbulent life—including the tactic of opacity—Webb turns the conversation toward an etiquette class, thus steering the conversation toward the subject of Blige's manners and demeanor. At this point, Blige has had it.

²³¹ Harlepolis, "Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]"; LaGrandeDame, "Throwback to 1995."

²³² Harlepolis, "Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]"; LaGrandeDame, "Throwback to 1995."

MJB: Angelo Ellerbee is the perfect example of what we need to be. He can't be fucked with.

VW: Why not?

MJB: I'm thinking about it. Do you know what? I would have figured it out if I was you.

VW: Why? Because he's happy in himself? Because he knows where he comes from? Why? What did he do with you for twenty-four weeks?

MJB: I wasn't with him for twenty-four weeks.

VW: Really?

MJB: That was the length of the course. [Blige attended it for seventeen weeks.] See, the more you ask me stupid questions, the more I'm going to give you stupid answers.

VW: Why was that a stupid question? That's consistently in your press, Mary.

MJB: It really is consistently in my press. But why do you think I went? Why do you think I went for such a short period of time?

VW: Because you knew a lot of it already, and you learn fast.

MJB: Well, why are you asking me the question? We need to be alone, right? Because we're going to fight, ain't we?²³³

Why does Blige consider Webb's question stupid? Perhaps it's self-explanatory why she would be asked to take etiquette classes; the industry and larger racial capitalist machine surrounding Blige want to change her and exploit her.

²³³ Harlepolis, "Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]"; LaGrandeDame, "Throwback to 1995."

However, the truth is more complicated. In a 2022 interview with *Hype Magazine*, Angelo Ellerbee discussed his relationship with Blige at this particular point in her life: "We developed a relationship that first day because what I created was a 24 week artist development program. I taught diction, speech mannerism and things that their mothers and fathers didn't do for them. That's what Mary came to me for. Not as a PR client, as an artist." The two developed a rapport and friendship through honesty and vulnerability about shared trauma and pain. According to Ellerbee, their bond was solidified the day he learned of the passing of his nephew. He explains, "She asked me to listen to her single 'My Life.' The lyric went, 'if you could see what I see...' Now remember 3 minutes before this that my nephew had died. I started crying, she said 'What's wrong?' I told her and she said, 'Why you still sitting here?' I said 'Girl we gonna sit here until this session is over.' She started to tell me about her father not being around... We developed a relationship."²³⁴

The etiquette classes were a special and meaningful experience for Blige, even as it was sensationalized in the press as a referendum on her supposed crass and disrespectful behavior. The topic was complicated, private, and emotionally poignant—too personal to discuss in an adversarial interview with someone she did not trust. Blige did not feel exploited or judged by Ellerbee; she felt her relationship with Ellerbee was being exploited by the media. Thus, Webb's explanation that the etiquette course is "consistently in your press" is met with a derisive "it sure is" from Blige because *of course* it is. Media is a particularly corrosive arm of the antiblack and patriarchal project of flesh gathering. It is in the arena of mass media where the

²³⁴ Star, "Angelo Ellerbee."

flattening narratives of Holiday's life and death take form and circulate. Blige is at war with this process, acutely aware of her precarity as a young Black woman, especially a famous one.

The interview ends with the following exchange:

MJB: People want to see a nigger like me locked down in jail, doing drugs. And that's just the rub of the way of the world. Like what they did to Tupac. They put him under. He didn't do a motherfucking thing. They put Mike Tyson under. He didn't do a motherfucking thing. They tried to say Michael Jordan's father was doing drugs and gambling. But that was his business.

VW: Whatever, he didn't deserve to die like that.

MJB: Don't lock me down like that. Don't chain me up like that. Don't bring me back to slavery days because I'm living my life. You're living your life when you get ready—and can't nobody fuck with you. Let me live my life.²³⁵

What is most powerful about these words, and this interview overall, is how it contains a rare confession from Blige at this particularly difficult moment in her life. At the closing of the interview, she is candid about her fear of subjection and degradation, and the very real nightmare of the loss of control over her body. For Blige, the nightmare is the various forms of violence and unfreedom lurking for her and other young Black figures of her generation who dare to live their lives on their

²³⁵ Harlepolis, "Mary J Blige & Veronica Webb [Discussion Post]"; LaGrandeDame, "Throwback to 1995."

own terms. Tellingly, her examples include Tupac Shakur and Mike Tyson, two male contemporaries convicted of charges related to sexual assault of Black women. It is possible that this reflects Blige's disbelief of Black women victims of violence, which would be both unfortunate and ironic considering her history. However, it is also important that she articulates her awareness of both the media's hunger to destroy Black life, and of her own precarity in a conversation that too often centers around the struggles of Black men. So, too are Blige and other women of her generation available to the forces of white supremacy and antiblackness, as well as patriarchy and misogyny. Blige's bumpy relationship with the media reflects a delicate dance with the demands of racial capitalism. Opacity serves both her desire to share her art with the world, and her will to protect herself from harmful archetypes that flatten the complexity of Black women and literally threaten their lives.

Mary Sings the Blues

In her interview with dream hampton, Blige mentions the 1972 biopic *Lady Sings the Blues* as a source feeding her understanding of Holiday's life and experiences.²³⁶ The film portrays a reductive version of Holiday that is the stuff of Blige's nightmares, rather than the complex, dynamic figure framed vividly in Griffin's book. However, foregrounding the spectral presence of Holiday's ghost that manifests in *Lady Sings the Blues* does not reduce Holiday (or Blige) to such projections. Films and other cultural objects help to shape the nightmares we can establish to clarify the radical power of opacity in Blige's work.

²³⁶ Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*. Pg. 13.

Lady Sings the Blues portrays Holiday as a helplessly self-destructive woman destroyed by trauma, fame, excess, and the manipulations of others. It begins with her being booked into prison, raped as a young girl, and sent to live and work at a brothel. When she embarks on a singing career, her savior is (the film's depiction of) Louis McKay—her suitor, lover, and protector—who offers her kindness, loyalty, and stability throughout her rise to fame and descent into drugs.²³⁷ The film frames McKay as Holiday's savior to such a degree that the primary conflict throughout *Lady Sings the Blues* is really McKay's battle against Holiday's demons, rather than Holiday herself. In the end, the message is that Holiday died not just because of drug and alcohol abuse, but because she did not listen to McKay. In real life, Louis McKay was a grifter and abuser who exploited Holiday until the end of her life.²³⁸ He also, unsurprisingly, was the film's technical advisor.²³⁹

Griffin suggests Blige and other artists of her generation did not know any better than to accept this uncomplicated version of Holiday because it was the only one available to them.²⁴⁰ I argue we turn the lens from the possession of biographical knowledge to the influence and impact of hegemonic framing that projects a scary, one-dimensional version of Holiday, and how opacity could protect Blige from being consumed by that narrative. By foregrounding the nightmarish depictions of Holiday's life, the Black Nightmare Imaginary clarifies how opacity can reflect the refusal to be reduced to the deadly terms of racial capitalist exploitation and subjection. Many portrayals of Holiday are inaccurate, but they still exist in Blige's

²³⁷ *Lady Sings the Blues*.

²³⁸ Blair, "Looking For Lady Day's Resting Place?"

²³⁹ Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*. Pg. 60.

²⁴⁰ Griffin. Pg. 13.

nightmares as a commonsensical possibility for Black women. Through analyses of two of Blige's most famous music videos—"I'm Goin' Down" and "Real Love,"—we can see how opacity interrupts that process.

Of all the scenes from *Lady Sings the Blues*, it is the opening scene that most harrowingly conveys and exemplifies the nightmarish power of Holiday's ghost. *Lady Sings the Blues* opens in black and white, with Holiday being booked into jail. When she first arrives, she is wearing a fur coat and sunglasses that opaquely obscure her eyes (Fig. 21). These signifiers of glamour and protection are snatched away, leaving her imperiled and exposed. White prison guards handle her like a ragged doll, a used-up plaything. Her hair is wild, and she appears despondent and sick. For her mugshot, a white woman guard violently grabs her by the hair for a clear shot of her face (Fig. 22). She is led to a padded cell where she screams, cries, and writhes on the floor like a wild animal, clearly in the throes of drug and/or alcohol withdrawal (Fig. 23).²⁴¹ Throughout, shots freeze like photographs, nodding to her status as a famous Black woman denied privacy or dignity. The entire experience serves to frame Holiday's life through images of criminality, surveillance, powerlessness, and subjection. She is broken, beaten, and alone. The scene fades with a final, haunting image of her in solitary confinement, straitjacketed, staring out into oblivion (Fig. 24).

²⁴¹ *Lady Sings the Blues*.



Figure 21: Lady Sings the Blues – Ross arrested



Figure 22: Lady Sings the Blues – Ross mugshot



Figure 23: *Lady Sings the Blues* – Ross in cell



Figure 24: *Lady Sings the Blues* – Ross in straitjacket

Key here is the role fame and celebrity play in a representation that only perpetuates an overly simplified narrative of her life. Holiday is in prison on drug charges, caught in part because of her fame. We are watching *Lady Sings the Blues* itself because of her fame, talent, and success—none of which protected Holiday from prison, or from premature death. In fact, these qualities placed her in a position to be publicly shamed and flattened to such a degree that the opening scene of a film

about her life is a scene of total subjection and misery. Thus, the scene captures perfectly the uncomplicated, simplified representation of Holiday's life as a nightmare of total subjugation and degradation, and one of which Blige was clearly aware.

That awareness, of both the film and the perils of Black female celebrity, are exemplified by the music video for "I'm Goin' Down," Blige's successful Rose Royce cover from *My Life*. Directed by Matthew Rolston, the video adopts visual and thematic markers signifying Blige's connection with a legacy of Black women jazz and blues performers like Holiday. As asserted by Angela Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, blues women—artists like Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, and Holiday—are central to the presentation and representation of Black women-centered narratives in popular music and culture, expressing shared attitudes, experiences, hopes, and dreams in ways that are unapologetic, transgressive, and complex.²⁴² Situating Blige in this tradition gestures toward the significance of hip-hop soul as a critical site to carry on that tradition, and to challenge media representations that flatten the lives of Black women.

The black and white video is set in a smoky 1940s-style lounge. Half empty, the club features a small stage for Blige, and a smattering of cocktail tables. Blige takes the stage in a luxurious black fur coat and sings into a retro microphone, her hair short except for two thick locks of blonde hair tucked over both sides of her neck (Fig. 25). Anachronistically, she dons a pair of large hoop earrings and contemporary Black shades, obscuring her eyes. In the book *On Racial Icons*, Nicole Fleetwood

²⁴² Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. Pg. 4, 11.

analyzes the visual strategies employed by Black women celebrities like Diana Ross that catapult them to iconic status. In the case of Ross and many others, a critical element of that process is to overtly reference previous generations of Black women visually in a way that situates the young artist both within and apart from that legacy.²⁴³ “I’m Going Down,” adopts markers that visually recall a legacy of Black women jazz and blues performers like Holiday, with some subtle anachronistic elements—like her contemporary earrings and sunglasses—that signify on that aesthetic. Fascinatingly, her appearance here bears striking resemblance to Ross’s appearance as Holiday in the abovementioned scene in which she is ushered into jail (Fig. 21).



Figure 25: I’m Going Down – Blige in shades

Consider another photo (Figure 26) of the actual Billie Holiday, taken as she was being booked on drug charges at San Francisco’s Hall of Justice in 1949.²⁴⁴ Her outfit, which includes a beautiful fur coat and trendy shades, is strikingly like both

²⁴³ Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons*. Pg. 57.; Ross’s performance and inhabiting of Holiday is a perfect example of this process.

²⁴⁴ Wierde, “Billie Holliday Busted - FoundSF.”

images of Ross and Blige. She wears this luxurious outfit like armor as she enters the lion's den that is the police station, a place where she is exposed and under threat. In this hostile setting she presents herself opaquely by obscuring her eyes from the prying gaze of white officials and press. Ross does the same in the opening scene of *Lady*, but in a far harsher and more physically dehumanizing context. In both cases, this opaque appearance serves to interrupt the violence of the white gaze while in police custody.



Figure 26: Billie Holiday booked

In contrast to the images of Holiday and Ross, Blige's outfit is worn for the stage, suggesting that the stage itself—a site signifying vulnerability, transparency, and notoriety—is *also* a dangerous place. In the words of Zack de la Rocha, "the front line is everywhere" for Black women. By referencing Holiday's opaque 1940s glam appearance and Ross's similar representation of Holiday, and by situating Blige on stage rather than jail, "I'm Goin' Down" gestures toward the dangers of Black female celebrity itself, and the utility of opacity as both provocative artistic approach and protective measure against the gathering of Black flesh.

In Figure 27 we witness a climactic moment in the “I’m Goin’ Down” video when, as the second chorus hits, Blige—overwhelmed with emotion—rips off the sunglasses and belts the chorus. The drama of the moment is undeniable and even somewhat cliché, but in the scheme of the video’s unique approach to opacity it reflects agency. Blige can move in and out of opacity, and her connection with narratives of Holiday’s tragic life, at will. In a flash, she tears away the mask to reveal her eyes.



Figure 27: I’m Going Down – Blige sans shades

This is a bold, full-faced performance of musical catharsis. Blige makes the choice to expose herself, standing defiantly in a collective pain she shares with women of her generation and—suggested by the retro concept of the video—Black women of the blues and jazz generations before her. This contrasts with Ross’s Holiday, who is forced to shed her coat and sunglasses while being booked by white police officers. The disturbing mugshot still from the film (Fig. 2) represents transparency that is violent and forced, as opposed to the dynamic and agential power of Blige’s transparency as an artistically and politically charged decision.

In *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, Daphne Brooks discusses the idea of “spectacular opacity,” in which Black performers oscillate between concealment and revelation to dramatic effect. According to Brooks, the shrouding of the body in darkness, which renders the Black body less knowable and transparent, allows for a spectacular revealing that can serve to recover, reimagine, and reveal the flesh through the agential and transformative power the performer wields over it.²⁴⁵ The dynamic of shroud and reveal plays with and interrupts racist constructs of the Black body by controlling when and how it will be knowable, available, and/or transparent. I argue spectacular opacity works in the context of the music video for “I’m Goin’ Down” to resist the antiblack hegemonic insistence on the transparency and knowability of the Black woman artist and celebrity, affording Blige with the ability to elude the gathering of her flesh despite the looming presence of Holiday’s ghost. Thus, we can read fugitive and insurgent qualities in the video’s deployment of opacity.

The video also features a series of close-up and medium close-up shots in which Blige stares directly into the camera unobscured, vulnerable, and exposed. In Figures 28 and 29 Blige rolls, writhes, and crawls as the camera follows her clumsily, giving these shots a surreal quality. Blige’s desperation and lonesomeness are palpable in these shots. We can compare them to the images of Ross’s Holiday in her jail cell, rolling and writhing across the floor, closed off from the outside world, all alone in her misery.

²⁴⁵ Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*. Pg. 8.



Figure 28: I'm Going Down – Blige writhing (1)



Figure 29: I'm Going Down – Blige writhing (2)

However, elsewhere in “I’m Goin’ Down,” Blige performs in a black pantsuit with the brim of her hat low to partially obscure her eyes. Figure 30 shows an army of lookalikes who join her as she marches heavily down an endless flight of white stairs. In these scenes opacity partners with abundance—there are too many bodies and too much flesh to gather, thus interrupting the flesh gathering process. Matched with the song’s content, the images articulate the inevitability of suffering for Black women. The army of Marys are literally going down, marching downward in an ongoing

experience of struggle and pain that is part and parcel of social death. Crucially, it is a collective struggle that they march through together, with a certain b-girl swagger that recalls hip hop's unique ability to articulate resilience and pride in the face of life's miseries.

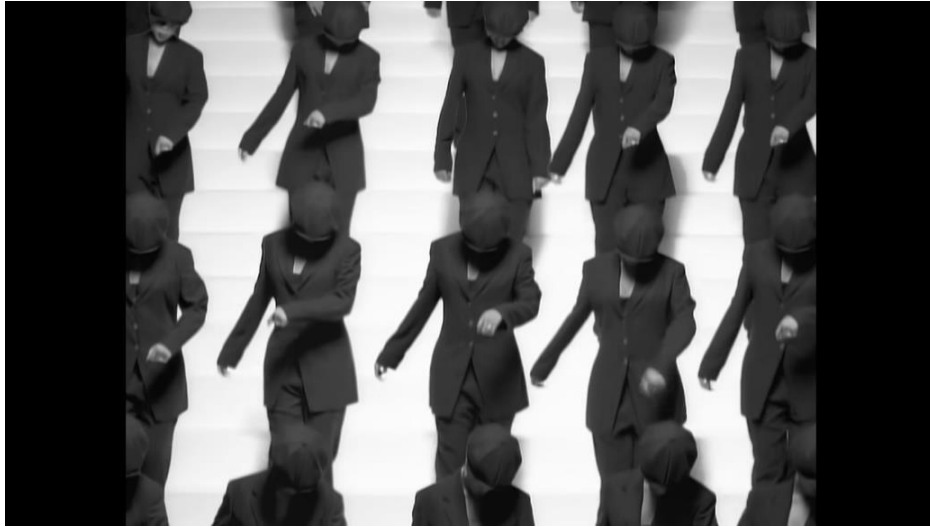


Figure 30: I'm Going Down – army of Marys

In the “I’m Goin’ Down” video, Blige is a Black woman in pain—not vastly different from archetypal representations of Holiday—but she has agency, and she is not alone. Playing with opacity and revelation, solitude and abundance gives her performance nuance, complexity, and agential power to interrupt the antiblack machinations of racial capitalism. Blige shrouds, reveals, recoils, and multiplies—she cannot be easily pinned down. The video situates Blige in a rich heritage of Black women artists like Holiday, but with subtle use of opacity it articulates the agency to do so on her own terms. The video both embraces Holiday’s legacy and suggests awareness of the dangers that come with having the flattening narrative of Holiday’s tragic, doomed life projected upon her.

Two-thirds of the way through *Lady Sings the Blues*, we return to the scene of Holiday in solitary confinement. We learn she had been snatched from a voluntary rehab stay on trumped up drug charges and is facing a long jail sentence. She shares a moment with McKay in her padded cell, where he declares his love and devotion to her.²⁴⁶ What follows is a sepia-toned montage of images depicting Holiday's experience in prison. The prison looks like a factory or warehouse, with large windows and lofty ceilings (Fig. 31). There are two images of jail bars (or barred windows), one from the outside of the building, and another indoors and above Holiday's head as she converses with McKay in a visiting room. Work is emphasized through images of Holiday washing and ironing clothing (Fig. 32).



Figure 31: Lady Sings the Blues – prison (1)

²⁴⁶ *Lady Sings the Blues*.



Figure 32: Lady Sings the Blues – prison (2)

Overall, what is stressed here is the loss of control of her body, the denial of McKay's unmediated presence, and through the intentional use of sepia-toned imagery—which commonly signifies history and nostalgia—a historical connection to enslavement and debt peonage. In other words, the images recall a longer history of dehumanization, interrupted social bonds, and forced labor of Black women. In contrast to the vibrant, in-color scenes of *Holiday* with McKay outside of jail, these bloodless images articulate the lovelessness of incarceration and the deadening of her spirit in confinement. The prison is a site of degradation and bodily dispossession where Black female flesh is gathered, and the nightmare permeates reality. Nothing grows here.

Compare these images to stills from the music video for “Real Love,” Blige’s first hit record. The video is ripe for close analysis that reflects on the imperilment of Black love and sociality under the spectral presence of social death. In the song, Blige conveys passion and uncertainty regarding the pursuit of healthy, authentic love. She sings, “I try my best and pray to God he sends me someone real” over a seductively

urgent sample of Audio Two's "Top Billin.'" By the song's end, Blige concludes that the search has been unsuccessful, lamenting,

I'm searchin' for a real love and I don't know where to go
Been around and high and low, but still
I'll never know how it feels to have a real love.
Gotta end it this way because it seems it can't be found."

Blige's performance reckons directly with the fear, frustration, and sense of hopelessness that she must combat on her journey towards love—a sentiment to which many Black women of her generation could relate. Treva Lindsey writes "Blige came of age during the height of the crack epidemic and witnessed the multiple devastating social effects of this drug. Crack addiction and crack-related violence deeply affected familial, interpersonal, and communal relationships within African American working-class and poor communities."²⁴⁷ The power of "Real Love" is in its honest exploration of not just being in or out of love, but of the nature and meaning of love itself. Blige's performance perfectly articulates the anguish of a fruitless search for love. As listeners we inhabit Blige's disillusionment about ever knowing what true love is, let alone having it in her life, romantically or otherwise.

If we consider the profound loneliness and lovelessness felt by many of Blige's generation of young Black women in the aftermath of Reaganomics, the crack epidemic, dehumanizing media representations, and mass incarceration—all of which ravaged communities and upended all kinds of relationships and social bonds—the scope of the song's demand for "real love" has profound political dimensions. Lindsey says, "The capacity to love and be loved, therefore, is not simply motivated

²⁴⁷ Lindsey, "If You Look in My Life." Pg. 91.

by personal desires; 'Real Love' as a performative text, declaratively demands recognition of Blige's full humanity and, more broadly, that of hip-hop generation women. The story embedded in Blige's rendering of 'Real Love' is the assertion of the right to love, which for African American women often proves elusive and unattainable."²⁴⁸

Directed by Marcus Raboy, the "Real Love" video unfolds within the confines of an abandoned factory or warehouse, its dimness and preponderance of bars and brick walls evoking a prison-like atmosphere. Throughout most of Blige's solo performances, she occupies shadowy spaces, with faint illumination casting her silhouette against the backdrop. Figures 33 and 34 depict bars casting shadows across her body, suggesting imprisonment. This amalgamated setting of warehouse and prison harks back to the prison scenes in *Lady Sings the Blues*. In both, Holiday and Blige are placed within loveless realms of labor and punishment. While Holiday endures her sentence in anticipation of reuniting with her love, Blige's narrative appears to commence and conclude within confinement, devoid of any indication that love—or any solace—awaits her beyond those bars.

In "Real Love," the prison serves as Blige's backdrop in her quest for love. The deserted factory/prison fusion serves as a reminder of the twin injustices of deindustrialization and mass incarceration, which have inflicted profound suffering upon Black communities in the post-Civil Rights era. Amidst this desolation and opacity, "Real Love" gestures towards the engulfing reality of social death—a place seemingly barren of growth or vitality. Echoing the challenges faced by young Black

²⁴⁸ Lindsey. Pg. 91.

women of Blige's generation, one cannot help but question how love could possibly flourish under such conditions. The antiblack forces at work in our world seem to render it impossible for Blige to cultivate and sustain meaningful and enduring bonds—with others or even with herself.



Figure 33: Real Love – Blige behind bars (1)



Figure 34: Real Love – Blige behind bars (2)

Still, Blige sings of the possibility of finding a love strong enough to exceed her nightmarish surroundings. I interpret her performance as an act of resistance against a narrative of complete social death. Black life persists perpetually under duress and against the odds, but it persists, nonetheless. Blige does not need to leave this factory setting to find love amid her opaque surroundings. In fact, perhaps Black love must be shielded under the cloak of opacity to thrive outside the clutches of white supremacist hegemonic violence. Throughout the video, images of Blige are intercut with two dancers, a man and a woman, dancing suggestively, romantically in the darkness. Figures 35 and 36 show their bodies moving seductively and contentiously into, around, and away from one another to the music. It is a dance of lustful yearning, playful indignation, and romantic possibility. The light projects their movements onto the brick wall behind them as one shadow vies for the other's embrace in a larger context that imperils its possibility.



Figure 35: Real Love – couple dancing in the dark (1)



Figure 36: *Real Love* – couple dancing in the dark (2)

Unencumbered by their surroundings, the two dance ecstatically in the dark, using the opaqueness of the setting to accentuate the movements and contours of their bodies. The images attest to the fraught yet enchanting possibilities of Black love and commitment during the early nineties. In that empty, foreboding warehouse, the politics of Black heterosexual love and sociality play out; a woman and man court and spark, play with destiny, yearn for intimacy, and engage with the possibilities of love in the dark. Centering opacity to analyze the song's now-iconic video, the true power of "Real Love" reveals itself—the courage and determination to love and be loved in the face of the nightmare of antiblackness that seeks to make Black love and life impossible. In *Lady Sings the Blues*, prison is a loveless place. In "Real Love," Black love thrives despite the antiblack bricks and bars that confine it.

Seeing a Mystery

An analysis of the album covers of Blige's first four albums—1992's *What's the 411?*, 1994's *My Life*, 1997's *Share My World*, and 1999's *Mary*—reveal how

opacity makes possible a radical practice of subject formation that resists the white supremacist and patriarchal lens of racial capitalism. These images balance knowability and unknowability in ways that reflect Blige's agency to tell stories that articulate shared and collective concerns, while performing the protective measures Black women must enact to shield themselves from the antiblack and misogynistic forces of racial capitalism and white supremacist hegemony. For Blige, these nightmares circulate on a broader scale with other Black women of her generation, and specifically on the treacherous terrain of fame and notoriety she shares with symbols of Black female pathology and tragedy like Holiday. Engaging with how Blige's emotional transparency and visual opacity work in tandem clarifies the true power of her artistry as an exercise in Black feminist surrogation—a powerful testimonial to pain, loss, resistance, and power.

Blige's first and second albums feature powerful yet simplistic cover designs that, while similar, diverge in critical ways. Blige's first album, *What's the 411?* is widely recognized as a landmark album of the nineties music scene. Its biggest hits—including “Real Love,” “Reminisce,” “You Remind Me”—are mainstays on R&B radio and defining songs of Black pop. Figure 37 is the cover of *411*, created by design duo The Drawing Room, in which Blige's face is nearly swallowed by darkness. Blige's eyes are not visible at all. She emerges from the shadows, the margins of life. The presentation mirrors the socio-political condition of young Black women, particularly in the early nineties. Marginalized in the media, in the male-dominated world of hip hop, and in the judgmental, respectability-focused Black cultural mainstream, women who grew up like Blige—in the streets, surrounded by

drugs, violence and poverty—lived at the margins of Black politics, and at the dividing line between citizen and noncitizen, subject and object, living and dead.



Figure 37: What's the 411? cover

In *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*, Sharon Patricia Holland theorizes on the “space of death” as a realm at the social and political margins of life defined by violence and inhabited by all those whose existence is the ground upon which the full and complete American citizen, human being, and subject are clarified.²⁴⁹ Black women are positioned in this unspeakable space of death because to engage their voices and experiences destabilizes the ideological status quo that naturalizes difference, subjugation, and death itself. Patricia Hill Collins makes a similar argument in “Mammies, Matriarchs, and other Controlling Images,” arguing Black women are marginalized yet necessary to signify the boundary that clarifies who and what belongs in America. Normality itself is

²⁴⁹ Holland, *Raising the Dead*. Pg. 15-16.

clarified through the otherness of Black women.²⁵⁰ The album cover of *What's the 411?* dramatizes this condition of both marginalization and destabilization—Blige's emergence from the shadows challenges the status quo by offering the marginalized voices of young Black women a platform to be heard. To use an image of Blige shrouded in darkness for the cover of her debut album presents her as a Black woman outsider walking out of the shadows into the public sphere on her own terms—a gutsy decision in a cultural context that demands familiarity and availability from Black women.²⁵¹

However, it is also important to note that *What's the 411?* is entirely written by male songwriters. According to Treva Lindsey, the album ironically offers a fascinating window into what Black male writers believed to be the authentic experiences of Black women in the early 90s.²⁵² Blige's vocal interpretations are riveting exercises in receiving, revising, and r(e)presenting these perceptions through her lens and breadth of experience as a Black woman. In fact, the bulk of The Drawing Room's credits during the early 1990s are cover art for male hip-hop artists like LL Cool J, Public Enemy, and Redman.²⁵³ In this light, it makes sense that the album's cover features Blige in the shadows, looking down, awaiting an answer or friendly light in the darkness. The opacity that characterizes *What's the 411?* is in many ways projected upon her.

²⁵⁰ Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images." Pg. 71, 83.

²⁵¹ I would also argue *411* is a key precursor to some of the most iconic album covers of the 1990s, including Aaliyah's *One in A Million*, Erykah Badu's *Baduizm*, and Janet Jackson's *The Velvet Rope*—images that use opacity to establish an intoxicating combination of distance and mystique.

²⁵² Lindsey, "If You Look in My Life." Pg. 90-91.

²⁵³ "Cover Art Credits Presented by Cover Art Daily."

After the release of *411*?, Blige underwent a period of personal and professional turbulence that deeply impacted her life and art. In the face of fame and her abusive relationship with K-Ci Haley, she descended into an intense period of depression, alcoholism, and drug abuse that paralyzed her spiritually and emotionally.²⁵⁴ Documenting her battle with inner demons that were only made more pronounced by the pressures of fame, *My Life* is a dark and sorrowful affair. In contrast with *411*, *My Life* is entirely co-written by Blige. Her first truly autobiographical work is distinctly darker than its predecessor. Minor keys, slow, somber melodies, and existential ruminations on the meaning, nature, and value of life itself predominate the proceedings. Blige sings of romantic relationships filled with strife, distrust, nonreciprocity, and suicidal thoughts. In the early 1990s, there was no other soul album that explored Black love with such a palpable sense of confusion, disappointment, and angst.

²⁵⁴ *Mary J. Blige's My Life*.



Figure 38: My Life cover

The covers of *What's the 411* and *My Life* (Fig. 38) share qualities that offer a sense of continuity between them, as well as important distinctions that convey personal and creative growth and change. Shot by Sante d'Orazio, an all-encompassing blue saturates the image, reflecting a persistent and quieter pain—sorrow that is walked with, felt deeply, and lived in, as opposed to the total darkness shrouding Blige in the *411* cover. For Blige, a newly famous public figure, this is her new reality, a tumultuous life commodified and on full display. However, **Blige** does return our gaze. Her eyes just barely sneak beneath the brim of her hat, locking into the viewer's and challenging their authority over her. In the throes of an existential crisis, Blige—in a newly empowered position as chief storyteller of her life and music—stares back, enacting what Simone Brown calls “dark sousveillance” that puts the viewer on notice that she’s watching them watching her.²⁵⁵ Staring back at the

²⁵⁵ Browne, *Dark Matters*. Pg. 21.

viewer interrupts the racist power dynamic of surveillance that reduces Black womanhood under the dominant and dominating mainstream white gaze. Blige asserts agency and authority over how she will be experienced and consumed. Once again, the oscillation between concealment and revelation asserts an agential relationship between Blige and her knowability and availability to the gaze of others, especially white and male audiences.

In both *411?* and *My Life*, Blige's head leans toward her left, rendering the right side of her face unviewable. This preserves continuity across the two albums, but with the subtle difference of eye contact that signal both distance and control. While the honesty and agony expressed in her music may leave her exposed to some degree, the album art reflects the necessity that Black women protect themselves from the flattening forces of racial capitalist exploitation. As both artist and commodity, Blige disidentifies with fame by being fully aware of the viewer yet not fully available to them.

The follow-up, 1997's *Share My World*, marks Blige's emergence from the darkness and pain that defined *My Life*, presenting a refreshed outlook on life. The album boasts a broader range of producers, resulting in a stylistically diverse and adventurous experience. Additionally, Blige assumes the role of executive producer for the first time, granting her greater creative control than her previous records. Standout tracks include 'Love Is All We Need' and 'Everything,' both vibrant celebrations of love and perseverance in the face of life's challenges. The title track is a sultry, slow-burning declaration of devotion, with Blige crooning, "Share my world,

don't you leave. I promise I'll be here, whenever you need me near," expressing her willingness to invite her partner into her inner world."

The album's cover, Figure 39, reflects this sense of bravery and maturation by departing from her previous two. The image is a medium closeup that creates greater distance between Blige and the viewer. Blige sits in the back of a moving car with the roof down. Shot by Kevin Westenberg and designed by Kenny Gravillis, the *Share My World* cover adopts a black and white color palette. However, unlike the cover of *411?*, white is the dominant color rather than black. As a result, the image feels brighter and less somber. With the wind blowing through her hair, and her body situated to the right of the frame, Blige is on the go, moving passionately and confidently through life with speed and conviction. The impression left on the viewer is that they are coming along for the ride, journeying with Blige toward a new life marked by a better self-image and a stronger grasp on old demons—and with a bit of glamor, as reflected in the Fendi logo on her sunglasses.

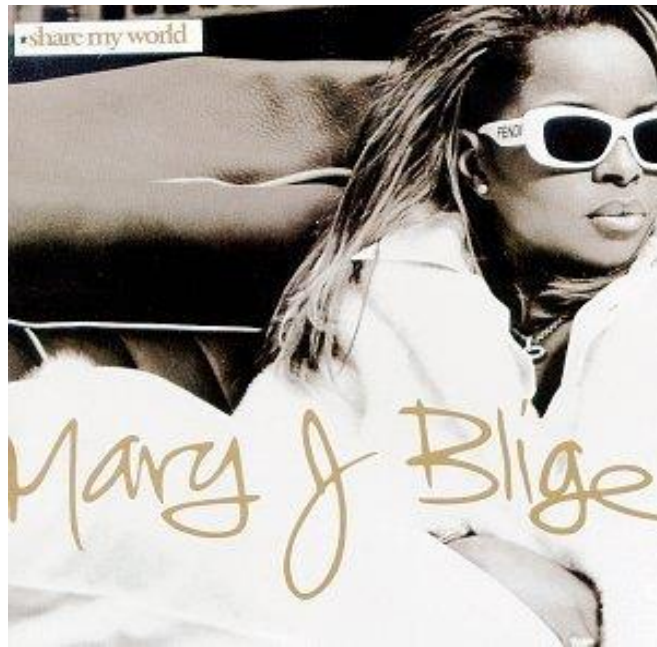


Figure 39: Share My World front cover

Figure 40 is the back cover of *Share My World*. It reveals that Blige is being driven through a major city, likely New York City. She is surrounded by pedestrians with shopping bags, tall buildings, and the general hustle and bustle of the metropolis. These are the fast-paced maneuverings of capitalism, the exchange of goods, at the epicenter of bourgeois consumption. Moving on and moving forward is the visual theme of *Share My World*. Blige is navigating her way through fame and articulating her hopes and dreams as a Black woman that, like Holiday before her, is a product for consumption formed under the weight of race, class, and gender oppression.



Figure 40: Share My World back cover

Yet those Fendi sunglasses cover her eyes. Matching the color scheme, the glasses are white, but the lenses pitch black, the blackest element of the image. Blige once again decides to protect her eyes from the viewer. Blige's gaze on the album's cover image is obscured and directed toward her left, offering continuity with the previous covers. As empowering and confident as the image might seem, it still reflects a guarded Mary J. Blige, utilizing opacity to invite the viewer in on her own terms. I argue that together, the image and the album's content reflect a Black woman on a journey of self-discovery. We are welcome to join her, but opacity keeps us at a healthy distance.

Blige's fourth and final album of the nineties is a self-titled release. 1999's *Mary* is marked by its mature and polished sound. The album was Blige's most overt engagement with soul music's past, as well as the then-burgeoning neo soul movement on which she was a major influence. Lead single "All That I Can Say" is a

shimmering, effervescent midtempo ode to the unspeakable joy that accompanies true love. “Deep Inside” samples Elton John’s “Bennie and the Jets” to engage directly with listeners about the challenges that come with life in the public eye. Blige pulls no punches:

See the problem is for many years I’ve lived my life publicly,
So it’s hard for me to find a man that I trust
And every time I find someone I like
I gotta worry about if it’s really me that they see
...Deep inside I wish that they could see
That I’m just plain old Mary

These songs are hit records that reflect a wiser, savvier self-reflective woman, surveying the wreckage of her life and insisting on reconciliation with the woman she wants to become.



Figure 41: Mary cover

Also designed by Kenny Gravillis, *Mary*’s stark cover (Fig. 41) makes a definitive break from her previous ones, deploying opacity to different ends. More than half of the image is composed of a side view of Blige’s face as she looks past us

toward our left, engendering the sense that she is gazing behind her to survey and make amends with the trauma of her past. The image is once again black and white, dressing her face in a rich and warm tone. She is defiant, purposeful, and determined. Unlike *Share My World*, there are no signs of luxury or the marketplace, no drop-top convertible, and no designer sunglasses. *Mary* communicates a soundness of mind and purity of spirit, and a willingness to face past trauma without fear or shame.

Blige continues to engage opacity by refusing to gaze directly at the viewer, but also by rendering the right side of her face unviewable. Unlike her previous covers that privilege the right side of her face, the cover of *Mary* highlights her left. Featured prominently just below her left eye is a small but visible scar, previously unseen in any of her album covers or major visual representations. In previous images, Blige engaged in opacity to make herself less knowable to the viewer. Here, the decision to obscure the right side of her face and display the left side makes this potential signifier of her trauma and pain knowable and legible. The viewer wonders where the scar came from, and how long she has had it. Who or what gave it to her? Why haven't we seen it before? The scar resembles a teardrop long since dried but impossible to forget. Perhaps upon Blige's face we witness a visual manifestation of the "hieroglyphics of the flesh," as theorized by Hortense Spillers.²⁵⁶ I argue the *Mary* cover articulates an expression of Black womanhood that both exceeds antiblack torture yet carries its markings. It captures the bearing witness, without fear or shame, to the transcendent history of racial violence and mutilation upon the bodies of Black women.

²⁵⁶ Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Pg. 67.

In this instance, opacity allows Blige to challenge the influence of the nightmare of antiblack and patriarchal violence by facing and revealing it on her terms to control its influence on her life and art. It is but one example of how representations of Blige harness opacity to nudge audiences in powerful directions while maintaining agency over the individual and collective experiences Blige so arrestingly articulates—in this case, the collective pain, trauma, and survival of young Black women of the hip-hop generation. Alexander explains, “Wearing her history of struggle, abuse, and transcendence as proudly as she came to show the scar on her left cheek that she’d long tried to hide, Mary J. Blige became something more than a diva—a queen of popular music, of popular culture, who represented the voices least represented in our society.”²⁵⁷

Everybody Loves the Sunshine

In 1999, Blige appeared on *The Queen Latifah Show* to perform “All That I Can Say,” the first single from *Mary*.²⁵⁸ As the first notes hit, the song’s writer, Lauryn Hill, makes a surprise appearance to perform the song with Blige. After the performance, Hill joined Blige for a sit-down interview with Latifah, where she was asked to describe her relationship with Blige and with her artistry. She said, “I think that [Blige] never tried to cover up who she was or hide the pain. Even though, you know, you may put on shades and think that’s covering it up, we always felt it through her music and her songs. She always sang with that deep feeling.”²⁵⁹ Hill

²⁵⁷ Alexander, *Real Love, No Drama*. Pg. 2

²⁵⁸ *Mary J Blige, Lauryn Hill, & Missy Elliot on Queen Latifah Show.*

²⁵⁹ *Mary J Blige, Lauryn Hill, & Missy Elliot on Queen Latifah Show.*

articulates the duality at play in Blige's artistry to harness opacity without impeding a connection with other Black women. Blige was (and still is) always bearing her soul. Many young Black women of Hill's generation could feel and identify with Blige's work because behind the shades and shadows is the desire for life in the light of day, free of the antiblack forces that seek to gather Black flesh.

Across Blige's entangled networks are moments where Blige finds her place in the sunshine, even if only for a moment. At one point in the *My Life* documentary, Blige explains her connection to "Everybody Loves the Sunshine" by Roy Ayers, a classic of 1970s soul sampled prominently for the title track of the *My Life* album. Blige says the song "cracked open everything in me," and made her forget about the poverty and dispossession that seemed to define her very existence as a young girl. "That song made me feel like I could have something," she explains, "but I couldn't get my hand on it. It was something I wanted."²⁶⁰ "Everybody Loves the Sunshine" served as a beacon of hope amidst the darkness for Blige, illuminating desires and dreams that had long been obscured by the pervasive clouds of violence that surrounded her in childhood.

In line with the revelatory qualities of Ayers's original, *My Life*'s title track is the album's most overt attempt to reveal and align Blige's personal struggle with the collective struggles of Black women. Throughout, Blige operates in two distinct positions as both counselor and counseled. She repeats, "If you look in my life and see what I've seen," asking the listener to venture into her experiences and find the depths of her sadness, and possibly their own. She simultaneously instructs the

²⁶⁰ Mary J. Blige's *My Life*.

listener and herself to take the necessary steps to find joy, solace, and peace in their lives—because then “you will see the sunshine, and things will turn out fine.” It is a shared struggle that Blige openly admits to having not yet defeated. I argue that central to this message are the nightmares circulating across a shared terrain of terror and violence for Black women of Blige’s generation and beyond. It is this synergistic relationship between terror, community, and resistance that makes Blige’s music so powerful and inspiring. Opacity allows her to model resistance to the conditions of social death that should make the very existence of her art impossible.

“Everybody Loves the Sunshine” inspired Blige to dream of a life that exceeds the structural violence that surrounds her. As a strategy for survival, opacity links Blige’s nightmares of flesh gathering to her freedom dreams for the illumined transcendence and tranquility that only real love can bring. Through her art and creative practices, we are invited to do the same by envisioning a world in which she and other Black women can live their lives free of the nightmarish conditions of social death that require opacity to resist its influence. In the meantime, the ravaged tone of her voice performs the turbulence roiling in her soul, while that distant, sampled voice rings “everybody loves the sunshine” again and again to articulate both the will to survive the nightmare and the courage to dream beyond it.

Chapter 4: If You Don't Own Your Masters, Your Masters Own You: Prince's Freedom Dreams and Slave Nightmares

Introduction

On December 13, 1994, Prince—then widely referred to as the Artist Formerly Known as Prince—made a memorable appearance on *The Late Show with David Letterman*. Prince was there to perform his single, "Dolphin." During the show, Letterman repeatedly poked fun at Prince's then-recent name change to an unpronounceable symbol during the height of his public dispute with Warner Bros Records. Peeved by Letterman's jokes, Prince decided to modify the ending of his performance. At a moment predetermined just before the show, a gunshot sample played, and Prince mimed shooting himself to death on stage. His "lifeless" body, with the word SLAVE scrawled and very visible across his right cheek, was cradled by a performer dressed as an angel, and eventually dragged off the stage.²⁶¹ Instead of adhering to the customary tradition of shaking hands with Letterman at the end of the musical performance, Prince opted to express his frustration and resistance through this dramatic act of subversion and evasion. According to a member of Prince's band, Letterman and his team were furious.²⁶²

By taking control of his performance and using it as a platform to make a defiant statement of artistic autonomy, Prince disidentified with the Late Show as a platform and aligned his actions with his broader project of resistance to the

²⁶¹ *The Artist Formerly Known As Prince Performs "Dolphin" | Letterman.*

²⁶² Zubrow, "Why Prince's Bodyguard Dragged Him off David Letterman's Set in 1994 - 60 Minutes - CBS News."

exploitative, racial capitalist machinations of the recording industry. Rather than simply go along with the program, he chose to both foreground enslavement and then perform slave suicide to resist the industry's constraints and maintain his autonomy as an artist, even if it meant creating discomforted, confused, or alienated audiences and peers in the process.

At stake in the conflict between Prince and Warner Bros Records was the question of artistic freedom. Prince was not just a prodigiously gifted artist but, more importantly, an extremely prolific one. He generated an enormous number of songs over the course of his career and had lots of material lying around by the dawn of the nineties. Prince wanted to release music at what, at least back then, felt like breakneck speed. As soon as a recording was complete, and if he was happy with it, Prince wanted its release to be imminent. Such was the immediacy of the triangular relationship between Prince, his music, and his fans that Prince saw his songs and ideas like newspapers or telegrams—they are most relevant at the moment of completion and should be disseminated as urgently as possible according to his artistic vision.²⁶³

Warner Bros was opposed to this process. Although Prince was an established hitmaker, the label believed he was saturating the marketplace by releasing too much music too quickly. Additionally, Prince was prone to releasing challenging (and for many, perplexing) creative experiments, canceling projects at the last minute, and

²⁶³ Pareles, “POP VIEW; Prince May Be Too Musical For the Music Business.”

refusing to do traditional means of promotion for them. Warner Bros saw these antics as essentially sabotage and began to push back on his ideas.²⁶⁴

Even after signing a \$100 million contract in 1991,²⁶⁵ the slower sales of his next album, 1992's "Love Symbol" album, and ongoing arguments about his many proposed releases and side projects strained their relationship to the breaking point. Unwilling to compromise on his artistic vision nor have it undermined by poor promotion or feet dragging from his label, Prince began to go public with his frustrations, openly demanding to be freed from his recording contract with Warner Bros and to own the master recordings of his music.²⁶⁶ When they refused both requests, he made a series of decisions that at the time shocked the music industry press and public, beginning in 1993 with his decision to change his name to an unpronounceable symbol. Prince's actions were widely derided as crazy, entitled, and absurd. But in hindsight, this moment of artistic evasion, improvisation, and contestation reflects the initiation of what I call *creative marronage*—a contested form of artistic freedom that challenged the exploitative machinations of the racial capitalist recording industry. Prince did not and could not defeat this antiblack structure of control on his own. What Prince did was disidentify with the marketplace in ways that allowed him to seize opportunities to exceed its boundaries through creative flight.

²⁶⁴ *Slave Trade*.

²⁶⁵ Bream, "Prince's New Record Deal."

²⁶⁶ *Slave Trade*.

Creative Marronage

“If You Don’t Own Your Masters, Your Masters Own You” considers the concept of marronage as it relates to Black musical works and creative practices, specifically those of Prince. In Neil Roberts’s recent text, *Freedom as Marronage*, he asks that we do away with the strict binary between freedom and slavery and consider the possibility of freedom as *flight*. Roberts explains that between enslavement and freedom are various valences of contested freedom—physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual—that are conditions that exist outside of bondage. Maroon communities took flight and established communities defined by establishing distance from the condition of enslavement, self-control over their movements, property relations outside the dynamics of the plantation, and the taking action based on a sense of individual or collective purpose.²⁶⁷ I want to apply this framework to the provocative activities of Prince during the early nineties, in which he sought the public’s support in intentionally sabotaging his own career in order to be released from his contract with Warner Bros.

Prince’s tactics can be mapped onto the above mentioned set of practices: (1) Prince sought distance from his label spatially, economically, and creatively in ways that strained their ability to categorize, market, and profit from him, (2) Prince demanded total control over his creative output, (3) Prince sought nontraditional property relations regarding ownership, control, and dissemination of his art and likeness, and (4) Prince repeatedly made reference to a larger cause of Black artistic (and spiritual) autonomy in his songs, iconography, and media appearances during

²⁶⁷ Roberts, *Freedom as Marronage*.

this time period.²⁶⁸ Through this process he achieved a contested freedom that found perhaps its fullest manifestation at Paisley Park, the creative compound where he wrote, recorded, and conceptualized all facets of his creative output. Paisley Park is the clearest and most physical manifestation of his desire to escape the bondage of the music industry and achieve autonomy as a Black artist, but it is not the only one. His project of creative marronage can also be found in other facets of his larger creative footprint during the nineties.

Using the Black Nightmare Imaginary to foreground the nightmarish scenarios of antiblack exploitation, specifically what Saidiya Hartman calls the “innocent amusements” and coerced “enjoyments”²⁶⁹ at auction blocks, coffles, and on plantations, I argue that public failure through career suicide was necessary for Prince to liberate himself from economic tyranny and regain control of his artistry. His anticommercial efforts to sever ties with his record label—which included appearing in public with SLAVE written across his face, changing his name to an unpronounceable symbol, deriding and undermining the sales potential of his own albums, and making repeated references to suicide and death in his songs, iconography, and public appearances—enacted a form of contested freedom that speaks to the possibilities and limitations of Black artistic freedom in the context of the music industry’s racial capitalist machinations.

²⁶⁸ La Marr Jurelle Bruce does similar theorizing in *How to Go Mad Without Losing Your Mind*, describing Lauryn Hill’s and Dave Chappelle’s flight from racial capitalism as “drapetomaniacal velocity”: Chappelle and Hill “followed a fugitive urge, resisted racial capitalism ...took flight, and was deemed crazy for it. (Pg. 199)”

²⁶⁹ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*.

Nightmares of Terror and Enjoyment

Prince famously wore the word SLAVE on his left cheek at all his public appearances to make a statement about the unfair dynamic between himself as an artist and Warner Bros as his record label (Fig. 42). In an interview with Rolling Stone in 1996 he explained, “People think I’m a crazy fool for writing “slave” on my face. But if I can’t do what I want to do, what am I? When you stop a man from dreaming, he becomes a slave.” And later, “I don’t own Prince’s music. If you don’t own your masters, your masters own you.”²⁷⁰ References to enslavement abound in this fascinating statement; using the Black Nightmare Imaginary clarifies how Prince’s discussion of SLAVE and “masters” foregrounds the nightmare of enslavement to clarify the radical power and rationale for his creative marronage project.



Figure 42: Prince performs with SLAVE on his face

²⁷⁰ DeCurtis, “Prince Interview Archive - Rolling Stone (#748), 28 November 1996.”

Firstly, Prince addresses the significance of the master recordings of his music. In the music industry, possessing an artist's master recordings translates to holding the rights to their music. Prince, a remarkably talented artist with an extensive catalog spanning numerous albums, both his own and collaborations with other artists, views his master records as central to his identity as a songwriter and musician. His master recordings—both their impact as artistic works and their value as commodities—are the ultimate outcome of his creative efforts and underscore his significant contributions to the popular music landscape. The lack of ownership of music rights places an artist in a disempowered position, despite the fundamental role their talent and labor play in the creation of these recordings.

Prince's repeated use of "masters" in his remarks, particularly the assertion that "your masters own you," deliberately draws a connection between the exploitation of Black artists and the historical legacy of enslavement. This dual usage draws a throughline between the contemporary music industry's exploitative practices and the historical dehumanization and violence endured by slaves who worked without compensation for the benefit of not only their immediate masters but also the larger oppressive system that enslaved them. Prince's intentional repetition of "masters" foregrounds the haunting, nightmarish imagery of enslavement to provide clarity on both his actions in the present, and the plight of generations of Black recording artists mercilessly exploited by white (and Black) record executives.

Next, there is the use of enslavement to describe a dynamic that, to many at that time and today, might feel lightyears away from the conditions of enslavement in the antebellum South. However, if we consider the concept of “slavery’s afterlives,”

as theorized by Saidiya Hartman, the comparison is quite apt. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman discusses the politics of terror and enjoyment on plantations that continues to contour the relationship between whites and Blacks into the present. She discusses minstrelsy, the coffer, the auction block, and “innocent amusements” on plantations in which slaves were forced to perform by dancing, singing, and modeling their bodies to convince potential buyers of their contentment and fitness for captivity and hard labor.²⁷¹ These coerced enjoyments were tools of control, perpetuating a false narrative of slave cheerfulness and well-being, while reinforcing the violent power dynamics between whites and Blacks that continue to manifest today. “Innocent amusements” like dancing, laughing, and playing games were mechanisms of domination to conceal the true nature of the white-black relationship, to blur the line between control and recreation, and to make slaves more valuable for sale, and more broadly, for the “enjoyment” of whites.²⁷²

Slave narratives of the 1800s are rife with examples of this nightmarish dynamic of terror and enjoyment. In *The Narrative of Henry Watson, a Fugitive Slave*, Watson describes how masters would “grease the mouths of the slave so as to make it appear they are well and hearty,” and would inflict punishments on sellable slaves to parts of their bodies “which the purchaser would not be likely to examine.”²⁷³ Henry Bibb describes how slaves were forced to wash their bodies in “greasy dish water,” and were instructed to answer questions from potential buyers promptly to communicate health, docility, and sound mindedness, adding, “if they

²⁷¹ Hartman, Pg. 23, 33.

²⁷² Hartman, Pg. 23.

²⁷³ “The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865.”

failed to do this, they were severely paddled after the spectators were gone.”²⁷⁴

William Wells Brown recalls how slaves performed contentment before the prying eyes of white onlookers, explaining, “Some were set to dancing, some to jumping, some to singing, and some to playing cards. This was done to make them appear cheerful and happy. ...I have set them to dancing when their cheeks were wet with tears.”²⁷⁵

By wearing SLAVE on his face in public appearances, Prince foregrounded the nightmares of these debased and coerced amusements and enjoyments that obscured the violence of enslavement then, and that obscure the violence of the music industry and racial capitalism today. According to Hartman, coerced spectacles of enjoyment encouraged the trade in Black flesh through the simulation of Black agency (i.e. that slaves were acting on their own free will) and “excesses of enjoyment” (i.e. that they were naturally happy, jovial, dancing, singing, making merry, etc.).²⁷⁶ In fact, in *Saltwater Slavery*, Stephanie Smallwood describes slave auctions as “compelling as a theatrical stage” for potential buyers of human property.²⁷⁷ Captives were bathed, shaved, and fed well, while spectators were served refreshments and treated to a “jovial” and “pleasant” atmosphere, much like a live concert or showcase for a new recording artist.²⁷⁸ The illusion of contentment and wellbeing amongst slaves was central to the production of human cargo, the

²⁷⁴ “The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865.”

²⁷⁵ “The Making of African American Identity: Vol. I, 1500-1865.”

²⁷⁶ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. Pg. 22.

²⁷⁷ Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, Pg. 159.

²⁷⁸ Smallwood, Pg. 160-161.

reproduction of slavery as an institution, and the antiblack rationalization for the fitness of Black bodies for the condition of enslavement itself

Recognizing that this dynamic persists into the present (especially in the racial capitalist machinations of the music industry), Prince interrupted this process by shattering these harmful misconceptions of agency and excesses of enjoyment. SLAVE on his cheek while performing transmits the messages that (1) he is not having fun, and (2) what he is doing is *labor*, not some natural state of being or consequence-less pastime. SLAVE drew attention to how Black artistry is labor, not impromptu fun or a selfless gift to white people, and that when this labor is unfairly compensated, or not compensated at all, it reduces Black artists to captive bodies, or mere vessels for white enjoyment.

With SLAVE on his face, Prince forced the public to confront the dynamic of terror and enjoyment that has animated the politics of racial pleasure and entertainment since slaves were forced to dance on ship decks during the Middle Passage. White America's obsession with and need for Black "enjoyment" to shore up its relationship with Blackness itself reinforces the denial of Black pain and obscures the violence at the heart of the relationship between whites and Blacks in America. When we harness the Black Nightmare Imaginary to foreground this deeper, nightmarish meaning behind the SLAVE branding, Prince's efforts during the early nineties take on a radical and fugitive quality. Prince sought a contested form of freedom from that dynamic of terror and enjoyment. According to Hartman, "forced amusements" were also opportunities for slaves to resist.²⁷⁹ In the case of Prince,

²⁷⁹ Hartman, Pg. 36.

rather than simply stop appearing publicly or making music, his self-described slaveness and other acts of subversion allowed him to make his public presence a consistently incendiary one that forced a confrontation with the ongoing exploitation of Black labor, from the Middle Passage to the present.

I argue that Prince's efforts underscore how the exploitation of Black creative labor in the music industry is a manifestation of slavery's afterlives, drawing a direct line from the coerced enjoyments of the plantation to modern-day economic violence against Black artists. Inequities in the music industry can affect artists of all backgrounds, but systemic antiblack conditions in American society make Black artists uniquely vulnerable to exploitative practices by record labels. This longstanding injustice has left many legendary Black artists in financial ruin, echoing the economic exploitation inherent in slavery's legacy. For instance, blues icon Muddy Waters died deeply indebted to his label, owing them a staggering \$500,000. Bessie Smith, a pioneering voice in blues and jazz, was exploited by Columbia Records due to her illiteracy, receiving meager compensation and no royalty payments, in stark contrast with the usual treatment of her white counterparts.²⁸⁰ Trailblazers like Little Richard and Big Mama Thornton faced grossly unfair compensation for their groundbreaking work. Richard's label allocated him only half a cent per copy sold of his iconic early rock n' roll smash "Tutti Frutti,"²⁸¹ while Thornton, whose recordings were famously covered by artists like Elvis Presley and Janis Joplin, died penniless in a boardinghouse and was buried in a pauper's grave.²⁸²

²⁸⁰ "Blues Law."

²⁸¹ Schwartz and Clark, "Black Artists Are Still Getting Ripped Off the Way Little Richard Was."

²⁸² "Black Women."

These horror stories underscore how Black artists have historically been denied ownership of their labor and its rewards, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation endemic to slavery's afterlives.

Informed by the struggles of Black artists before him, Prince adamantly rejected the exploitative practices of record labels, refusing to succumb to their unjust treatment. By scrawling SLAVE on his face, he flattened time and space to highlight the persistent antiblack violence in the industry, challenging notions of progress that obscure its intransigence. Prince understood that ownership of master recordings was crucial to transcending the pervasive disempowerment imposed by the music industry, recognizing that while Black artists sustain its creative fire, their limbs often serve as the tinder. Faced with this nightmare, Prince was determined to challenge the antiblack machinations of the music industry by asserting control over his own creative output.

The Love Symbol

Prince's new \$100 million recording contract, as it was announced to the public in 1992, was not the golden ticket Prince and his team thought it was. The \$100 million price tag was an amount that could only be met if Prince released five albums in a row that all sold at least five million copies.²⁸³ This was an extremely ambitious plan, especially since only three of Prince's previous thirteen albums ever sold that amount. Still, the deal gave Prince an increased share of the proceeds from his albums, and an extra \$20 million to manage his own record label, Paisley Park

²⁸³ *Slave Trade*.

Records.²⁸⁴ However, when sales of his next album stalled, things got ugly. Both Prince and the label accused each other of underpromoting the album. Prince grew more frustrated about having to adhere to the label's timeline for releasing new music and began to push for ownership of his master recordings. When Warner Bros told Prince they would release no "new" Prince music in 1993—only a greatest hits collection—Prince announced his retirement in the press, vowing to satisfy his deal with Warner Bros by releasing old songs from his extensive vault of material.²⁸⁵ Finally, on June 7, 1993, his birthday, Prince announced that he would be changing his name to an unpronounceable symbol (Fig. 43).²⁸⁶



Figure 43: The Love Symbol

The love symbol is a combination of traditional male and female symbols merged into a single, ambiguous form that suggests a fluid, non-binary approach to gender. By adopting the symbol as a moniker, Prince interrupted the racial capitalist necessity of being able to categorize, name, and claim bodies for exploitation and consumption. What's more, I argue the symbol represents not just a name, but a

²⁸⁴ Philips, "From the Archives."

²⁸⁵ Philips, "Prince Pulls the Plug on Studio Recording Career."

²⁸⁶ Heng, "When Prince's Name Became an Unpronounceable Symbol."

practice of Black creativity that exceeds boundaries imposed by the recording industry, and by antiblackness more broadly. Prince does not break the system of exploitation entirely, but the elusiveness and ambiguity of the symbol is one way in which he could evade capture by it.

Prince had incorporated iterations of the symbol into his iconography since the early eighties, climaxing with its use as the title for his 12th studio album.²⁸⁷ Thus, there was already some public awareness of the symbol and its association with Prince. Still, Warner Bros, the press, and the public were shocked and flummoxed by the name change. Prince's public relations team went as far as to distribute a floppy disc to press outlets containing a special font that would generate the love symbol in print.²⁸⁸ Many journalists simply ignored the symbol altogether, referring to him as "The Artist Formerly Known as Prince," a widely lampooned moniker that nonetheless stuck.

In the above-mentioned quote, Prince says, "I don't own Prince's music. If you don't own your masters, your masters own you." What's most striking about these words is Prince's use of the third person to refer to himself and his acknowledgment that his music is considered the property of his record label. He emphasizes that he doesn't "own Prince's music," suggesting a distinction between the individual Prince, the commodity represented by the name "Prince," and the artistic identity symbolized by the Love Symbol. While there has always been some degree of separation between Prince the person and "Prince" the commodity, this

²⁸⁷ Till, *Pop Cult.*

²⁸⁸ Feldman, "The Legend of Prince's Special Custom-Font Symbol Floppy Disks."

tension became more pronounced during his battle for ownership of his master recordings. The name change symbolized a rejection of both the individual and the commodity, allowing him to assert control over his artistic identity by creating a third, indeterminate persona.

The antiblack hegemonic order requires that identities be fixed, and that binaristic thinking structures how we make sense of our social world. Even before the name change, Prince harnessed ambiguity and opacity to challenge gender binaries and fixed identities that mark bodies for ownership and exploitation. According to Cynthia Fuchs, the symbol only extended the ambiguity Prince was already using in his performances to challenge hegemonic schemas of identification. Fuchs argues the name change to a symbol was but an extension of what was an ongoing radical project of queer self-making.²⁸⁹ I argue that self-making project became heightened and fraught with greater urgency once the conflict with Warner Bros went public. Prince believed he had been reduced to a mere commodity for consumption and commerce. Rather than settle for this condition of subjection, Prince harnessed the symbol to essentially appropriate himself and regain control over his identity. Performing across identities in a world that needs to fix them is a radical decision. Prince's identity play made it harder for him to be tagged and exploited to the ends of others. This was a key means of enacting creative marronage; he sought to elude capture by challenging the antiblack hegemonic necessity of naming and claiming Black bodies for consumption that serves to enrich white corporate interests at the expense of Black creative autonomy.

²⁸⁹ Fuchs, "'I Wanna Be Your Fantasy.'"

Fred Moten's concept of the "thingliness" of Black life is relevant here. He discusses how Blackness can find articulation in the space between subject and object, as neither subject nor object, but instead, "thing," where Black social life persists despite the specter of social death.²⁹⁰ He says it is in this realm that Black social life exists, seeping beyond the confines of white supremacist definition like steam.²⁹¹ This perspective informs my analysis of Prince's use of the love symbol as a means of resistance and self-definition. Through his adoption of the love symbol, Prince embodied the resilience of Black social life that transcends the oppressive barrier of ontological obliteration that should make its very existence impossible.

Initially, as a professional musician, Prince relinquished control of his name to his record label's capitalist interests. However, when his conflict with Warner Bros reached a breaking point, he could no longer willingly participate in the commodification of his identity. His name "Prince" became a dehumanized symbol detached from his true self, akin to what Fanon calls the "epidermal racial schema" imposed on Black bodies that subjects them to all needs of and projections by whites.²⁹² Rather than submit to this conditional existence lest risk the death of his career—what we might call a "death contract"—Prince, the "death-bound subject," to pull from Abdul Jan Mohamed, confronted this threat of death head-on to break free from its grasp.²⁹³ He changed his name to an unpronounceable symbol, challenging social categorization and reflecting Black radicalism's dynamic, elusive, and confounding nature. Operating as the love symbol enacted a contested form of

²⁹⁰ Moten, "The Case of Blackness, Pg. 181.

²⁹¹ Moten, Pg. 188.

²⁹² Fanon, Philcox, and Appiah, *Black Skin, White Masks*, pg. 92.

²⁹³ JanMohamed, *The Death-Bound-Subject*, Pg. 17.

freedom by making it more difficult for him to be effectively marketed or commodified by his label. Again, the symbol does not represent a name, but rather a practice of Black creative work and tactic of resistance that can exceed boundaries imposed by the recording industry, and by racial capitalism more broadly. The Love Symbol enacts a contested form of artistic freedom through the practice of creative marronage that disidentifies with that system to evade capture by it.

Prince v. Warner Bros

After changing his name in 1993, Prince engaged in a tumultuous power struggle with Warner Bros, continually proposing and submitting bizarre new projects—some under the name “Prince,” others under the Love symbol—that both flustered and frustrated Warner Bros. Broadly put, I argue that this chaos was integral to Prince’s creative marronage project. Prince relentlessly sought new and unique avenues and platforms to release his music that circumvented the authority of his record label, and the standard practices of the music industry. These actions reflect how his tireless search for artistic autonomy required perpetual creative flight—new venues, different strategies, innovative sounds, and more than a few failures along the way. Prince did everything he could to make it extremely difficult for him to be tamed or controlled by Warner Bros. Creative marronage allowed him to find contested freedoms both within and beyond the confines of racial capitalism.

In the months before and immediately after the name change, Prince was writing and recording at a feverish pace. He generated dozens and dozens of songs

that the conflict with Warner Bros precluded him from releasing.²⁹⁴ Instead, many of these songs popped up on what Prince called at the time “alternative media.”²⁹⁵ Prince sought mediums to share these songs outside of the traditional single/album format that is most lucrative to record companies. For example, he lent a few previously released songs to the Joffrey Ballet’s production, “Billboards” in January of 1993.²⁹⁶ He also held a variety of performances and events at Glam Slam, his string of nightclubs in Minneapolis, Los Angeles (Glam Slam West), Miami, and Yokohama, Japan. The Glam Slam West location became the site for a slew of shows choreographed and produced by Jamie King, a dancer and choreographer who would go on to work with the likes of Michael Jackson and Madonna.²⁹⁷ Every Monday, Prince sent King unreleased tracks he could not release due to the conflict with Warner Bros. By the end of the week, King would turn around fully realized performances complete with dancers, choreography, and props. According to *Variety*, Prince flew in every weekend to watch them.²⁹⁸

Glam Slam West was also the site for the opening night of “Glam Slam Ulysses,” an “interactive musical experience” created by Prince that featured many of the songs that would end up on future albums, including *Come* tracks like “Dark,” “Loose,” and “Space.” Opening on August 21, 1993, Glam Slam Ulysses was loosely based on Homer’s *The Odyssey* and featured a combination of live and video performances, dancing from a young Carmen Elektra, and choreography by King.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁴ Pareles, “POP VIEW; Prince May Be Too Musical For the Music Business.”

²⁹⁵ Barendregt, “Prince Releases the Fine Album *Come* (and Nobody Seems to Care).”

²⁹⁶ Escoyne, “TBT.”

²⁹⁷ Pilato, “Channeling MTV Devotion into a Career.”

²⁹⁸ Pilato.

²⁹⁹ Augusto, “Glam Slam Ulysses.”

The show was unsuccessful, closing after three weeks and garnering a scathing review in *Variety* that proclaimed, “Prince has sacrificed his instinctive musical gifts in favor of disposable, multi-media excesses, like ‘Ulysses.’”³⁰⁰

Simultaneously, Prince was in the middle of a European tour called *Act I*, during which photographer Terry Gydesen took a series of beautiful black-and-white photographs of Prince that would later be released in 1994 as the coffee table book, *Prince Presents: The Sacrifice of Victor*.³⁰¹ A set of these images would also later be used as the artwork for the *Come* album. Meanwhile, at the start of the *Act I* Tour, Prince released *Gold Nigga*, the debut album by his band the New Power Generation. Released independently, Prince bypassed traditional retailers. Instead, the album was sold at merchandise tents during the tour, through Prince's newly established 1-800-New-Funk telephone retail outlet, and at brick-and-mortar retail outlets then-owned by the artist.³⁰² *1-800-New-Funk* would also be the title of a compilation album featuring artists signed to his record label, performing songs penned by Prince himself. Prince even developed a CD-ROM computer game called “(Prince) Interactive” that featured new songs, an unreleased music video, and interviews with Miles Davis and George Clinton.³⁰³

Another particularly fascinating endeavor during this time is *The Undertaker*, a bluesy, psychedelic, lo-fi hard rock project recorded in 1993 that never saw an official release. *The Undertaker* is a one-take jam session with New Power Generation members Michael B (drums) and Sonny T (bass). The project featured a

³⁰⁰ Augusto.

³⁰¹ Prince and Gydesen, *Prince Presents the Sacrifice of Victor*.

³⁰² Barendregt, “Prince Releases the Fine Album *Come* (and Nobody Seems to Care).”

³⁰³ Burr, “(Prince) Interactive.”

cover of the Rolling Stones song “Honky Tonk Woman” and Prince’s own “Bambi,” a hard rocking gem from his 1979 self-titled second album. These two songs reflect what I argue are the project’s reference points—the whitewashed legacy of hard rock and the hard rocking legacy of Prince himself. Prince even hatched a plan to release the album as a CD insert in an issue of *Guitar World Magazine*, a publication with a largely white, rock-oriented fanbase, to further establish his prowess as a guitar god.³⁰⁴

The sound of *The Undertaker* album is drenched in droning feedback, explosive guitar solos, an murky production—its dark and corrosive sound an entirely noncommercial pursuit that would have alienated much of the buying public. To capitalize on this fact, *The Undertaker* was to be released under the name “Prince” to further strain the marketability of his former identity. After copies of the album had been manufactured, Warner Bros blocked its official release,³⁰⁵ allegedly going as far as to coat all copies with a plastic covering to render them unplayable.³⁰⁶

A major turning point in the battle between Prince and Warner Bros—and his broader creative marronage project—is when Warner Bros ended its distribution deal with Paisley Park Records, effectively shutting it down for good, in February of 1994.³⁰⁷ Prince responded by immediately founding another label (this one entirely independent) called NPG Records to release all his own future projects, even though he was still signed to Warner Bros.³⁰⁸ Warner Bros vehemently opposed this for

³⁰⁴ Wilkening, “Out-of-Print Prince.”

³⁰⁵ Wilkening.

³⁰⁶ Barendregt, “Prince Releases the Fine Album Come (and Nobody Seems to Care).”

³⁰⁷ Hogan, “Here’s Every Battle Prince Waged Against the Internet and the Music Industry.”

³⁰⁸ Hogan.

obvious reasons. As a compromise, Warner Bros agreed to allow Prince to release *one* song independently, under the Love Symbol moniker. Without their financial and promotional support, Warner Bros were certain whatever song Prince released would fail, and that he would come to his senses about the need to cooperate with them.³⁰⁹

Emboldened by the challenge, Prince chose to release one his most gorgeous ballads. Released on February 24, 1994, “The Most Beautiful Girl in the World” is intended to be an all-consuming experience, steeped in melodrama and grandeur, that glides effortlessly on its sublime melody and soaring chorus. Prince’s high wire, falsetto vocal performance strikes a masterful balance between nuance and finesse. With shamelessly romantic lyrics like “How can I get through days, when I can’t get through hours?” and “You’re the reason that God made a girl,” the song has more than earned its rightful place on wedding playlists the world over. Recalling Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff’s grandiose Philadelphia International productions of the seventies, “Most Beautiful Girl” is the artist’s most over-the-top expression of stately, sophisticated pop elegance. Crucially, it was also Prince’s first (and a much needed) hit song after changing his name, which only further undermined the viability of the “Prince” brand.

To promote the single, Prince pulled out all the stops, adopting a series of unconventional marketing strategies that reflect the improvisational and evasive tactics central to his creative marronage project. NPG ran advertisements announcing the imminent release of the single, with blurbs from his famous friends attesting to its brilliance. He launched a fake want-ad in newspapers around the world, seeking “the

³⁰⁹ Whatley, “The Story Behind The Song.”

most beautiful girl in the world” by soliciting photo submissions from women of all races and backgrounds.³¹⁰ Some of these images were later used for the song’s cover art. He even premiered the song at the 1994 Miss USA pageant, rather than relying on traditional radio or MTV support. These feverish efforts of independent self-promotion paid off. “Most Beautiful Girl” was a worldwide smash, reaching number one in the UK (his first in that country) and number 3 on America’s Billboard Hot 100 chart.³¹¹

In the end, Warner Bros could not have been more mistaken about Prince’s aptitude for self-promotion. To Prince, this success was all the proof he needed that he could work independently of his label by adopting nontraditional platforms and strategies to release and promote his music. It was a major creative victory that only strengthened his resolve. More broadly, I argue that these hits and misses—successes and failures—were central to Prince’s creative marronage project. Foregrounding the nightmares of enslavement, we can see that Prince’s creative practices were intentionally frenetic, evasive, and unconventional to remain one step ahead of his label, and to seize contested moments of artistic freedom and creative autonomy.

Killing Prince

In many ways, the climax of the conflict between Prince and Warner Bros is the saga of the *Come* and *Gold Experience* albums. Initially, Prince hatched a plan to release two albums on the same day, one called *Come* and credited to “Prince,” and

³¹⁰ EURPublisher01, “How Prince’s ‘The Most Beautiful Girl in the World’ Made History 26 Years Ago & Why You Can’t Find It Today [EUR VIDEO THROWBACK].”

³¹¹ Whatley, “The Story Behind The Song.”

the other called *The Gold Experience* and credited to the symbol.³¹² He would do minimal promotion for *Come*, imploring his fans to all but ignore the album, deriding it as outdated and a bunch of “old stuff,” even though the material on *Come* and *The Gold Experience* were written and recorded around the same time.³¹³ Prince would frame *Come* as essentially the existential end of “Prince,” while extolling the brilliance of *The Gold Experience* as a career-defining opus held in limbo by his greedy, exploitative masters at Warner Bros—the beginning of an exciting, new, and liberated chapter in his career. While Warner Bros would inevitably reject the simultaneous release date idea, it stands as a fascinating example of Prince’s subversive and highly intentional thinking at this time. And although they would inevitably be released a year apart from one another, aesthetic, lyrical, and musical decisions reflect his efforts to establish a dichotomous relationship between the two albums: the imprisoned and dying Prince of *Come* versus the liberated, rebel icon of artistic freedom on *The Gold Experience*.

For this chapter, I’m interested mainly in how the album *Come* reflects a unique creative process of willful failure on the part of Prince. *Come* is widely viewed by journalists and critics as merely a tossed together collection of songs meant to satisfy Prince’s contract with Warner Bros. However, a close analysis of the circumstances surrounding the album’s release, its related iconography, and the content and prevailing lyrical themes on the record reflect a very intentional performance of career suicide to achieve artistic freedom within the confines of the

³¹² Draper, “The Gold Experience.”

³¹³ Light, “Prince Interview Archive - Vibe, August 1994.”

recording industry. Prince dramatized the death of his former self and his rebirth as the love symbol to further his creative marronage project.

While it is customary in the study of an artist's work to focus on what are widely considered to be their “best” or most accomplished releases, the focus of this chapter is in part on an album widely considered to be Prince’s creative nadir. Upon its release, *Come* received terrible reviews in the United States. *The Village Voice*’s Carol Cooper began her review, “IF YOU HEAR the sound of a gauntlet slapping the floor, it’s only the echo of *Come* (Warner Bros.) ...hitting the racks of your local record retailer.”³¹⁴ *Rolling Stone*’s Tom Moon gave the album two stars, bemoaning not just its music but the larger series of events surrounding it: “Whatever you do, appreciate these latest moves as part of what has become the most spectacular slow-motion career derailment in the history of popular music. ...Ordinary artists tear up albums and start again; he’s tearing up his entire identity and starting again.”³¹⁵ Stephen Thomas Erlewine's brief retrospective review for AllMusic.com sums things up quite nicely: “Some of the songs are good, but there's nothing on *Come* that Prince hasn't done before; he even sounds bored on certain tracks. On top of that, the album has no obvious singles, making it a nightmare to sell. Not surprisingly, the album flopped.”³¹⁶

All three of these reviews are accurate to some degree. *Come*’s release confused fans, disappointed the critics, frustrated his label, and tanked his own career. As a result, reviews and retrospectives of the album (of which there are few) tend to

³¹⁴ Cooper, “Prince: *Come* (Warner Bros.)/1-800-New-Funk (NPG/Bellmark).”

³¹⁵ Moon, “*Come*.”

³¹⁶ Erlewine, “Prince - *Come* Album Reviews, Songs & More | AllMusic.”

be short and dismissive, with little attention to how the album's sounds and themes are both cohesive and intentional. *Come* deserves closer attention for how it successfully did its job of shattering the career of "Prince," at least in the United States. For many, *Come* was the artist's first truly "bad" album, and in the scheme of his larger creative marronage project, that was by design. For Prince, the failure of *Come* was necessary to interrupt the preeminence of the "Prince" brand and thereby undermine the influence of Warner Bros on his career. Prince was so deliberate about the album's failure that he excluded the massive hit "The Most Beautiful Girl in the World" from the final tracklisting, despite its release before *Come*. When questioned about this decision, he reportedly explained that "The Most Beautiful Girl" is a song by the symbol, while *Come* is an album by Prince.³¹⁷

Come is clearly a "contract filler"; years later, his own website would send that message by superimposing the words "contractual obligation" over its cover art. Yet, as previously discussed, these songs were performed countless times over the previous two years, popping up during his concerts, afterparty performances, and even the Glam Slam Ulysses shows.³¹⁸ Fans and documentarians of the artist have cataloged the many proposed album projects and track listings Prince would compile, rearrange, and recategorize during this period, and all the songs on *Come* consistently appear in various iterations and sequences. Bootlegs and independent releases that preceded the album's release include so many of these songs that diehard fans were likely familiar with many of them when *Come* was finally released.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Barendregt, "Prince Releases the Fine Album *Come* (and Nobody Seems to Care)."

³¹⁸ Barendregt.

³¹⁹ Barendregt.

Prince was proud enough of these songs to perform them consistently and to take them seriously as releases. Many of them contained highly personal themes like child abuse, challenged racism and social injustice, and took both direct and metaphorical shots at Warner Bros and the larger oppressive machinations of the music industry. I argue Prince intentionally split these songs up, sequenced them in particular ways, coupled them with cover art and other iconographic contexts, and centered the themes of sexuality and escape, death and liberation to perform the symbolic suicide of “Prince,” and the emergence of a contested form of Black creative freedom, symbolized by the love symbol.

Better Off Dead

The most overt reference to the suicidal death of “Prince” is found in the artwork for *Come*. On the front cover is a black and white photo of the artist standing in front of the gates of the Sagrada Familia church in Barcelona, Spain (Fig. 44).³²⁰ The Sagrada Familia is a gorgeous architectural marvel; it is also the largest unfinished Catholic church in the world. Prince’s full body is centered in the image. He stares directly at the camera with a look of subtle confrontation while pointing a cane in our direction. The image is filled with shadows—one obscures Prince’s right eye, others blanket the steps beyond the imposing, rod iron gates behind him. The gates loom large, taking up almost the entire image and thus couple the cathedral with imagery that suggests imprisonment. It is an interesting juxtaposition of worldly spirituality, manifested through the manmade edifice of a grand cathedral, with bars

³²⁰ Prince and Gydesen, *Prince Presents the Sacrifice of Victor*.

that cage, and that can pierce or maim the bodies of those who attempt to escape from behind them. That Prince beckons us inside of an unfinished church behind intimidating bars emphasizes the deathly and foreboding atmosphere he conjures on *Come*, while also foregrounding a dark, nightmarish scenario of physical and spiritual imprisonment that, by embracing the liberatory possibilities of suicide, can be exceeded.

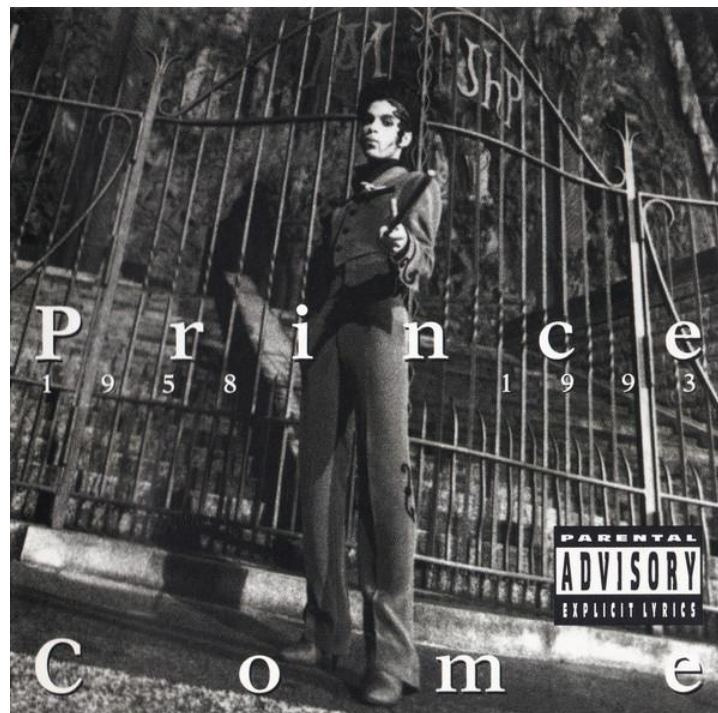


Figure 44: Come cover

Marronage and suicide are not the same things. While marronage achieves a contested form of freedom, suicide completely severs one's conscious and unconscious relationship with the world. However, the key distinction here is that Prince performed (rather than committed) suicide and did so in a way that served his larger creative marronage project, rather than serving to end his creative life completely. By changing his name to a symbol, and through the iconography of his

Come album cover and many of its lyrics, Prince committed a form of career suicide, severing the relationship between himself as an artist and "Prince" the captive body exploited by Warner Bros. His performance of SLAVE suicide challenged the coercive tactics and exploitative practices of the music industry. Performative suicide revealed the limits of his record label's control over him, or any other Black artist, for that matter. Suicide carried metaphorical and rhetorical power as symbolic of his willingness to undermine the corporate interests of his masters to be free. Like slaves of the antebellum south, the masters at Warner Bros needed "Prince" to live under conditions that maintained their power and authority; the loss of "Prince" meant a loss of revenue and a potential ripple effect that could influence other artists to stage their own rebellions.

Prince understood that, even in their most disempowered state, slaves still possessed what Terri Snyder calls "the power to die."³²¹ By exercising that power on a performative level, Prince successfully found the opening for an uncategorizable or containable iteration of his identity to escape the plantation-like limits imposed upon him by his label. The effect is akin to committing suicide and then being able to watch how one's death impacts the world left behind. This is the "stealing away" that made Prince so effective at establishing a contested form of artistic freedom during the nineties, and inevitably the freedom to establish and maintain stolen creative life in the outdoors of Black creative expression, beyond the confines of racial capitalist exploitation.

³²¹ Snyder, *The Power to Die*, Pg. 99.

“Prince: 1958 - 1993” runs across the horizontal center of the *Come* cover, perpendicular to the length of Prince’s body and thus forming the shape of a cross. These words are the most obvious illusions to the death of “Prince.” The title “Come” runs across the bottom of the image, appearing to act as the ground upon which Prince, and we as the viewer, stand as we prepare to enter the sonic experience contained behind those gates. The placement of "Come" and the death-related language on the cover frames death as both alluring and, considering the year 1993 is one year before the album's 1994 release, as having already transpired. Prince has, in essence, already departed and is now communicating with us from the afterlife. He is liberated. The symbolic elements of the 1993 date and the cross also hint at religious prophecy. The death of Prince is a fait accompli, and perhaps *Come* will enlighten us on how and why, beckoning us to accompany him into the autonomous zone symbolized by the love symbol.

That the artist has committed suicide manifests in other ways across the album’s artwork. In the inner sleeve, an image of Prince in front of another part of the cathedral is coupled with a backwards caption that reads, “This is the Dawning of a New Spiritual Revolution.” On another page, in backwards lettering, are excerpted lyrics from the song “Letitgo” that read:

All my life this heart’s
Been under lock and key,
My curtains were draw
—there wasn’t nobody home...
Trigger here, trigger there
Everybody’s high except for me,
Better off dead if I can’t be alone...

Rather than lamenting the implied death of “Prince” and the general deathliness of the imagery and music, these words herald *Come* as the necessary, existential end of “Prince” the captive body, and the liberation of the freed creative spirit of the artist, manifested in the love symbol. Rather than seek community within the confines of the normative artistic landscape of the early nineties, Prince is “better off dead.” Like a plantation, that so-called community is compulsory and oppressive, coercing its inhabitants with diversions and false needs to deny them of what truly matters most—freedom. *Come* performs Prince’s unbinding from the death contract that maintains artistic enslavement to unlock a liberated elsewhere.

The songs on *Come*—their intentional sequencing and thematic emphasis on sex, death, and rebirth—also contribute to the symbolic suicide of “Prince” and the emergence of the Love Symbol as a representation of contested Black creative freedom. The songs collectively convey Prince’s deliberate efforts to break free from industry constraints and establish a new, liberated identity. Through the music on *Come*, which sonically spans from funk to industrial, to sorrowful Memphis soul, Prince effectively communicates a dark journey of unbinding, and a unique and powerful expression of creative marronage.

Come opens with its laid-back funky title track, an 11-minute invitation to be made anew by the ecstasy of sexual release. The song features jazzy horns, hip-hop-inspired percussion, and smooth sax solos that imbue it with a heady, improvisational spirit. With its swing and energy reminiscent of a live band, “Come” serves as the ideal sonic backdrop for Prince, our leader and conductor, to guide us on a journey to a utopian realm of carnality, intimacy, and freedom. “Come” is not the finish line, it's

a conception song—the beginning of a new idea soundtracked by sultry quiet storm.

Prince sings,

No more, no more (No more will U cry)
Will u cry, cry, cry (Here's a reason why)
If u had the chance
2 see the future would U try?
If U will, so will I

He is beckoning us into a dark journey in which the liberatory possibilities of death and sex intertwine and swirl wildly into the stars. It is a great opening track and mission statement.

"Come" is followed by "Space," a song that continues to meditate on intimacy by juxtaposing closeness with openness—emphasizing both intimacy and space.

"Space" commences with the sampled sounds of NASA's mission control counting down to lift off, setting the stage for a voyage into otherworldly realms. Airy synths and sparkling, individually plucked notes evoke the twinkling of stars in the night sky, enhancing the song's nocturnal ambiance. With lyrics depicting the transformative power of romance, the song portrays sex as boundaryless and expansive, offering a means to escape to uncharted realms. "Space" serves as a meditation on the liberating potential of sexual exploration.. In lilting falsetto, he sings:

Don't u want to go?
The space
Where the souls go
The space
Where the tears flow
The space
Where the love grows
Do u want 2 go?

“Where the souls go” and “where the tears flow” suggest the afterlife and/or loss of some kind, connecting sexual ecstasy with a pleasurable and liberatory form of death. At core, “Space” is about stealing away. By embracing closeness and intimacy, one can transcend the earthly constraints that confine us, even if only on a metaphorical level. The song perpetuates the overarching theme of the album, contemplating death and liberation.

Come moves into darker territory with its next two songs. “Pheremone” is a dense and urgent composition. As the song’s insistent, pounding snare dominates the foreground of the recording, ugly synths lurch, gurgle, and drag beneath its surface, imbuing the composition with a general climate of tension and perverse titillation. Here, Prince’s falsetto is hushed and charged with menace that is matched by the song’s lyrical content about the pleasures and perils of voyeurism and sadomasochistic sex. The speaker watches the scene of a dangerous sexual game between a mystery woman and her partner that involves guns, restraints, and even allusions to murder. It is a disturbing yet alluring listen that complicates the album’s broader narrative about sex, death, and rebirth by dramatizing the slipperiness of these concepts. In “Pheremone,” Prince forces us to consider the pleasure in pain, and the contingency of power and control in a larger quest for catharsis and release, sexual or otherwise.

“Pheremone” transitions seamlessly into “Loose!,” a dive into an industrial, cyberpunk-influenced soundscape. Mechanical percussion propels the track forward amidst the cacophony of factory-like screeches and drones, while shards of sound scatter like glass across the composition. Prince’s raw, liberated voice surges through

the chaos, urging listeners to "push your way up to the front and shake your motherfuckin' 'do loose!" The song advocates for rejecting the status quo by shedding inhibitions and embracing authenticity, resonating with the album's broader themes of escape and liberation. The lyrics carry a double meaning, referencing both one's "hairdo" and the act of *doing*, to encourage listeners to take action to seize the lives they deserve. Together, "Pheremone" and "Loose!" deepen the album's exploration of death and liberation, offering a nuanced examination of desire, power, and the pursuit of freedom.

Come's darkest moment arrives with "Papa," a song about generational trauma, domestic violence, and child abuse. The song's plodding percussion and eerie guitar flourishes create a chilling atmosphere as Prince's haunting spoken word performance tells the story of a father who returns home from work and assaults his four-year-old son. Each blow is punctuated by a sharp snare hit to heighten its visceral impact. The horrifying narrative continues as the father confines his child in a closet before stepping outside with a shotgun. In a moment of despair, he gazes at the sky and screams, "How come I don't love my woman!" before tragically taking his own life. The lyrical references to a closet and the father's inability to "love my woman" gesture toward sexual repression and angst that torments the father, ultimately suffocating his family. The song is a poignant performance that lays bare the misplaced anger and destructive gender and sexual norms that imprison and traumatize across generations.

"Race" is a foray into new jack swing that envisions a world devoid of racial divisions and systemic racism. Accompanied by the track's zany, ironic samples,

periodic stabs of horns, and pointed beat drops, Prince rages against the need to confront the historical horrors of white supremacy to navigate the present. He raps:

Down with H-I-S-T-O-R-Y and all this b.s. propaganda
Keepin' u from me and me from u as we grow
I don't want to know
Why those before us hated each other
I'd rather believe they never did

...Race
In the space I mark human

The irony here is how Prince yearns to erase race while, by foregrounding slaveness in his larger marronage project, draws from the nightmares of individual and collective experiences of historical and contemporary antiblackness to clarify both his conflict with Warner Bros and the larger exploitative machinations of the record industry. He marks “human” despite the intransigence of antiblackness that always positions Blackness outside of that designation, making public his own private protest, despite the structural conditions that ultimately nullify his choice. “Race” is perhaps both a dream and lament for a liberated elsewhere that collapses under the weight of a societal power dynamic that inflicts and perpetuates antiblack violence.

Come's emotional nadir is the track “Solo.” It begins as an acapella neo-spiritual, resonating outward like the vast expanse of a grand cathedral, or from the narrow depths of a well. One of the most distinctive tracks in Prince's repertoire, “Solo” casts a profoundly dark shadow, skillfully conveying feelings of despondency, nihilism, and hopelessness through both its musical arrangement and lyrical content.

Prince immerses himself in isolation:

So low, the curb looks like a skyscraper
So high, the stars are under me
So quiet, I can hear the blood rushing through my veins

So low, I feel like I'm going insane

As the song progresses and Prince is accompanied by a harp and the distant sounds of a thunderstorm, his vocal performance becomes increasingly elastic and unpredictable, conveying a sense of disturbance and peril. The culmination of the song features the lines:

"But now I'm done
I'm so low
Solo
My name is no one"

This final line serves as a clear allusion to Prince's decision to change his name. However, in this context, Prince portrays the name change as a loss. His name has been taken, leaving him at rock bottom, a metaphysical nonpresence—"No One," a damning title for the absence of possibility it implies. Ultimately, Solo" communicates to the listener a state of total disempowerment and spiritual death.

These fortunes are reversed on "Letitgo," *Come's* penultimate track and second single, the album's most explicit commentary on Prince's ongoing struggle with Warner Bros. "Letitgo" distinguishes itself with a laid-back groove and a funky keyboard refrain that imbues the song with a hip-hop-influenced vibe of self-assuredness, confidence, and calm. In it, Prince narrates his personal transformation, shaped by his decision to break free from Warner Bros and reclaim creative and spiritual autonomy. Ironically, holding onto his integrity necessitated that he lett go of the pressures to conform, pursue material wealth, and even his iconic name "Prince," which he had painstakingly built into a global brand. He says,

Until now all I wanted 2 do is
Do do do what I do and
Bang bang bang on the drummer

And love so-and-so
But now I've got 2 let it go

...I'm ready for the real.

"Letitgo" celebrates the joy of liberation, embracing various forms of freedom—spiritual, material, and creative—as intertwined. Prince invites us to join him on this journey, proclaiming,

Now I've got an army and we're three million strong
Our voices will ring in your ears when we are gone

Prince presents his quest for liberation as both an individual and collective endeavor, aiming to break free and achieve autonomy as an artist and as part of a community sharing similar ideals. Through letting go, we attain deeper insights and clarity about our potential and purpose as creative individuals. Prince's reference to "the real," implies a pursuit of personal and collective autonomy, enabling lives grounded in authenticity and integrity, rather than under the constraints of racial capitalist exploitation. Embracing his identity as the Love Symbol, Prince undergoes a rebirth, ready to navigate the industry on his own terms, rather than being bound by the unfair contracts of record labels.

As the final full-length song on *Come*, "Letitgo" provides coherence to the album's narrative of finding liberation at the end of an arduous journey through painful and tumultuous terrain, not unlike the process of marronage. If "Solo" is rock bottom spiritual death, "Letitgo" is the funky rebirth that can only begin after the death of false needs and unbinding of the death-bound from the wretched conditions of enslavement, whether that be physical or mental, spatial, or spiritual.

The album ends with a final track, “Orgasm.” Atop a jagged bed of heavy guitar distortion and feedback, we hear a woman wincing, moaning, and wailing her way to climax. Prince’s soft, deep voice offers words of encouragement like “Don’t be shy, it’s only you and I,” and “Imagine what you look like from across the room.” The guitar fades, replaced by the distant sound of waves against the shore, and in a fleeting moment, Prince declares, “I love you,” bringing the experience to an abrupt end. Just as *Come* begins with the title track’s invitation to experience revelatory sexual and spiritual release, “Orgasm” is catharsis, the completion of our journey to an otherwise and elsewhere beyond the antiblack constraints of not just the music industry, but the ontological barriers of modernity.

Throughout the album, the recurring presence of ocean sounds punctuates intros, outros, and interludes. Perhaps water is a fitting motif for an album exploring themes of enslavement, freedom through suicide, and rebirth. On one level, the association between marronage and being lost at sea or stranded on a deserted island is evident. Water can also symbolize a mode of transportation and communication, representing the liquid boundaries to be transcended for liberation.

However, a deeper reading connects the ongoing water motifs to the harrowing nightmare of captivity during the Middle Passage. In *The Power to Die*, Terry Snyder details how captive Africans often chose suicide by leaping into the Atlantic Ocean to escape the clutches of unfreedom.³²² Perhaps these aqueous moments in *Come* could be situated within the ship's hold, where a psychosexual liberatory practice, overseen by Prince, marks the end of subjugated Black life and

³²² Snyder, Pg. 29.

the transition to an uncategorizable, non-fungible, and uncontainable Black radical spirit beyond the confines of the ship.

Despite Prince's intention for the album to fail, such a closer examination reveals the imaginative possibilities within *Come*. Far from a hastily assembled work, the album, with its intentional visuals, themes, and sounds, can take on a profound significance. By foregrounding the nightmares of enslavement, Prince's intentional choices transform *Come* into a masterfully executed attempt at career suicide—an effort to transcend the limitations of the racial capitalist music industry. Through a symbolic death, the album strives for a contested form of artistic freedom I call "creative marronage." In this way, *Come* becomes a deliberate and impactful artistic endeavor that challenges boundaries and seeks a unique form of liberation within the complex landscape of racial capitalism.

Conclusion

Although "Dolphin" was performed on Letterman just four months after the release of *Come*, it was not included on that album. "Dolphin" is an up-tempo, guitar-driven pop ballad that asserts Prince's will to maintain principles and integrity despite the immense pressure to conform to the creative and spiritual boundaries imposed by the music industry, and by racial capitalism more broadly. Instead, he steals away, seeking unknown possibilities in a liberated existence free from racism, ridicule, and control.

You can cut off all my fins
But to your ways I will not bend
I'll die before I let you tell me how to swim
And I'll come back again
As a dolphin

Lyrically, "Dolphin" is a fascinating rumination on the process of unbinding that is required to seize and maintain creative freedom despite the racial capitalist machinations of the recording industry. The song's imagery also mirrors mythologies surrounding Atlantic Slavery, in which many African captives believed those forced overboard would morph into sea creatures upon escaping the bondage of the slave trade—a marronage at sea.³²³ While the image of a dolphin diving, flipping, and swimming freely through open water is a beautiful and energetic idea, a line like "I'll die before I let you tell me how to swim" is startlingly morbid and consequential, reinforcing the high stakes of freedom. Such were the stakes for Prince during the conflict with Warner Bros that he was willing to kill one iteration of his creative and commercial identity in the hopes that a different one might have the chance to thrive.

The music video for "Dolphin" confirms those stakes early on with a close-up image of the SLAVE branding on his right cheek (Fig. 4). Prince immediately draws a direct conceptual line between our present system of exploitation and the violence of enslavement—especially the coerced, seemingly innocent enjoyments that help to contour social death's spectral presence. Prince would rather you cut off his "fins," than live down to the deathly terms of enslavement.

³²³ Ede-Osifo, "Actually, Black Mermaids Have Been Part of Mythology for a Long Time."



Figure 45: Prince in *Dolp*

As Prince hoped, *Come* was his lowest selling album up to that point, barely going gold.³²⁴ When it was followed a year later with the long awaited first album credited to the symbol, *The Gold Experience*, critics offered effusive praise for it as a creative rebirth. *The Village Voice*'s Robert Christgau called it "a renewal,"³²⁵ while *Rolling Stone*'s Carol Cooper hailed the album as his "most effortlessly eclectic set since 1987's *Sign o' the Times*."³²⁶ *The Gold Experience* is a bold, kaleidoscopic, and hyper imaginative listening experience, teeming with ideas, and overflowing with stylistic diversity. Tracks such as "Endorphinmachine" exude raw, vibrant hard rock energy, while "Shhh" sensually celebrates intimacy and connection in the present moment, diverging from the liberated elsewhere theme found on *Come*. *The Gold Experience* stands as a vibrant celebration of life, agency, community, and reincarnation. Both lyrically and stylistically, it performs the boundless possibilities that emerge when liberated from corporate control, free from exploitation, and open to the endless potentials of life illuminated by the light of day.

³²⁴ Barendregt, "Prince Releases the Fine Album *Come* (and Nobody Seems to Care)."

³²⁵ Christgau, "Consumer Guide Nov. 14, 1995."

³²⁶ Cooper, "Gold Experience."

However, even though it featured both "Dolphin" and "The Most Beautiful Girl," as well as the artist's stamp of approval, sales were not stellar. *The Gold Experience* barely went gold, just like *Come*.³²⁷ The overarching impact of the battle with Warner Bros, the name change, and the SLAVE branding overshadowed the music, intensifying tensions with a skeptical media and distancing mainstream audiences.

Prince would never reach the commercial heights of his heyday in the eighties, nor the triumph of another number one record like "Most Beautiful Girl," but through creative marronage he achieved deeper and more long-lasting victories. At the end of 1996, when Prince finally reached a settlement with Warner Bros, he embarked on a new phase of his career marked by increased artistic freedom and creative control. He released projects through his own website, pioneering online music sales years before it became an unavoidable reality for the music industry.³²⁸ He collaborated with major labels (including Warner Bros!) on his own terms, soliciting distribution support without compromising creative control.³²⁹ He also further maximized the possibilities of his Paisley Park compound, where he wrote, recorded, filmed, rehearsed, and archived hundreds of songs, videos, concerts, and other creative experiments.

Paisley Park was a remarkably multi-faceted and self-contained creative sanctuary—a live-in mansion, a recording studio, an office building, a writer's retreat, and a live music venue all in one. It was also the site of his untimely death on April

³²⁷ Light, "Prince: The Gold Experience Album Review | Pitchfork."

³²⁸ Hogan, "Here's Every Battle Prince Waged Against the Internet and the Music Industry."

³²⁹ Hogan.

21, 2016. Today, Paisley Park is a museum where diehard fans pilgrimage to pay their respects and savor a fleeting glimpse at the inner world of one of the greatest musicians in popular music history.³³⁰ I contend that Paisley Park serves as an ongoing testament to the resilience of Black life, embodying its capacity to improvise, subvert, and transcend ontological oblivion despite the persistent counterforces of antiblack violence and social death that would seem to render the existence of such life and the art it inspires impossible. In this regard, Paisley Park, like Black radicalism, possesses an essence that transcends mere physical location. As the artist himself once famously sang, "Paisley Park is in your heart."

³³⁰ "About | Paisley Park Paisley Park | Prince's Home and Studio."

Conclusion: Confronting the Terror of Being Destroyed

“Sometimes I think, one Atlanta child told me, that I’ll be coming home from practice and somebody’s car will come behind me and I’ll be thrown into the trunk of the car and it will be dark and he’ll drive the car away and I’ll never be found again.”

James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*

In the preface to James Baldwin’s *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, a book-length examination of the harrowing Atlanta Child Murders of the late 1970s to early 1980s, Baldwin attributes the above quote to a Black child he encountered while covering the story.³³¹ Upon hearing this child’s recurring nightmare, Baldwin strains to place himself in such a perilous position, imagining “the darkness, the silence, the speed, the corkscrew road,” but his mind cannot piece those specific details into any identifiable memory of his own. “But that child was myself,” he realizes. Neither he nor the child physically experienced that nightmare, but it is the Black child’s precarity and availability to it that haunts him, and it is Baldwin’s recognition that such a nightmare holds psychic space in his own mind as well that is the revelatory turning point in his analysis of the murders.

What James Baldwin and the little boy share across generations is a fundamental and traumatic realization that in our antiblack world, their bodies are vulnerable to any form of violence at any time—Baldwin calls this “the terror of being destroyed.”³³² Baldwin struggles to recall what he describes as “what he does not want to remember,” yet acknowledges a deep-seated recognition due to their

³³¹ Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, pg. xiv.

³³² Baldwin., pg. xiv.

shared vulnerability to bodily dispossession and destruction, a concept foundational to the boy's fears and intrinsic to Blackness itself. Reflecting on this, Baldwin laments, "It has something to do with the fact that we all came here as candidates for the slaughter of the innocents. It has something to do with the fact that all survivors, however they accommodate for failing to remember it, bear the inexorable guilt of the survivor. It has something to do, in my own case, with having once been a Black child in America. My memory stammers: but my soul is a witness."³³³

I argue that what Baldwin describes aligns with the Black Nightmare Imaginary, a shared psychic repository of scenes and scenarios of antiblack violence to which Black Americans share access because of their shared precarity and availability to that violence. For Baldwin, the significance of the Atlanta murders lies not in the guilt or innocence of Wayne Williams (the young Black man controversially found guilty of the killings), but rather in how the ongoing peril Black children face in America, and our inability to protect them, indicates the persistence and intransigence of antiblack violence across time, despite periods of "progress" since emancipation. As GerShun Avilez explains in "The Aesthetics of Terror," Baldwin's and other Black cultural producers' determination to remember and confront the Atlanta Child Murders in their works ensure that the persistence of antiblack violence across generations is not overlooked or ignored.³³⁴ Baldwin's observation regarding the lack of safety for Black youth in a city like Atlanta, despite its Black leadership at the time and reputation for racial tolerance, underscores the

³³³ Baldwin., pg. xv.

³³⁴ Avilez, "The Aesthetics of Terror."

pervasive nature of antiblack violence and the ongoing, and perhaps futile, struggle for genuine equality and safety for Black people in America.

It has been decades since the murders, but the nightmare of that deathly era lives on in the works of Atlanta-born hip hop artists, who continue to take on this work of remembering. Andre 3000 has repeatedly referenced the murders. In the title track of Outkast's third album, 1998's *Aquemini*, he raps,

Let's walk to the bridge
Meet me halfway
You might see some children dead off in the pathway
It's them poor babies walkin slowly to the candy lady

The bridge he mentions references how areas near bridges were often where the slain children's bodies were dumped and eventually found.³³⁵ A bridge is also the site where Wayne Williams was first apprehended by police.³³⁶ Nearly two decades later, in his featured verse on Travis Scott's "The Ends," Andre 300 revisits those traumatic days:

I came up in the town, they were murdering kids
And dumped them from the creek up from where I live
Bodies, bodies, bodies sprinkled around
Killer would show up with boxes of pizza
And said he had a label recruiting' people
Put that on my grandma and everything
My homie said he told 'em his name was Wayne
It could've been me or could've been you too

The details presented here are stark and horrific. Andre's words invite us to traverse a psychological hellscape where the bodies of dead children dot the woods near their homes, and memories linger of a murderer luring our babies to their deaths

³³⁵ "Hip-Hop and the 'Atlanta Child Murders.'"

³³⁶ Albright, "Wayne Williams' 1981 Arrest Allayed Crime Fears, Ended Atlanta Child Murders."

with free food and promises of fortune and fame. It is a nightmarish scenario, one that resonates with the shared sentiment of "could've been me or could've been you too." According to Dee Dee Murray, who closely collaborated with the Dungeon Family Collective, including Outkast and Goodie Mob, there's a shared recognition of the fear and lingering trauma from growing up during those terrifying times that helped bond them together. "As we got to know each other, that was the one thing that we could all relate to," she says, "how scared we were at that time."³³⁷

Perhaps we can foreground those nightmarish years when listening to Goodie Mob's 1995 classic "Cell Therapy," where they ruminate on paranoia and violence in the face of a myriad of threats to their lives with the song's famous chorus, "Who's that peeking in my window?/ POW! Nobody now." An obvious interpretation of the song might frame it as a brash assertion of dominance and self-preservation in the tumultuous landscape of the ghetto. However, utilizing the Black Nightmare Imaginary to foreground the horror of the Atlanta Child Murders, "Cell Therapy" can also be interpreted as an attempt to confront the enduring and collective trauma of growing up with a pervasive sense of precarity—the fear of disappearing without a trace. The terror of being destroyed. This approach not only provides a richer understanding of the song's significance but also acknowledges the resilience of the generation of Black youth that endured those tumultuous times, reframing their artistic expressions as courageous testimonials to their lived experiences.

The influence of the Atlanta Child Murders on the city's highly influential hip hop scene reflects the power of the Black Nightmare Imaginary as a theoretical lens

³³⁷ "Hip-Hop and the 'Atlanta Child Murders.'"

to understand how the nightmares of Black life can be generative of creative works that engage that trauma head on. As Baldwin observed, various forms of violence beset the lives of Black people across time in ways that are foundational to the American hegemonic social order. However, Black life is a dynamic and agential force that eludes and evades capture at every turn. More specifically, *The Black Nightmare Imaginary* offers vital context when we challenge misrepresentations of the music created and enjoyed by Black youth as negative, dangerous, or destructive. Such descriptions are more apt to the antiblack world in which they live.

While the Atlanta Child Murders is technically a discrete event, it epitomizes the pervasive violence faced by Black youth, a reality that persists in the present. In our current moment, courtrooms nationwide exploit rap lyrics to prosecute young Black artists,³³⁸ leveraging the lyrical evidence of their fear of being destroyed to bolster the carceral state, which consumes Black youth with greater efficiency than Wayne Williams ever did. By contextualizing controversial Black musical works through the lens of the Black Nightmare Imaginary, their works can assume radical and potentially triumphant qualities, serving as testimonials to the resilience of Black life that transcends the oppressive conditions of social death.

³³⁸ Rafei, “Putting Rap Lyrics on Trial Is a Violation of Free Speech | ACLU.”

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