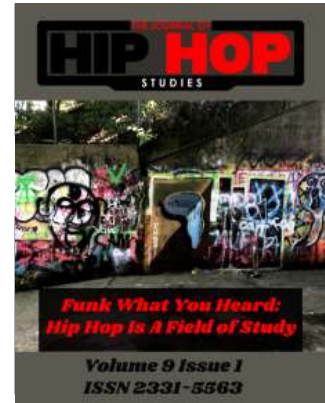


**"Imbedded" Belonging and Black Being: A  
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# “Imbedded” Belonging and Black Being: A Critical Analysis of Hip Hop Beingness in Kendrick Lamar’s 2016 Grammy Awards Performance

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This article argues that in a space of artistic performance Black people can fully imbed themselves in the space, despite the temporality of the performance itself. Therefore, in the act of performing, Black people are able to fully be recognized as a human whole. The goal of this article is to think of a Hip Hop beingness that fuses the temporal/body, consciousness/beyond the body, and the ancestral connections of orality and genetic memory. I do so by looking at how black performance disrupts dominant narratives of black bodies as being just flesh. This article brings together, Hip Hop studies, Africana philosophy and performance theory to argue that the space of performativity moves beyond the notion of blackness as void and does not solely focus on the constraints of corporeal blackness. Instead, the black body imbeds the space it occupies. In doing so, it disrupts and reconfigures space, time, and narratives of belonging.

## Introduction

In his article, “Can It Be Bigger than Hip Hop?: From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop,” Travis Harris states, “there is no uniform perspective on what ‘real Hip Hop’ is, it is clear that real Hip Hop is deeper than what is easily identifiable on the surface.”<sup>1</sup> As a Black existential philosopher, I approach Hip Hop as another lens to think of Black existentialism, which is defined as a philosophical methodology that “critiques domination and affirms the empowerment of Black people in the world.”<sup>2</sup> To concretize the discussion further, I am looking at the philosophical ruminations that Hip Hop provides. As Harris notes, “real Hip Hop is more than what is being played on the radio and television, trending on YouTube, at the top of the iTunes chart, or hot on Tidal.”<sup>3</sup> Moving beyond the temporal response to Hip Hop, which is the sonic, the visual, the economic mobility, the fashion, and the bravado in performance and vernacular as well as the local representations in conversation with and deviating from the global response, it is rich with philosophical inquiry and how marginalized communities do philosophy.

Thinking within and beyond the context of American society, the perception of the Black body is one that is imbedded in a space that is centered on both discourse and meaning. The non-anchored, Black body is suspended from a space that is simultaneously made apart from the whole while also being made a central point of attention. From this perspective, the Black body is a ‘floating body’ that “lacks form or

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<sup>1</sup> Travis T. Harris, “Can It Be Bigger than Hip Hop?: From Global Hip Hop Studies to Hip Hop,” *Journal of Hip Hop Studies* 6, no. 2 (2019): 18, <https://doi.org/10.34718/27nk-bx98>

<sup>2</sup> Magnus O. Bassey, “What Is Africana Critical Theory or Black Existential Philosophy?” *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 6 (July 2007): 914–35.

<sup>3</sup> Harris, “Can It Be Bigger than Hip Hop?,” 18.

placement within a political/ontological landscape."<sup>4</sup> But performance theorists such as Harvey Young, Thomas DeFrantz, and E. Patrick Johnson have discussed in detail that Blackness in the realm of performance moves beyond a static stasis of a floating body by being grounded within the space of performance. By grounding the Black body through an analysis of performance, this article argues that performance disrupts whether Black bodies are, or are not, a part of what constitutes a human being. I do so by looking at how Black performance disrupts white temporal narratives as the performativity moves beyond the notion of Blackness as void and does not solely focus on the constraints of corporeal Blackness. Instead, the Black body imbeds the space it occupies. In doing so, it disrupts and reconfigures space, time, and narratives of belonging. In a space of artistic performance African Americans can fully imbed themselves in the space, despite the temporality of the performance itself, and therefore in the act of performing, African Americans are able to fully be recognized as a human whole. The goal of this article is to think of a Hip Hop beingness that fuses the temporal/body, consciousness/beyond the body, and the ancestral connections of orality and genetic memory.

### **Genealogy of Difference**

To fully contend with this, we need to go back to a genealogy of difference on this side of the Atlantic and must incorporate a greater context of the Middle Passage, Slavery, and Citizenship. If we are to move beyond the narratology of a history of enslavement, then we must interrogate the carcerality of non-white bodies. The analysis then becomes an existential conversation of imprisonment within and outside of the longer prison industrial complex. Ironically, it becomes a circuitous exercise in which we are back to the discussions of the materiality of difference. The difference being that racialized Black bodies are erased from being a part of normative discourses of citizenship, justice, and humanism. This is clearly seen in well-known examples of popular culture. On February 15, 2016, Kendrick Lamar delivered an explosive six-minute performance of excerpts of his album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. Critically acclaimed and lauded, spectators were left wondering, "what will he do?" He opened his performance with the song "The Blacker the Berry," on a set where the stage is made to look like the inside of a prison. It is complete with bars and cells and the sounds of horns playing. Lamar enters center stage wearing a state prison uniform and walking in a line hand- and ankle-cuffed to the men who are in line with him. Not only are these men a visual reminder of the Prison Industrial Complex, but they force the audience to retrace images of men being shackled together while boarding ships during the Middle Passage. By critiquing the Prison Industrial Complex, Lamar forces the audience to bear witness to the fact that African Americans are only 12% of the U.S. adult population but make up 40% of the prison population.

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 56.

Lamar's performance continues as he recites his lyrics into a microphone, and he is able to remove the shackles but not his uniform. He transitions to the song "Alright." The lights darken, revealing luminescent paint that appears on his uniform and that of the other prisoners. The scene is like the dream sequence in the Broadway musical *Fela*. The transition is complete with drum rhythms and chants of "we gone be alright." The djembe drummers and dancers form a circle around him as a bonfire appears and Lamar continues his verse by incorporating this African diasporic phenomenon. Arguably, Lamar's incorporation of live drums, chanting, dancing around a bonfire is an homage to when drumming was banned in the Pre-United States Colonies. In 1740, the *South Carolina slave code laws* became the basis of the slave code Laws of the United States.<sup>5</sup> An excerpt of article 36 states: "[U]sing or keeping drums, horns or other loud instruments, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes."<sup>6</sup>

The drums which are the heartbeat of a culture as well as the bells, and horns that accompany them were the sonic deadening of African oral culture in what would become the United States. However, Black resilience does not end with the banishment of drums and horns and "other loud instruments." The covert methods of preservation are overlooked by the overt examples that are visible in Caribbean, Central, and South American and African diasporic culture that were allowed to retain drums and other instruments. The erasure of the non-verbal sound of those of African descent who were both free and enslaved is to eradicate the being and belonging that is outside of a white power structure. The significance of the legal silencing of Black sound is that it continues to serve as the silence and erasure of a discourse on Black being, belonging and imbeddedness, which is why Blackness can only be measured through the continual performances of Blackness because Black being-ness is temporal.

The music video to "Alright" ends with Lamar suspended in air until a white uniformed police officer forms his hand into the shape of a gun and the sound of a bullet fires and Lamar falls to the ground. The audience is left to assume that Lamar is profiled and killed because he is Black. Lamar's Grammy Award performance of the song goes beyond an observation of racial and classed violence against unarmed Black youth. Instead of ending his performance like he does in his music video, he walks to a section of the stage that is lit with a single spotlight illuminating a microphone attached to a stand. Lamar then delivers his next song, which is a new track that is a reflection on capitalism, violence, and systemic oppression. Then the lights fade and reveal a projection of an outline of Africa. Within that outline the word "Compton" appears. The location of the word "Compton" is of note. It appears towards the western edge of the outline. Compton, California is Kendrick Lamar's hometown, and it is the place in which

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<sup>5</sup> Gov. William Bull ratified the document. The original document of the 1740 South Carolina Slave Code, *Acts of the South Carolina General Assembly, 1740 # 670*, is housed in the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, which is in Columbia, South Carolina.

<sup>6</sup> 1740 South Carolina Slave Code, *Article 36*.

Black being and imbeddedness is erased due to poverty and poverty-related crime that contributes to the mass incarceration of Black bodies.

The placement of the word "Compton" specifically signifies the location in Africa where many people were captured and subsequently enslaved during the transatlantic slave trade. The stage lights fade to dark, and the camera immediately repositions to the audience, their faces revealing signs of shock and awe. Lamar's performance broke barriers of art, by infusing his embodiment of Blackness while performing at an awards show. He forces his audience to take in both his performance and how he embodies and imbeds his Blackness. The program then goes to a commercial break. In a racist context to be Black is not just a phenotypical marker but a signifier of being below. Kendrick's performance is a reminder to Black people that their Black skin is a reminder of forced migration but also a temporal symbol of their lack of political agency. Blackness and political agency can only be approached through the aesthetic contributions found in art, music, literature, and fashion. Consequently, Black Americans have no sustainable political agency because of institutional sanctions that produce and promote anti-Blackness.

### **Enmeshing Hip Hop, Performance and African Diaspora Culture**

In their June 2017 lecture "Creolizing Theory,"<sup>7</sup> Jane A. Gordon and Michael Monahan argue that the main issues that arise in American Africana-Afrocentrist theory is an "embedded belongingness that creates a primary, legitimate, and informed perspective." This means that the descendants of the transatlantic slave trade who are now categorized as theoretical "natives"<sup>8</sup> to the United States, grapple with the concept of belonging and having legitimate claims to an informed perspective of African culture, tradition, and orality. For example, music, food, oral lore, and spiritual practices are ways in which one can trace the African and Indigenous ancestral memory within Black American culture. However, the embracement and claim of these traditions is fraught with tension both within and between what it means to claim lineage to the continent of Africa while also being part of the naturalized citizenry of the United States. According to D. Soyini Madison, Black performance theory (or BPT) "helps us decipher these imperatives of Blackness." Soyini-Madison defines deciphering performance theory as working through:

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<sup>7</sup> Gordon and Monahan delivered their talk at the Caribbean Philosophical Association's 2017 summer school. Jane Gordon and Michael Monahan, "Creolizing Theory," CPA Summer School 2017, University of Connecticut at Storrs.

<sup>8</sup> The use of "native" is in correlation to Richard Wright in his novel *Native Son*, which I argue is being imbedded in a culture that is otherized but not ancestrally indigenous to North America/US. Furthers the thesis of imbeddedness. Richard Wright, *Native Son: A Novel* (1940; New York: McClelland and Stewart, 2022).

meanings of Blackness by excavating the enlivening enactments that sustain Blackness; theory does the labor of translating the thick ontologies of what Black imperatives are by locating them within the generative forces of performance. With each generation, perhaps with each turn of a phrase, we stake a new claim within a new world order for the nature and significance of Blackness. Black performance theory complicates old claims of Blackness, because life is change and the world keeps turning, demanding new vocabularies and new actions.<sup>9</sup>

How do Black Americans establish being and belongingness when their performance and artistic expression are merely seen as just a performance of Black culture? How does that performance of artistic expression inform the ways in which Black Americans continue to form modes of resistance in the post-Obama era which is now referred to as the “Age of Trump”? To begin to answer these questions I go back to Harris’s intervention; he uses the work of both Pough and KRS one, invoking a “collective consciousness” or “state of mind.”<sup>10</sup> Harris further articulates a belongingness or a Hip Hop beingness by stating,

Since Hip Hop is an African diasporic phenomenon, KRS’ collective consciousness and Pough’s belief that Hip Hop is a way of life becomes clearer. I intentionally use the term “phenomenon,” instead of just aesthetic or culture to make space for them both (aesthetic and culture), and the worldview that comes out of African diasporas. Africa is the birthplace of humanity.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, how do Black Americans resist systemic forms of oppression that view artistic expression as entertainment and not as a method of empowerment? This essay argues that Kendrick Lamar’s 2016 performance is a declaration of imbedded belonging and Black being. Lamar’s performance provides a way to think through imbeddedness because his performance is a visual and sonic suspension of time and reality. It is also a suspension of historical and contemporary constructions of Black humanity and gender, despite the fact that Kendrick Lamar is a male performer (and as scholars have noted male performers are often center when women, gender and sexual minorities remain in the periphery).<sup>12</sup>

Lamar’s performance is not just a moment in time on a televised stage that suspends reality— it declares Black being and an imbedded belongingness. The disruption of space and time occurs because Blackness is counter time and counterspace. Yet Blackness faces a difficulty in being able to fully claim and occupy even that countering. The suspension of time and the sonic suspension of reality, according to Gordon, “produces an ambiguous place because we are approaching history from the perspective of being, which is a fraught and ambiguous place. Consequently, it influences

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<sup>9</sup> D. Soyini Madison, “Foreword,” *Black Performance Theory*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), xii.

<sup>10</sup> Harris, “Can It Be Bigger than Hip Hop?,” 21.

<sup>11</sup> Harris, “Can It Be Bigger than Hip Hop?,” 21.

<sup>12</sup> See Imani Kai Johnson, “From Blues Women to B-girls: Performing Badass Femininity,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 15-28, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0740770X.2014.902649>, for a good example of how performing Hip Hop allows for new realities and understanding of Black humanity and “gender.”

the present and subsequently the future."<sup>13</sup> I would add that the narrative of history is that of an illusion because it paints a broad brushstroke of inclusivity and blanketed assumptions. Rarely does the narrative include the perspectives from those voices that are marginalized within the dominant narrative. Hence, if we are to look at "being," and "Black American being" in particular, from the perspective of American philosophy, it rarely includes an analysis of those voices.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, this essay proposes that by using the alteration of "imbedded" we can begin to think of Blackness as not something solely defined by chronological narrative. Therefore, we can begin to move past the issues of superimposed meanings from teleological understandings.

This issue of traditional narrative creating meaning, and the problems it poses to Black being, is seen most clearly in popular understandings of chattel slavery. Although it could be argued that the erasure of the Black body and Black being did begin with the transatlantic slave trade, this is not the only point of origin to derive meaning for the Black body and Black being. Only by using a concept such as "imbedded," which simultaneously grounds meaning in a specific moment of performance while also highlighting the disruption of that chronology, can we begin to have a method to see specific moments in time as important to the creation of Blackness without assuming that those specific moments contain all meaning in a determined teleology.

Black being and being apart is the interrogation of not only structures outside, but also within, racialized non-white communities which are defined, typically, by what whiteness excludes. In using Zack's argument on the problems of the theory of teleology as it relates to imbeddedness, we see why belonging cannot be achieved if the status quo prevails. Black being and imbeddedness can only be defined through the notion of being stacked against the United States Declaration of Independence's motto of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, and therefore counter to most dominant narratives.

### **The Politics of Black Being**

Frank B. Wilderson III argues that "the aporia between Black-being and political ontology has existed since the Arab and subsequently the European enslavement of Africans."<sup>15</sup> Black-being and political ontology are oxymoronic because to acknowledge Black being or being Black is political, and it empowers Black being-ness. Because Black being and political resistance as the agency that lends power to Black being contradict and undermine regimes that seek to repress Black being, oppressive regimes must attempt to eradicate and vilify Black being and resistance through evolving methodologies of anti-Blackness. Wilderson continues by stating, "the need to craft an

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<sup>13</sup> Gordon and Monahan, "Creolizing Theory."

<sup>14</sup> See Lewis Gordon, *Introduction to Africana Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>15</sup> Frank B. Wilderson, *Red, White: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

ensemble of questions through which to arrive at an unflinching paradigmatic analysis of political ontology is repeatedly thwarted in its attempts to find a language that can express the violence of *slave-making*, a violence that is both structural and performative.”<sup>16</sup> For Wilderson, *slave-making* is not just how the plantation and being forced onto ships during the Middle Passage institutionalized imagery of what Blackness and enslavement mean. Instead, it is how the narrative of *slave-making* replicates itself to manufacture enslaved persons in the twenty-first century. How are Black Americans with the legacy of institutionalized slavery and now institutionalized incarceration going to contemplate Black imbedded belonging and states of being? In thinking of Black beingness from the perspective of eradicating a slave-making ideology, Black being, and imbedded belonging cannot simply be an imaginative theory. It is a theory that requires an active praxis due to Black beingness and imbeddedness not fully existing in American conceptions of chronological development. At best, Black being is a floating signifier. Therefore, beingness is the ability to experience life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Those three words are the alleged Genesis of American ontology. Moreover, how can Black bodies respond to this when the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Amendments cannot undo the undoing of slave-making? If beings who are Black are a part of the United States, that would mean that the United States has to acknowledge that the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment was supposed to end slavery but actually redefined it in the form of incarceration. That would also mean acknowledging that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which grants citizenship to all born and naturalized in the United States, and the 15<sup>th</sup>, which grants citizenship regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, did so to counter a preexisting and well-established chronology of American development. Far from being “natural” outgrowths of American promise, these amendments are correctives to a problem with a chronology. Hence, the Black body, and marginalized identities in general, are forced to imbed themselves in a normative line of development. And this is all complicated further by the historical fact that Civil Rights in the US have never been a progressive teleology but instead a back-and-forth over various states of oppression – discrimination and erasure of citizenship occurred even further due to the failure of the Reconstruction Era, the decision of *Plessy v Ferguson*, and the ongoing fight to enact further Civil Rights Acts that extends to the modern period.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Wilderson, *Red, White*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Civil Rights Act of 1866, extending the rights of emancipated slaves by stating that any person born in the United States regardless of race is a US citizen.

Civil Rights Act of 1871, prohibiting race-based violence against African Americans (see also, Enforcement Acts which were three Acts in 1870-1871).

Civil Rights Act of 1875, prohibiting discrimination in "public accommodations", which was found unconstitutional in 1883 as Congress could not regulate conduct of individuals.

Civil Rights Act of 1957, establishing the Civil Rights Commission.

Civil Rights Act of 1960, establishing federal inspection of local voter registration polls.



Not only are (cis)gendered heteronormative white men and women responding with "All Lives Matter" and "Health Care is a Privilege" but women of color (presumably heteronormative) are responding with the same rhetoric.<sup>18</sup> For example, during the question-and-answer round of the 2017 Miss USA competition, when Kára McCullough was asked, "Is health care a basic right or a privilege?," she responded that it is a "privilege because as a government employee I have the privilege of receiving health care because I work and those that work should receive health care which proves we not only need healthcare but jobs."<sup>19</sup> When asked if they had ever attended any BLM rallies, recording artist Rozonda Thomas (Chili) from the music group TLC and band member Tionne Watkins (T-Boz) both said no, and Thomas responded with "all lives matter." Ironically, unlike The Miss America pageant, The Miss USA pageant is not a scholarship competition. Instead of being awarded a scholarship, Miss USA contestants not only compete to win the title of Miss USA, but they are also eligible to compete for the Miss Universe pageant. Instead of being judged by intellectual merit, the contestants are judged by their ability to wear a swimsuit, which is the ability to be assessed largely on their perceived physical beauty.

The judges for the 2017 preliminary rounds for the Miss USA competition were Halima Aden– Somali-American model and first woman to compete in a Miss USA state pageant wearing a hijab and burkini; Maura McGreevy – IMG corporate community (IMG for entertainers and models); Carole Gist – Miss USA 1990, Miss USA 1990; Nancy Lublin – CEO of Crisis Text Line and creator of Dress for Success; Brooke Lee – Miss USA 1997, and Miss Universe 1997; Nick Light – vice president of Sony Music and Warner Bros. Records; and Vanessa Gringer – director of business development at IMG (IMG

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Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, and national origin by federal and state governments as well as some public places.

Civil Rights Act of 1968, prohibiting discrimination in sale, rental, and financing of housing based on race, creed, and national origin.

Civil Rights Act of 1990, would have made it easier for plaintiffs to win civil rights cases; was vetoed by President George H. W. Bush.

Civil Rights Act of 1991, providing the right to trial by jury on discrimination claims and introducing the possibility of emotional distress damages, while limiting the amount that a jury could award.

<sup>18</sup> Numerous media outlets such as *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *VOX*, and *CNBC* wrote articles about the erasure of stating "All Lives Matter" instead of "Black Lives Matter." Computer scientists Ryan Gallagher, Andrew Reagan, Christopher Danforth, and Peter Dodds conducted a qualitative study that logged the deaths of Black men and women since Mike Brown's death and the cultural responses to those shootings. See Ryan J. Gallagher, Andrew J. Reagan, Christopher M. Danforth, Peter Sheridan Dodds, "Divergent Discourse Between Protests and Counter-protests: #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter," *PLoS ONE* 13, no. 4 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0195644>

<sup>19</sup> Kara McCullough's response during the Question and Answer portion of the Miss USA Competition. See "Watch Miss USA 2017: Season, Episode 2017, 'Miss USA 2017' Online," *FOX*, May 14, 2017, <https://www.fox.com/watch/099d6101df4ecc76972f13df348bc156/>

Models). The judges for the 2017 Miss USA finals were Halima Aden– Somali-American model and first woman to compete in a Miss USA state pageant wearing a hijab and burkini, Carson Kressley – TV personality, style expert, fashion designer and author, Brook Lee– Miss USA 1997 and Miss Universe 1997, Nancy Lublin – Founder of Dress for Success, Jeannie Mai– Style expert, philanthropist, and co-host of *The Real* and Janet Mock – Author, television host and advocate. McCullough’s inability to answer the question with either empathy, inclusion, or imbedded notions of Blackness did not cost her the crown— it solidified that she would win it. McCullough’s answer is her ability to convey to the judges that she is not a being imbedded in Blackness and empathy. Those who served as judges for the preliminaries and finals only solidified that McCullough needed to demonstrate her ability to perform an image of not imbedding herself in her Blackness because they too are representations of capitalist corporate consumption. Rozonda Thomas’s statement that “All Lives Matter,” is another example of having the ability to not be imbedded in Blackness. Instead of stating “when Black Lives Matter All Lives will matter” she stated, “All Lives Matter.” It is because of her inability to imbed her Blackness in mattering with Black being and against dominant narratives of white supremacy.

Currently, the divide between margin and center on the aspect of Black imbedded belonging is not just those that are phenotypically, economically, or normatively in power. It is also reinforced by those who are historically and contemporarily in the liminal space of both margin and center. What does it mean for those who have economically attained a level of centrality to negotiate that space when they have been forced to occupy the space in the margins? What does this mean not only in popular spheres but for those who vacillate between academe and the world outside of academe? The question however is not to say that those who do live in a silo are absolved of events that happen outside of academe. Instead, critically engaged scholars are confronted with having to acknowledge and work through the world outside seeping into the world inside of academe. Yet, if Black being and being apart is not desirable or good then there is no desire to imbed Black bodies because it is the reason why Black being and imbeddedness is not equally executed because Black imbedded belongingness is not a part of the discourse on being.

During her speech at the 2017 Women’s March held in Washington, D.C. Angela Y. Davis stated, “history cannot be deleted like web pages.”<sup>20</sup> Her statement was meant to centralize the current moment of rebellion and protest to unify and unite women in particular and oppressed people in general. The impetus of the march was meant to be a protest against the switch from an illusory inclusivity of the Obama administration to the advent of the racist, sexist, and fascist rhetoric of the newly inaugurated Donald J. Trump’s administration. In particular, the Women’s March was meant to unify women in a time in which they thought they would be celebrating the inauguration of the first

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<sup>20</sup> There were numerous marches held globally as a protest against the inauguration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

female president. Unfortunately, the United States has yet to experience the election and inauguration of a female president. The 2016 presidential election is an example of how being and imbedding functions through white performances of normative inclusion. Because to exercise normative inclusion threatens white survival and power. Consequently, that fear of white erasure excludes intersectional progression. Therefore, to retain power, which appears as employment, healthcare, home ownership, and citizenship, means that voting for a candidate like Donald J. Trump is plausible. Operating from the fear of erasure is why whiteness enacts the ability to make marginalized groups to not be a part of the larger whole. Not being a part of the broader chronological context is why the rhetoric of xenophobia in the form of anti-immigrant rhetoric, racial tension in the forms of protests, and the regression on rights and privileges regarding gender, were palpable during the 2016 presidential election. The idea of voting against "progressive" modality in the form of being a more inclusive society is one way that voters who benefit from white privilege could recoup and retain power which appears as white supremacy and patriarchy. Ironically, fifty-three percent of those who voted for Donald J. Trump were not poor white males from Appalachia, but instead, they were white women.<sup>21</sup> Out of the 53% of the white women who voted for Trump, 45% of those white women were college-educated. Their votes are not an excuse to ignore the white men and others who believe in retaining white male supremacy that voted for Trump. Instead, the inclusion of voting percentages of white women voters merely highlights that despite the fact that during Trump's presidential campaign his rhetoric and subsequent behavior incited hate in the hearts, psyche, voice, and action of his supporters which empowered people to vote to protect whiteness.

### **Black Beingness and Hip Hop Beingness**

To contemplate this mode of slave-making, and the erasure of beingness and Blackness, we can further interrogate Blackness in America by seeing contemporary portrayals in popular culture. In the television series *American Gods* in the episode "The Secret of Spoon," the story opens with a scene entitled, "Coming to America 1692." People who are enslaved and bound to America aboard a Dutch-owned slave ship confront their terrifying situation. One of the men prays to the African trickster God Anansi, or "Mr. Nancy," as a means for help. Much to the man's amazement, the God appears in the flesh, clad in a plaid purple suit. The praying man laments that he cannot find his mother. He is totally unaware that he is a person enroute to America via the Middle Passage, and therefore does not understand the broader historical implications. In fact, not only is he afraid because he cannot find his mother and does not even fully understand why he is in chains. Mr. Nancy, played by Orlando Jones, tells the man that his mother is dead for refusing sex to one of their enslavers and that the white men have thrown her overboard. He says she died because she did not know how to swim, and that

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<sup>21</sup> Lois Beckett, Rory Carroll, Carmen Fishwick, Amber Jamieson, and Sam Thielman, "The Real 'shy Trump' Vote: How 53% of White Women Pushed Him to Victory," *The Guardian*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/10/white-women-donald-trump-victory>

people should learn how because it is an awful stereotype. As the men beg to be freed from their chains by Anansi, he starts to tell them what they should expect for themselves and their predecessors. "Once upon a time, a man got fucked," he begins. "Now, how is that for a story? 'Cause *that's* the story of Black people in America." He grins impishly at the people's blank expressions, then remembers: "Shit! You all don't know you Black yet. You think you just people. Let me be the first to tell you that you are all Black. The moment these Dutch motherfuckers set foot here and decided that they white and you all get to be Black—and that's the *nice* name they call you? Let me paint a picture of what's waiting for you on the shore ... You arrive in America, land of opportunity, milk and honey," he tells them. "And guess what?" You all get to be slaves. Split up, sold off and worked to death. The lucky ones get Sunday off to sleep and fuck and make more slaves. And all for what? For cotton? For indigo? For a fucking purple shirt?"

There is a silver lining, he adds, "The tobacco your grandkids are gonna farm for free is gonna give a shitload of these white motherfuckers cancer." He explains that the perpetuity of racism will follow them even after slavery is abolished. "A hundred years later, you are fucked," he continues. "A hundred years after that, fucked. A hundred years after you get free, you're still getting fucked outta jobs and shot at by police. You see what I'm saying?" Most of the men on the ship, while shocked, are soon teeming with rage. And that's exactly what Anansi wants. "Anger is good," Mr. Nancy says, pleased. "Anger gets shit done." Mr. Nancy/Anansi frees the men from their shackles, and they set the ship on fire — dooming themselves and the ship's men in the process. The lone survivor of the wreckage is a spider, Anansi's godly form, who then floats on a wooden plank to America's shores.

The use of a trickster figure to be freed from bondage is a bold move for retelling the story of enslavement, racism, and contemporary violence and dispossession of Black bodies. However, the role of the trickster is to disrupt normative behaviors and ideologies. Anansi is necessary to answer how does Black being become a part of the discourse of American humanity? It must go back to when one group decided to be called white and call the other group of people Black. Going back to that origin and fast forwarding it to 300 and counting years of Black subjugation it can give an answer to the following question. The main question for many especially Black Americans was who would succeed the first Black President Barack H. Obama? On the eve of the presidential election of Donald J. Trump, in a response to the state of American democracy and Black imbedded belonging-ness, recording artist Kendrick Lamar used his platform to talk about the state of Black lives. His performance sonically and visually went beyond the suspension of time and sonic reality and is a protest of the political state of Black Americans. Lamar performed songs that were seamlessly spliced together from his 2015 album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. As previously mentioned, the historical legacy of the legal removal of sound and performance is the removal of imbedded belongingness. Therefore, Lamar's visual performance is not a moment of protest but is a declaration of imbedded belongingness. By privileging Hip Hop as his preferred genre of music, Lamar highlights

Hip Hop as the recuperative genre of music that preserves and archives the orality of Black Americans. The archival and performative duality that is Hip Hop music is itself an active art form that solidifies Black imbedded belongingness.

Racial division is one way to practice dominance and impose isolation on those who are socially and politically marginalized in an attempt to prevent them from gaining agency and centrality. This is not to ignore the internal issues of difference based on gender, sexuality, age, or ableism. By thinking how Black imbedded-ness and belong are differences within and between the dominant forces that work to continue to marginalize and ostracize those that are not in positions of authority and power. I argue that a discourse on imbedded-ness and belongingness is ontological in scope but ethical in execution and implementation. The field of ethics encompasses a range of approaches in understanding how, why, and to what degree a person or society places value on how one will experience imbedded belonging. It can only be justified when the subject or subjects in power places value on how objects and subjects will guarantee a belonging to and imbedded in the fabric of society. At its most basic level there is a difference between morality and natural goods, which then begs the question what is and is not an object or what is and is not a human that acquires the level of being valued as human. Circuiting to the figure of the trickster (Mr. Nancy/ Anansi) and the disruption and time and space through performance (Kendrick Lamar) rewrites the discourse on imbedded belongingness and Black being. What happened to the deities of Africa when Africans who were enslaved were brought over? Anansi is often referred to as Aunt Nancy in Black American South oral folklore.<sup>22</sup> As stated previously, Lamar uses Hip Hop, which is a form of poetry that connects to the Griot (oral folklorists) of West Africa.<sup>23</sup> Rewriting how society places value on humans within American society is rewriting how Blackness is imbedded within the normative discourse. This is not to ignore the ways in which materiality impacts what is and isn't of value. My aim is to move beyond a dialectic of sympathy that only further marginalizes Black being and instead make Black being and belonging a moral obligation and responsibility of those in positions of power in that it imbeds Black bodies.

Sympathy as Martha Nussbaum and other value theorists argue merely differentiates complicity.<sup>24</sup> For example, sympathy is the act of stating "that must be awful!" However, empathy goes beyond an implication of "that is awful." Because the person who is expressing empathy believes it to be so, empathy takes on the responsibility of discomfort and injustice and fosters a notion of action. Writing about

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<sup>22</sup> Shanna Greene Benjamin, "Weaving the Web of Reintegration: Locating Aunt Nancy in Praise Song for the Widow," *MELUS* 30, no. 1 (2005): 49-67, [www.jstor.org/stable/30029611](http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029611)

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Banks, "From Homer to Hip Hop: Orature and Griots, Ancient and Present," *The Classical World* 103, no. 2 (2010): 238-45, [www.jstor.org/stable/40599932](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40599932)

<sup>24</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

and articulating injustice is the way in which writers and thinkers of the period can take on the moral responsibility of contemplating the varying degrees of value placed upon racialized subjects. Therefore, moving beyond being “sympathetic” to discourses on Black being, it is the responsibility of those in power to allow Black beings to belong and become imbedded.

An articulation of variance in value does not negate or dissolve the intricacies of privilege and the participation in oppression of those who are white or of European descent. Instead, it is a way to see the complication of race, empire, gender, and hierarchy that exists within the time in which these texts were written. The intersections of these markers are with us today and it informs how we value those who are deemed racially other. Racially other are those who are not phenotypically seen as white or of European descent. Those differences transition from countries often marked by linguistic and cultural differences to that of skin color. No longer are people described as belonging to a tribe or country but as being Black, white, red, or yellow. The linguistic categories that are ascribed to skin color are categorized in what becomes Webster’s dictionary, which becomes the American dictionary and the etymological guidebook to race. The etymology of race is the way in which non-white beings are valued as being physically, intellectually and politically inferior to those who are white. The topic of race in its design is that of intersectionality. A raced body is valued as that which precedes the difference in gender, class or sexual orientation because the perception of skin color historically and in contemporary discourse regulates the value of an entire group of people.

Black being and imbeddedness gestures towards an articulation of defining race within and between spaces of dominant discourse. It not only allows us to acknowledge resistance within and between the margins but also the notion of decentering the center. The question of centrality creates a discourse that not only demands what is deemed central and marginal but determines how we define centrality. By revisiting the ways that we currently define differences regarding race, class, gender, and ability, we can consider the chronology in which the conversation on these topics emerged in the dominant discourse. In redefining and reimagining the chronology we can also interrogate overt and covert modes of resistance. Arguably, it is necessary to look at value theory instead of focusing on the theory of value, which would simply reinscribe the mere materiality of things. In using marginality, I am aware of the ways in which it is not a stagnant concept but fluid because it has an intra- and intersubjectivity when discussing humans who are autonomous versus the objectification that humans encounter within and between communities that work within, between, and against power structures. Those who are deemed marginal and central continue to navigate the liminal aspects of agency that can create multiple levels of being, belonging, and imbeddedness.

This is not a rhetorical strategy to recruit the use of intersectionality because as Naomi Zack<sup>25</sup> has argued intersectionality does not address the struggles between and within groups of marginalized people. Instead, it only names the problem and reifies the confines of difference. Nor do I think that a discourse on what Zack calls "critical plunder" fully articulates the multiple and complex issues of colonialization. Instead, an examination of the difference in value and the lack of value that is given to the multiple layers of marginalized and ostracized persons is necessary. An analysis of imbedded-ness and belonging is not a catch-all solution that will solve the problems of humanity. Instead, it will raise more questions because those who deeply interrogate these differences will see the liminality of language.

In his prolific body of work, Lewis Gordon places great emphasis on the limitations and restrictions that etymology has on the marked subject. If we are to look at non-white non-normative subjects, what part of their lives are and are not the byproduct of a performance of their difference? Yet, where do we go from here if we are not willing to deal with the messiness of all the things that constitute what it means to not fit into a one size fits all mold of what it means to be oppressed? The materiality of difference is the ability to acknowledge being and belonging beyond not only those in power, but also those who do not yet have power. Materiality in this argument is to acknowledge embodiment and inhabitation of a being. Before one is acknowledged as a being their materiality must be acknowledged and treated as being imbedded within the discourse. Until then, the materiality of difference will never be actualized or imbedded in the discourse of belongingness. That is not to ignore the carceral body, the material body, the state of being and, within the discourse of enslavement, the role that enslavement plays in the ways that the carceral system is in the contemporary site of non-being.

Black Being and imbeddedness is a way to contemplate Black being and belonging because it is taken from an ethical and political standpoint. Taken from this standpoint, it creates a counternarrative response against the ravages of colonization, whiteness, and the eradication of any connections to or conversations with the continent of Africa. By not considering the ethical and political standpoint of imbedding Blackness it not only eradicates Black being, but it also simultaneously creates an action of discarding the aspects of the continent that do not merely serve to reenforce power structures. Acknowledging Black being that is imbedded would empower counter movements who want to abolish oppressive power structures. It causes critical thinkers, as bell hooks notes, to do the "internal critique," which "is essential to any politics of transformation."<sup>26</sup> Otherwise, I and others will only work to continue to exercise violence by silencing those that do not fit the comfortable confines of respectability to then at best create a dystopic fantasy of Black being and monstrosity which continues the narrative of Blackness as

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<sup>25</sup> Naomi Zack, "Gender Theory in Philosophy of Race," *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>26</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984), xiii.

floating bodies. Instead, the goal is to embody a complicated but real state of being in which is obtainable for all.

To do so, would mean that humans who do not operate within the discourse and performance of normative being-ness can live without fear or judgement. It means that those who do not operate within the performative gestures of academe can still be treated as equal contributors to a liberatory praxis. However, it does not mean that those who chose to operate within academe can only silently acquiesce to dominant power structures. Such a view will A) only reinforce the thing we seek to undo and B) undermines the fact that their presence is a political act of individual and collective agency. Such a vision would mean that it would be the verbal and written notion that there is more ignorance than knowledge or simply put the value of knowing that you don't know. In that vision of advocating for those that are outside the dominant power structure through new language, it will go beyond only sharing the experiences of difference. Because it will go beyond a narrative of sympathy and will be one of moral obligation and responsibility. By allowing those that are historically and systemically marginalize to be heard and respected it will no longer only be expressed by those who have access and occupancy to normative spaces of power. If that responsibility is not taken by those that currently occupy normative spaces of power, the consequence will be that those who exist outside of that space of discourse and accessibility will never be heard or acknowledged. Access to normative spaces does not dissolve the limitations, complications, and isolating aspects that language itself does to those who are marginalized. Language itself must include Black being and the imbedded belonging that comes with including Black being.

However, the consequences of exclusively focusing on the political and libidinal capital of white male heteronormativity only addresses the intersubjective aspects of human value and Black being and not the intrasubjective aspects of human value and Black being. By placing value between the dominant and non-dominant it ignores how normative and non-normative constructions create dominance and oppression within marginal communities. What happens when those who are socially inferior within the context of whiteness marginalize those within their community? Firstly, it proves that theories of dominance especially that of whiteness can reappear in marginal communities. Second, those that experience marginalization within their marginal community have permission to not feel an allegiance to those in their community. Thirdly, this creates a larger question, namely, does it really mean anything to claim allegiance to a community when most are still operating from the place of non-being and non-imbedded-ness and are thriving? Instead, it only reminds us of the multiple layers of oppression and residual trauma that need to be undone to even constitute a life of imbedded belonging. Or is Black being the problem? Is Black belonging itself a utopic vision that only allows a mere portion of a population to live a full life? Perhaps it is



merely an Americentric rumination of working against living a life free from state-based violence and contrasting it with the materiality of imbedded belonging.<sup>27</sup>

Whole personhood in American discourse is associated with those who have power. Therefore, those who do not have power are not theorized as a whole person. Hence, Black belonging, and imbedded-ness is not a part of the discourse of American thought, which means Black belonging and imbedded-ness has no materiality. By ignoring the discourse on Black being and imbedded belonging, there will never be a discourse of imbedded belonging that will address the multiplicity of difference. At best it deals with the materiality of those in power who can experience imbeddedness, which is defined as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Consequently, those who do not can never embody nor put into praxis Black being and belonging. Materiality itself, interrogates the value that is placed on the materiality of power and how that power is based on the dependency of those who are marginalized and ostracized within and between marginal communities. Hence, the removal of the materiality of sound is the removal of imbedded belongingness of Black being.

Naomi Zack complicates current discourses on Black being because her definition of teleology articulates the temporality/floating of Black bodies. It impacts the conceivable scope of full citizenry in Kendrick Lamar's performance. I revisit the initial statement of Naomi Zack by comparing how things are regarding Black being with the way they should be. Everyone should be able to live their lives within the full materiality of being and the opportunity to live by the creed of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Yet, Black being, and imbedded belonging are not in the discourse of material fullness and discourse. Therefore, the teleology of Blackness is a mistaken conflation. The imbedded belongingness of Kendrick Lamar's 2016 Grammy Award Performance does what those in a space of non-normativity can do, which is question and suspend moments of othering. It does not solve the issues of marginalization. At best, it only allows us to voyeuristically peruse the lives of Black men, even if it is the jaw-dropping visuals that Lamar provides in his artistry that capture a day in the lives of Black America more broadly and Black men in particular. Nor does it attempt to resolve the intricacies of marginalization. Instead, it leaves the viewer with the question of "Now what?"

Kendrick Lamar's 2016 performance is a declaration of imbedded belonging and Black being. Lamar's performance provides a way to think through imbeddedness because his performance is a visual and sonic suspension of time and reality. But more than that, Lamar's performance goes beyond a moment in time on a televised stage that sonically suspends reality; it declares Black being and an imbedded belongingness. Lamar's performance is an ethical call to acknowledge the lives of those that are in the margins by asking what actions those in power can take. Because there are no answers or effective actions that can be taken for those who face multiple levels and layers of

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<sup>27</sup> I see materiality as the physical formation of a whole person.

marginalization. Yet, it does not eradicate the fact that Black communities face varying levels of marginalization within and outside of their fiscal, political, and religious affiliations. Whether it is a reflection on the prison industrial complex, protests, police brutality, and the erasure of Black American belongingness, Black being and imbedded belonging at best will be a utopic mythos that is only obtained by a privileged minority within a marginal community. Yet, if we consider imbedded belonging and how that is obtainable for Black beings through the lens of full materiality which is defined through the American philosophical trope of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that idea will encapsulate the ways in which, through a reimagined discourse, we can collectively and individually revisit what is and is not in conversation with the dominant narrative and ultimately begin to dismantle those ideological structures that are in power.

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