



**SIGNS OF WATER: COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVES ON WATER, RESPONSIBILITY, AND HOPE**

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## Water Formations, Water Neutrality, and Water Shutoffs: Posthumanism in the Wake of Racial Slavery

*C.R. Grimmer*

In 2013–2014, three accounts of water and urbanization arose in the Metro-Detroit area. One, *Only Lovers Left Alive* (*OLLA*), a feature film directed by Jim Jarmusch, arrived in theaters, telling the story of vampires who temporarily live in Detroit to enjoy its cultural vestiges after white flight and prior to gentrification. In the same year, Detroit water shutoffs and Flint water poisoning entered the media, as residents of actual cities began protracted battles with their respective administrations over access to clean, affordable water. In this essay, I focus on these concomitant accounts of how water is currently linked to urbanization—through gentrification, water shutoffs in Detroit, and water poisoning in Flint—as they emerge in popular media productions about post-industrial urban spaces. In 2016, with *OLLA* out on DVD and both the Detroit water shutoffs and Flint water poisoning unresolved, *Lemonade*, Beyoncé’s visual album, which she directed with Kahlil Joseph on the history of racialization and post-industrial urbanization, also came out. Unlike the two previous accounts, as I will argue, *Lemonade* offers a perspective that centralizes, rather than submerges, the significant role racialization plays in linking water and urbanization.

Detroit's water shutoffs bear relevance to my readings of *OLLA* and *Lemonade*. Taken together, these three accounts reveal that a relationship between water, urbanization, and racialization corresponds to alternately neoliberal and anti-neoliberal accounts of post-industrial urban life. I define neoliberalism here as the championing of the free market as a space for organic, proliferative growth and opportunity that naturalizes differential economic status through rhetorics of choice and individualism. To provide context for the film analysis, I will first turn to the backdrop for both films in Detroit. Then, I read a scene in *OLLA* that I argue epitomizes its neoliberal portrayal of inhuman, apathetic vitalities through water, which is coded as a neutral life source evacuated of racist histories and thus usable to mythologize post-industrial urban spaces as prelapsarian Edens ripe for gentrification. This neutrality works in tandem with what I am terming apathetic vitalities, or an apathetic affect toward sustaining life through resources such as water that depends upon the perception of those resources as uniformly available and abundant. This, I argue in the final section, operates in contrast to *Lemonade's* use of "water formations" in tandem with hyper vitalities. *Lemonade*, through water formations, indicts the violent histories of water with relations that have variously racialized populations, even as water itself becomes a conduit for anti-racist and posthuman resistance to the violence of water privatization and regulation. Water formations work in tandem with what I am terming hyper vitalities. While not in binary opposition to apathetic vitalities, the term describes affects and representations of vitality that contrast apathy by elucidating the necessary, urgent relationship between cultural and natural resources necessary for creating and sustaining life.

As I will argue, both *OLLA* and *Lemonade* explore variously racialized inhumanisms and modes of apathetic and hyper vitalities through water. In both films, water acts as a key conduit to the historical, racialized constitution of "the human," directly or indirectly gesturing toward the historical role of water politics, privatization, regulation, and traversal in enacting racial violence or creating alternatives to that violence. *OLLA* presents a neoliberal narrative of gentrification in watery, urban landscapes through atemporal historical trajectories. These inhuman trajectories disavow the material presence of racialized subjects in urban areas by attempting to portray water as an abundant, neutral, life-giving resource. To do this,

the film enacts what Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) terms “engulfment,” an apt, watery metaphor for the neoliberal filmic process of incorporating its own critique into itself to appear progressively posthuman in its relationship to nonlinear time and apathetic vitality. This is enacted through what I call water neutrality, which is a way of submerging historical time and violences by naming water as a natural, neutral resource seemingly available to whoever chooses to avail themselves of it—a form of ecological colourblindness. However, the visual and historical erasing of racialized violence through water politics in the city, in fact, inadvertently points toward the material formations of that violence and resistance. This is figured through Jim Jarmusch’s inhuman vampires and their neutral relationship to water, as the capitalistic specter of water is disproportionately distributed to Detroit businesses. In these arrangements, residents are blamed for wrong “choices” that give rise to denying people the status of rights-bearing human. I then argue that water formations, in contrast to water neutrality, are taken up in Beyoncé’s visual album and film, *Lemonade*, to resist this mode of violence via rhetorics of the human and nonhuman. In creating a different articulation of posthumanist relations to water and performing a hyper vitality, Beyoncé’s film offers a critique of neoliberal colourblindness and water neutrality, while also engaging with what Habiba Ibrahim (2016) terms “oceanic lifespans” and what Christina Sharpe (2016) terms “the wake” of racial slavery and its afterlives. In other words, water across these narratives demands an examination of the violence of racialization as well as the resistance to this violence, as media accounts of Detroit water shutoffs resort to the language of “human rights,” and both filmic responses challenge the historically situated category of the “human” in relation to water as property.

### *Only Lovers Left Alive*: Water Neutrality and Apathetic Vitalities

In April 2013, the Detroit Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) entered a “contract with Homrich, a demolition company, to carry out 70,000 shutoffs in 730 days [in Detroit, MI] ... sponsored by Rodney Johnson of Grosse Pointe” (Bellant et al., 2014). The DWSD reported that the goal was to do damage control over the debt incurred by the DWSD by delinquent water bills. A year later in Detroit, residents began a protracted battle over

the shutoffs in their homes. Seventeen-thousand residents in Detroit had by now had their water shut off (Ley, 2014), and many of them attended a “Water Affordability Fair” to learn about payment options. Yet, those who attended claimed that they were unfairly billed or had not received adequate billing and notifications of a potential shutoff. Throughout the protests, an undercurrent of the value of industrial and post-industrial buildings,<sup>1</sup> businesses, and manufactured objects compared to actual residents came to the forefront: in June 2014, the Detroit City Council approved an 8.7% rate increase, even as those who called themselves the “Defenders” spotted thousands of delinquent bills (Bartkowiak, 2014), and private companies were hired to regulate water access. This happened despite three United Nations representatives who visited Detroit and declared the shutoffs a violation of human rights (Abbey-Lambertz, 2015). In response to rising tensions over who and what were still receiving clean water in Detroit, the state gave one million dollars to DWSD in what was called the Detroit Residential Assistance Program. In the program, residents could apply for up to \$1,500 toward delinquent bills. This was only a fraction of debt relief for some residents who were contesting balances as high as \$5,700 (Winchester, 2016) or the third of the DWSD debt that was due to “high dollar commercial and municipal accounts” (Bellant et al., 2014). Similarly, while Detroit proposed in August 2014 to restructure and sell off \$5.2 billion of the water debt, declaring bankruptcy and potentially lower water rates, more shutoffs to residential water were already in place by August 25, 2014.

In 2016, when *Lemonade* came out, Detroit residents were remarking on how commercial and municipal properties owed \$41 million of the debt compared to \$26 million from homes, and while residents had their water shut off when they disputed their bills, the businesses and government-owned properties did not (Kurth, 2016). In the historical context of the 2013–2016 water shutoffs, *OLLA* and *Lemonade* represent two different media responses to water, post-industrial urbanization, and the battle over what is considered a rights-bearing “human”—a battle also and contemporaneously taken up by the Black Lives Matter movement. Detroit’s water shutoffs create a current of cultural responses to the regulation of and access to literal water through representations of water and racialization. These popular culture (*OLLA* and *Lemonade*) and protest (Black

Lives Matter) responses wield the metaphorical and historical use of water to comment on the status of a rights-bearing “human,” each variously critiquing or re-constituting the category as necessary to provide access to water as a life source.

While *OLLA* is a film that situates itself in various parts of Detroit, in my analysis, I focus on a scene where the two protagonists of the film, vampire lovers Adam and Eve, do a self-guided car tour of the city at night. This scene encapsulates the film’s white liberal critique of the city’s politics that attempts to empty its contemporary history and articulate it instead as prelapsarian Eden ripe for gentrification. Eve says to Adam, “So this is your wilderness. Detroit.” Adam responds immediately with, “Everybody left.”

They here survey the seemingly empty landscape as uninhabited and wild, evacuating the city of its history and inhabitants to re-narrate it as nature. They go on to survey selective, historic sites: Adam describes the Packard Plant, a famously abandoned car factory in Detroit, as a space where “they once made the most beautiful cars.” He calls it “finished,” and the statement as a metaphor for the city becomes apparent when Eve responds, “But this place will rise again.” When he questions her on that probability, she responds, “Yea. There’s water here. And when the cities in the south are burning, this place will bloom.” This prediction builds on the naturalization of the city’s seeming emptiness by portraying it as ripe for a process of re-inhabiting due to nearby abundant, “natural” water sources.

Blended with silence and string instruments are visuals of empty streets and graffitied buildings, all from the perspective of the “touring” car, where Adam offers to take Eve to Motown Museum. Since it is late at night, they would only view it from the outside; Eve declines the tour, calling herself “more of a Stax girl,” referencing a Tennessee based record label for soul and blues music that is known for “uniting” people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds. Adam does not immediately respond, but then has the idea to instead drive by Jack White’s house. As they pass, she exclaims, “Oh, I love Jack White!” which corresponds to the one concert they attend by an indie rock band aptly labeled, “The White Hills.” They converse about Jack White being his mother’s seventh son, and then end their tour at the Michigan Theater, which has also been abandoned. Here

they reminisce about how beautiful the space must have been—“Can you imagine?”—for concerts and movies, describing it now as “just a car park.”

The opening of the scene’s dialogue around wilderness frames water as a natural and neutral resource for gentrifying urban spaces, likening such a gentrification process to a naturalized (re)production or “blooming.” The scene attempts to cast actual Detroit residents as having already left, and this re-narration of white flight is crucial to the dialogue of wilderness naturalizing otherwise disproportionate access to resources such as water. In other words, as the Detroit water shutoffs effectively make the city uninhabitable, even unlivable, for its inhabitants in a present, material manifestation of a longer atemporal project of racialization across watery topographies, the film in kind culturally erases the residents by saying they have left. Especially since Detroit protests around the water shutoffs happened contemporaneously to the film, this declaration submerges the city’s history of white flight, implying that those who exist in the city do not matter enough to count. This dialogue of erasure alongside empty city visuals creates a mythic, idealized Detroit landscape that uses nearby water to “bloom” while eclipsing the social relations of the water shutoffs. Water becomes a crucial conduit here for naturalizing a neoliberal racialization that assuages white colonial attempts to gentrify the city, that is, naturalizing the process by likening it to the life-sustaining possibility of water and portraying that resource as uninhibited and neutrally available to whoever might “choose” it. This rhetoric of choice belies material manifestations of water regulation and privatization in the city, where residents are in the choiceless predicament of being unable to pay the water bills while the city attends to the companies that, through lawyers, negotiate lower payment rates and loan forgiveness.

Adam and Eve thus critique the category of the human as apathetically alive vampires that siphon the residents’ remaining resources, including access to life through water. However, the vampires become the “new” Adam and Eve as their capitulation to a posthuman subjectivity reinscribes the ideals of the white, neoliberal, heteroreproductive, property-owning, and resource-distributing human. I explore this heteroreproductive component in the *Lemonade* analysis, but it is useful here to index how the rhetoric of blooming corresponds to the potentially heteroreproductive Adam and Eve who now inhabit the city. This selective historicization of urban areas

seems to initially hold forth an atemporal logical promise to un-do the violence of neoliberal linear progress through time and location.

Yet this very promise of the atemporal exists in tension with the city's actual water shutoffs. Thus the film's romanticization of neutral, natural resources and implicit rhetoric of choice for accessing those resources belies the neoliberal violence of rights-bearing humanity through accounts of choice-bearing agency. As a result, those who wield control over water are given the status of patriarchal subjecthood as ideal humans deserving clean water (those who "left" and those who will return to make the city "bloom"), whereas those subject to the water shutoffs outside of the film's gaze are implicitly seen as less than human, while also not permitted the status of vampiric posthuman via a new Adam and Eve. Through *OLLA*'s rhetoric of naturalized neoliberalism, then, the racialized subject is made to bear the risk of water neutrality and valued precisely in their capacity to do so. The vampires' use of the atemporal implies that if a Detroit resident still lives there, then their complaints that access to water, or a life-source, has been severed can be portrayed as an unwillingness to do as the vampires can do: simply leave and participate in the more productive global market or access the abundant, nearby water. Water as a clear, odorless fluid and naturally occurring resource becomes a metaphor for what is not only atemporal but a dehistoricized logic of neoliberalism that would submerge the city's racial, historical violence as it plays out in the present tense of the Detroit water shutoffs.

The film attempts to eliminate the racialized lives of the city to justify the project of naturalized gentrification by harnessing abundant local water sources, but in that very process inadvertently points toward real-world protests around water shutoffs and the historical, material reality of the urban space. Thus the neoliberal account of atemporal history in Detroit through vampiric lifespans opens to a critique of neoliberal justifications for violent gentrification. That gentrification process hinges on a free market portrayal of water as a neutral life source, posthumanist apathetic relations to vitality, and a selective focus in framing the post-industrial urban landscape's historical materials. When Detroit residents protested water shutoffs in 2014, they insisted on visibility, but not for fantasy narratives emptying and articulating the city as "wild" through nearby resources. Through this visibility, they demanded that viewers recognize



their organization around ongoing violence enacted through exposure to seemingly invisible precarity (loss of a life-sustaining resource that runs underground and, while mentioned in the film, remains unseen). The implication of precarity that brings Detroit's past vulnerability into a present, ongoing vulnerability pushes against the film's vampiric narrative of the ideal neoliberal human who can transcend geography as a rights-bearing (post)human in the global market, apathetically apprehending vital resources such as water. The vampires' apathetic vitality becomes inextricably linked to vampiric capital while the vampires themselves do not even have to think about or fight for these basic components to life.

The film, in using apathetic dialogue around water as abundant and neutrally available, inadvertently highlights its real-world counterpart: the vocalized protests over precarity that demand access to that same resource, highlighting water's history and necessity. The water being shut off happens in the present moment, but addressing the shutoff means addressing a longer history that has been silenced in the process of re-vitalizing the city: Detroit's trauma is rooted in the past.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, neoliberal popular media, such as *OLLA*, portray residents as absent, anticipating the water withholding's genocidal implications for a racialized landscape, even as the resource itself is represented as neutral and "colourblind" to that history. The violent logic of utility bills—"earning" the right to "pay" for clean water and electricity—is naturalized as a matter of financial and livable choice.

In their selective framing of the city and its history, Adam and Eve demonstrate Denise Ferreira da Silva's concept of neoliberal "engulfment." Their characters portray an idealized posthuman subject de-materialized from and evacuated of its all-too material, racial relation to privatizing and regulating life-sustaining resources. Da Silva uses the term *engulfment* for the "watery" material and metaphorical modes of governance that create otherized subjects only to overwhelm their modes of resistance into a narrative of neoliberalism's promise. They consistently put the "other's" own world-making at bay in favour of neoliberal opportunity (2007, chap. 4). Their world view encompasses the very material deaths that result from this taking up of otherized identities, in addition to their lands and resources, including water. Engulfment requires an exteriorization of the subject's internal conflict onto an otherized body to make

possible the conception of an essential “self” that can achieve “transcendental poesis” (Da Silva 2007, chap 4). Engulfment is a theorization, then, of the subject/other rooted in recognizing the other *as other* precisely to defend the premises of neoliberal transcendence. This becomes apparent when Adam and Eve drive through Detroit and describe the city as a wilderness, selectively memorializing predominantly Black cultural movements—Motown—and replacing them with colourblind or predominantly white musical productions—Jack White and The White Hills. The historical presence of Motown is relegated to the past through a museum, then co-opted by indie rock to supplement neoliberalism’s promise of “arts” through gentrification.

Even this past, then, is made other in favour of neoliberal colourblind promises of alternative histories and futures, such as the reference to preferring the South’s Stax and its explicit multi-ethnic, colourblind tradition of funk, soul, and the blues. The film promises a musical era’s atemporal possibility through a contemporary record company, but simultaneously makes “other” and “past” a social, political, and racial movement local to Detroit. *OLLA* thus both engulfs Motown by the alternative narrative about Stax and memorializes it. Additionally, the vampires then bring into the present Jack White’s childhood home, which appears inhabited, unlike the passing scenery of empty post-industrialism. This exteriorizes Adam and Eve’s inner conflict over musical production—they are also musical artists—onto Motown as an “other” to produce a markedly “white” and colourblind transcendence of Detroit’s musical history, or the production and circulation of musical arts for profit. Water becomes the conduit for Adam and Eve, whose names reference the Biblical genesis of reproduction, to foreclose the “other’s” potentially non-heteroreproductive modes of world-making, such as Motown, and resistance, such as protests around water shutoffs, in favour of the neoliberal promise of a colourblind aesthetic that naturalizes a form of reproductive world-making in a free market’s neutralized access to water and music. The seeming promise of an atemporal narration of Jack White’s childhood into the present engulfs the actual, historical experience of Motown continuing in Detroit from past into the present. The inclusion of historical matter with water otherizes racialized bodies and their musical production while also co-opting them to construct neoliberal narratives of whiteness, property relations, and

categories of “humanness” in the arts and posthumanism, a racializing process further examined in the *Lemonade* analysis.

*OLLA* here writes off a foundational component of life, water, as inherently neutral through a rhetoric of personhood and human-making that creates populations excluded from the protections of human status. It is not simply that the engulfment of “others” is created through a disavowal of the simultaneous harnessing and foreclosure of life possibilities through water regulation; it is also articulated as a cultural process at the abstract level rooted in a rhetoric of “choices” made by those who are externally criminalized: “[Racism] ensures that certain people will live an ‘abstract existence’ where ‘living’ [is] something to be achieved and not experienced” (Cacho, 2012, p. 7). That is, while Adam and Eve experience life because it is an achievement they can take for granted (vampiric immortality), apathetically apprehending its necessary resources, they abstract Detroit’s actual racialized bodies that fight for access to life via water. The privileged human as posthuman here depends upon the potential “bloom” of vitality promised by neoliberal personhood and capitalist business obtaining, or owning, resources such as water. The construct of a rights-bearing, legally protected human is naturalized in an attempt to erase historical and cultural formations through actions such as the Detroit water shutoffs. *OLLA* “literally [establishes] watery grounds that [make] land and its resources extremely valuable to developers precisely because the land [is now] worthless to everyone except the poor of colour whose lives were not deemed worthy of rebuilding” (Cacho, 2012, pp. 13–14). In a cruel logic, then, the film holds forth the promise of moving beyond the foreclosures of humanness as they have been constructed by linear accounts of past, present, and future in relation to “natural” resources that make life livable, such as water. The film simultaneously grounds its posthumanist critique in the racialized bodies’ removal from the protected status of “posthuman” enough to wield rights over those same, life-giving resources.

Part of the cruel irony stems from the film’s merging of the cultural and natural, especially in musical performance and urban space histories. The irony here also opens to modes of cultural resistance that wield the relationship between cultural representation and natural necessity for resistance against making human and posthuman through violent

racialization. In their “tour” of Detroit, Adam and Eve re-visit the sites of musical production. In addition to this, though, and central to the plot of the film, Adam is a musician himself, collecting various famous guitars, producing records, and in the most “human” laden night scene, attending a White Hills concert. The humans in the scene are primarily young, white gentrifiers enjoying a show at a small music venue. The Michigan Theater, an abandoned homage to prior concert halls and movies, is featured as well. Evoking the auto industry’s formative role in creating and destroying the city, the theater stands where the first Ford model was produced. The theme of using cars to tour the city, indicting cars in creating and devastating the city, and bemoaning the central, continued presence of cars over against the arts undermines how the vampires themselves constitute idealized global neoliberal citizens who can enter or leave the city by car or plane. This fact corresponds to their subject positions as individual creative musical geniuses who are present as a bi-product of the globalization that caused car factories to outsource labour, divesting Detroit inhabitants of employment and hence the ability to pay their water bills.<sup>3</sup> The water narratives for blooming, then, are naturalized through ties to cultural blooming, which is opportunistically and racially selective regarding cultural memory.

### *Lemonade*: Water “Formations” and Anti-Racist Hyper Vitalities

In April 2016, three years after *OLLA* and the initial media attention directed towards the Detroit water shutoffs, Beyoncé released her sixth studio album, *Lemonade*. While the more famous image from Beyoncé’s album, which informs my use of the term “water formations,” occurs in the film’s final single, “Formation”—where she slowly sinks into the water on top of a police car in an area supposed to symbolize Katrina’s devastation in the Bayou—I turn here to the use of water, spoken word, and both liquidly and technologically mediated breathing and speaking to draw out *Lemonade*’s Black feminist critique of water and racial capital.

The film opens with a watery, indeterminate sound while the camera pans around Beyoncé leaning against a car so that her yellow fur coat and yellow braided hair are the primary visuals. Before the viewer can disentangle the technological and ecological posthuman elements involving

both desire and immersion, the scene cuts to the sound of birds and wind with images of abandoned houses and landscapes. This dramatic shift is followed by wordless, harmonizing female vocals, with a single electronic instrument joining in the background, followed by another dramatic cut to Beyoncé on her knees in front of a closed theater curtain, where she begins singing about her lover's betrayal. There is an additional cut to Beyoncé alone in a field as the opening song's refrain, "pray to catch you whispering/pray you catch me listening," begins. The explicit juxtaposition of technological cultural production and "nature" contrasts starkly with *OLLA*'s attempts to portray the post-industrial urban spaces as simply natural and Edenic, and this contrast becomes explicitly historicized even as atemporal logics are centered in Beyoncé's lyrics, music, and visuals.

This first song is interrupted by spoken word throughout the first section of the film, "Intuition." In this spoken word section, Beyoncé speaks to her unfaithful lover, layering anti-humanist sentiments on the passage of time, living, and subjectivity. As the scenes cut between cameos of famous women of colour in plantation-era clothing and make-up, Beyoncé describes the lover as like her "father, a magician" for being able to "exist in two places at once," and as she explains that this is part of a larger tradition of the "men in [her] blood," she also states how "the past and future emerge to meet us here." In the final scene of this spoken word portion, she is alone in a bathtub, and the line, initially romantic, turns to a sarcastic "What luck. What a fucking curse." The collapse of time and space implicates the historical violence against racialized populations. The "past" of racial slavery is depicted as continuing into the present: as the "curse" of how past and present emerge together in what Sharpe calls "the [precarity] of the ongoing disaster of the ruptures of chattel slavery" (2016, p. 5). I would add that such precarity has been perpetuated across and from the trans-Atlantic slave trade as it corresponds to the water shutoffs in racialized urban spaces.

The folding of time so that Beyoncé cannot proceed linearly as a subject from past to present to future through the water in her bathtub is also evident in the juxtaposition of scenes where she and other women are garbed in plantation attire or where she is alone in a field wearing a black hoodie that zips from the back. The revised narration of plantation-era slavery with Black women in formal dresses (rather than as

slaves) simultaneously re-capitulates the past as liberatory while bringing that past's violence into the present, reflected by the sarcastic "what luck" in tandem with "what a fucking curse" and amplified further by cameo facial expressions. Here Beyoncé narrates the ongoing wound of U.S. racism alongside and through the wound of a lover's and father's betrayal. This narration is what Sharpe articulates as the "wake [producing] Black death and trauma" by "meeting here" to simultaneously "insist on Black being into the wake" (2016, p. 11). That is, the cameos and Beyoncé's opening to the visual album's story insist on the literal and cultural Black life that continues in the larger historical project of racializing populations. The ability to exist in the wake through these scenes articulates both the violence of and resistance to normative aging and linear, historical temporal progression as part of neoliberal life management and violent racialization. In these opening scenes, Beyoncé harnesses the atemporal as accusation, exposing historical violence. She does so in blatant contrast to Jarmusch's Adam and Eve and their focus on submerging it. Further, however, she also creates a utopic opening, gesturing to possibilities that include "being" in contradiction to Adam and Eve's prelapsarian Eden with its heteroreproduction.

Beyoncé roots such possibilities in posthumanist vitalities that refuse apathetic, neutral relations to life management via water privatization and regulation, in turn implicating Detroit's water shutoffs. Thus, these opening scenes—with Beyoncé leaning against the car, which cuts to a tub and plantation-era life—take up "oceanic lifespans" to index "the presumed normativity of Black subjects who could exceed the normal lifespan of a (white) human" (Ibrahim, 2016, p. 314). While, as I have argued, *OLLA* engulfs this anti-racist posthumanist critique within its neoliberal portrayal of vampiric subjectivity, *Lemonade* uses water to create a historical analysis of water politics through oceanic lifespans: the somber music, facial expressions, and plantation-era set in these opening scenes, juxtaposed with urban landscapes and a closed theater curtain, speaks to the violence of the "making ageless" that undergirds normative human progression through time. While Jarmusch's vampires inhabit apathetic vitality to siphon the landscape's supposedly neutral and natural resources, such as water and memorialized cultural production, the murky grounds that make this apathy possible are re-materialized through Beyoncé's collection

of cameos, faces, and bodies of women of colour in plantation-era clothing while simultaneously representing contemporary cultural formations. These scenes call attention to what Ibrahim historicizes through her analysis of “the contemporary vampire narrative [as] an outcome of New World colonialism and enslavement” (2016, p. 316). Ibrahim’s delineation of oceanic lifespans brings to the surface anti-racist vampire narratives that offer alternatives to a colourblind posthumanism that would otherwise disavow neoliberal accounts of age and time. As Ibrahim argues, normative narratives of time and aging depend upon monstrosizing the alternatively aged or childlike Black subject. As I have argued here, colourblind posthumanist vampire narratives reconstruct these normative moorings. In turn, *Lemonade*, through its opening scenes of relations to the technological, ecological, historical, and propertied formations of time and “human,” attends to the “oceanic” element of such lifespans.

This introductory section’s oceanic posthumanist vitality is produced in part through open collaborative and historicized cultural media. Within the first song on *Lemonade*, the women dressed in atemporal attire are also famous women of colour activists, producers, athletes, and artists. The film has over twelve cameo appearances, ranging from model Winnie Harlow, tennis player Serena Williams, actresses Amanda Stenberg and Quvenzhané Wallis, ballerina Michaela DePrince, and family members and activists such as Beyoncé’s daughter Blue Ivy and mother Tina Knowles, and finally mothers who lost their sons to police brutality, including Sybrina Fulton, Gwen Carr, and Lesley McSpadden. These cameos are central to the album, reflecting the larger collaborative nature of *Lemonade*’s production through an homage to networked subjectivity and insurgent modes of kinship. Through repeated emphasis on collaboration, cultural production becomes the explicit, non-heteroreproductive co-constitution of artists. They are not defined by the conditions of historical violence, but emerge from them to elucidate continued violence and Black cultural theft into the present, simultaneously resisting by “being” in this cultural moment, which is, as Sharpe notes, in the “wake” of racial slavery—as in a funeral wake and the trans-Atlantic slave trade ships’ wake. This co-constitutive agency contrasts sharply with *OLLA*’s neoliberal project of a singular, bounded body working individually or in heteroreproductive concert, such as Adam and Eve alone while creating

music. Again, at the end of my analysis of these scenes, I examine this kinship through Beyoncé's musings on paternity. Here, though, the cameos in atemporal attire create a relation to vitality and time that, instead of memorializing like *OLLA*, makes undeniably present the violence of either disrupting or submerging such networked relations. The album offers less a story of heteroreproductive gentrification "blooming" in urban desolation than a repeated "[turning] away from the lead singer as the exclusive artist," centering multiple modes of insurgent life and cultural production.

Co-constitutive subjectivity happens through "more producer-driven and collaborative musical productions" (Weheliye, 2002, p. 30), than memorializing Motown's past and celebrating an individual musician. Beyoncé builds on Weheliye's analysis of R & B posthumanisms by also calling out the co-option of Black cultural production in white-dominated musical genres. These genres include rock and country, with rock co-opted in *OLLA* by predominantly white artists and vampires, as the predominantly Black artists of Motown are mourned and memorialized. As Beyoncé's scenes and attire shift from urban, to rural, to mythical, so too do the musical genres shift. Participants tell the story in bath tubs, buses, underwater bedrooms, rivers, post-industrial urban streets, country fields, and so on with each genre change, signalling how Black cultural musical production gets co-opted by other musical genres while that cultural theft is merged with land, bodies, and elements for life, such as, most notably, water. Beyoncé's critique builds on Weheliye's historicized posthumanism in R & B, examining musical production itself as elucidating the "curse" of historically violent formulations of "human" and "posthuman" in culture, while simultaneously attending more historically to Black cultural production. Such an attention calls out *OLLA*'s own posthuman as property-owning to be rights-bearing, with property-owning dependent upon the material, geographic, and cultural theft of Black bodies and cultural production.

Clarifying this theft includes indicting Adam and Eve for memorializing Motown in favour of colourblind Southern record labels or white male rock performers. Engulfing and colourblind, these submersions of musical history build into *OLLA*'s self-possessed posthuman and global subjectivities; *Lemonade*'s contrasting re-materialization of that musical history surfaces the racial violence and theft for creating such subjectivities



in the first place. In other words, *OLLA* and neoliberal posthumanism's cultural theft belies the material theft of racialized bodies that undergirds human and posthuman subjectivities "possessing" any body that can, in turn, privatize and regulate water. This possessive logic happens through a colourblind neutrality that naturalizes cultural relations to resources necessary for life itself. Thus, the networked subjectivity and production of *Lemonade* critiques whiteness as continuing to take subjectivities produced within Black arts traditions, such as country and rock coming out of soul, funk, and other genres that, in turn, came out of gospel and freedom songs (Young, 2012, p. 303). These attestations to anti-racist posthumanist options as well as historical violence are enacted through the wake work of water formations.

Water formations, then, work by historicizing cultural production to de-naturalize the property logic inherent in accessing water, surfacing colourblindness's non-neutral terms and the mythology of an individual, self-contained human or posthuman subjectivity. In other words, while in *OLLA* water is a neutral, invisible, natural resource readily accessed through a cultural production evacuated of violent, historical, racialized moorings, in *Lemonade* water is a formation made hyper-visible and hyper-necessary in its relation to vitality. The hyper-visible water itself, as well as its historicity and necessity for both living and cultural life in *Lemonade*, produces various hyper-vitalities refusing to apathetically apprehend water and, by proxy, vitality itself. These scenes act as both accusation and launching point for an insurgent mode of vitality that contrasts any rights-bearing human or posthuman logic dependent upon possessing water. The opening scene ends, for instance, by returning to the song's refrain, "Pray you catch me." It then shifts wordless, harmonized vocals as Beyoncé, with outstretched arms, falls off an urban building's side. The expected death cuts instead to her plunging into water. Her voice describes a series of religious modes of cleansing and starting over, invoking Yoruba religions alongside Christian ones, alternately merging with background electronic music to sound like speaking underwater. When Beyoncé falls into and is submersed in water, seeming to have drowned, she gazes underwater at what appears to be her dead self, but then proceeds variously to speed up or slow down as she comes back to life without surfacing. This coming back to life happens through paradoxically inhaling the water as

she describes her attempt to be feminized by dominant cultural standards. Yet, the spoken word concludes the impossibility of receiving love through such an engendering as she comes back to life, inverting the historical submersion and death of Black bodies via the trans-Atlantic slave trade and continued water violence, such as the shutoffs, as she also creates a vitality in contradiction to binary gender norms.

The scene juxtaposes human matter's slowed response within water with a technological "fast forward" effect, attesting to both oceanic lifespans' violence and its proliferative possibilities for living. Such possibilities deploy an insurgent relationship to atemporal passages of neoliberalism's otherwise linear, normatively aging time. When Beyoncé breathes bubbles out, for instance, they do not always float to the top, and when she breathes the bubbles back in, she de-naturalizes the body's bounded, linear relationship to life via water and a slowed or accelerated aging process. This scene attends to the history of creating and violating Black subjectivity through the trans-Atlantic slave trade, access to bathing pools, and water regulation in spaces such as Detroit, even as it creates an alternative vitality. Beyoncé's subject redeploys water's relationship to life sustenance without "mastering" it, regulating it, possessing it, distributing it through capitalistic means, and so on. Her work constitutes the site of a hieroglyphics of the flesh that contradicts *OLLA*'s transcendence of bodily necessity through apathetic vitality and water neutrality. According to Hortense Spillers (1987), the violated flesh of the captive, Black female slave body becomes the site integral to the property relations built into possessing a legible, discrete body of patrilineal kinship. Spillers marks in this site a hieroglyphics of the flesh which bears the narrative and grammar of the otherwise disavowed violence and suffering integral to the make-up of a present tense's narrative and grammar for White, heteropatriarchal history (pp. 75–76). It is thus the hieroglyphics' grammar that also promises deviations from the norms that commit racializing violences against the flesh.

These hieroglyphics open to proliferative possibilities through water's atemporal, but deeply historical articulation of oceanic lifespans in *Lemonade*. Beyoncé variously speeding up or slowing down visuals and spoken word creates an alternative grammar for articulating life, culture, and water politics in contrast to the normative passage through that same

time. Beyoncé's death as a birth opens to a watery site of hyper vitality that merges the technological and the ecological, casting a posthuman hieroglyphics of the flesh that responds to and resists privatization and regulation of life sources, like water. As Ibrahim has articulated, oceanic lifespans and reckoning with normative aging and time can be added to a hieroglyphics of the flesh, and it is here that I return to Beyoncé's opening scene, where, in a bathtub, she reflects on the patrilineal line carried within her blood. The spoken word on her father and lover continuing the "tradition of men in [her] blood," existing in two places at once through merged past and present, builds on Spillers' analysis of the Black female slave body's violation as integral to building and maintaining normative "human" status through property rights. Those rights are transferred in culturally sanctioned heteroreproduction. Spillers notes that the U.S. racial slavery's female body loses essentialized femininity and "'motherhood' as female blood-rite/right" so that "the captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (p. 75). That is, gender, heteroreproduction, and property rights become inextricably linked through the violation of Black female bodies lacking legal recourse to claiming their children. As this "gendered female unravels" under property logics, the "customary lexis of sexuality, including 'reproduction,' 'motherhood,' 'pleasure,' and 'desire' are [*sic*] thrown into unrelieved crisis" (p. 76). Spillers highlights how the female body's dispossession is linked to "father-lacking." Father-lacking becomes "property lacking" in racial slavery, denying patrilineal kinship to evade property transference, marking this non-heteronormative law as "monstrous" and nonhuman. As *Lemonade* takes this up with Spillers, the film examines the "prevailing social fiction of the Father's name, the Father's law" as one that grants humanness based on property logics. Rather than create a restorative grammar of gender and property, though, which like *OLLA* would engulf racialized subjectivity in its own violence, Spillers and *Lemonade* turn to alternative grammars through "insurgent ground" (p. 80), a ground I read here as necessarily, productively watery.

*Lemonade* puts a hieroglyphics of the flesh into a post-racial slavery context so that rhetorics of capitalist and biological life management through life sources, such as water, inadvertently create the insurgent

grounds for their own violence. Beyoncé’s musings on male betrayal, for instance, instead of describing ungendering to demonize Black men, turn toward restoring the relationship to her lover and father without recuperating patrilineal relations. They exist in her own blood and without her engendering normative femininity. These deviations from patrilineal relations elucidate the historical violence dating back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade perpetuated in that violence’s wake: neoliberal rhetorics of choice for buying water and colourblind neutrality for accessing water as property logics dependent upon violent racialization. Water centers the “oceanic” in lifespans within (the bathtub and her spoken word in water), alongside (processions along water and taking a baseball bat to fire hydrants) referencing (Yoruba religious references to renewal) water. Since normative grammar proceeds as legible through lineated time and space, Beyoncé’s technological and ecological speeding up and slowing down of linguistic cultural production re-centers that grammar’s dependence on the body for its temporal meaning. Her critique also builds on Ibrahim’s addition to Spillers’ analytic by framing normative aging and ableness as dependent upon monstrosizing Black bodies and non-heteronormative or heteroreproductive kinship relations. Ibrahim opens to a potential, posthuman insurgent ground that refuses normative temporal grammars, particularly through aging, as Ibrahim sees it, in science fiction narratives about vampires. Here, *Lemonade* centres the literal and cultural “oceanic” in Ibrahim’s oceanic lifespans to create a posthuman subjectivity historicizing and politicizing the property logics inherent in water access.

At the end of the spoken word section underwater, Beyoncé emerges out of a courthouse and begins to dance, sing, and smile to the song “Hold Up,” releasing water from the courthouse and urban landscape in her wake. As she navigates urban, post-industrial streets, she takes a baseball bat to different cars, panopticon-like surveillance cameras, and notably a fire hydrant that subsequently releases its water. In these scenes, she nods to, laughs with, and interacts with others on the set, who join in her celebratory release of anger. This includes children dancing in the water that she releases from the urban landscape via the fire hydrant. This scene contrasts with Adam and Eve’s tour through Detroit, which portrays colourful street art as monotone from the car’s spectator position, containing the soft music and dialogue. Adam and Eve act as apathetic voyeurs to the

otherwise inherent vitality of Detroit and its inhabitants. *Lemonade*, on the other hand, contains the angry lyrics of “Hold Up,” itself juxtaposed with Beyoncé’s bright yellow dress, arrays of urban colour, and sun-glinting water in an urban space. The contrast between her lyrics and visuals offers a hyper vital, affective entry point for historicizing the anger toward policing (courthouse, surveillance cameras, and cars) and the neoliberal regulation of life within (privatized and withheld water) urban spaces. Water for Beyoncé is not a neutral, invisible, readily available resource, here, but rather implicated and made hyper visible through the fire hydrant and courthouse. Beyoncé’s hyper vitality through ecological water and cultural urban life comes from the watery death as a birth, enacting what Sharpe (2016) terms “wake work”: “to encounter myriad silences and ruptures in time, space, history, ethics, research, and method” for those “who teach, write, and think about slavery and its afterlives” (p. 12). Wake work happens in *Lemonade* partially by releasing water as a counter-violence to its privatization and regulation, making hyper vital and hyper visible water’s relation to life’s proliferative possibilities.

## Conclusion

*Lemonade* acts as a powerful relief to the heteroreproductive normativity of Adam and Eve in its scenes of birth out of water, as well as to the neoliberal, rights-bearing human rhetoric that sets life and death up as a binary that brackets normative, linear progression. Beyoncé takes “back” water both figuratively and literally without recourse to humanist property rhetorics or dominant posthumanist capitulations of apathetic, colourblind, neutral relationships to life and its necessary resources. This historical and political indictment applies also to a site of race and water: Detroit and its water shutoffs. Although in *Lemonade* the urban space is unspecified, another contrast to *OLLA*’s distinct naming of Detroit, the history itself is re-materialized, made actual to its audience, while *OLLA* places Detroit within a vague, global narrative of capital possessing nebulous historical formations and promising gentrifiable futures. Beyoncé’s more ambiguous urban spaces, such as the city portrayed in “Hold Up,” expand an analysis of the Detroit water shutoffs that would, otherwise, attempt to isolate the violence as exception to the general rule. Detroit is no exception. It is instead, as *Lemonade* insists, water’s history in various urban

and rural settings expanding to a national and globalized history of racial slavery and colonialism. Thus, while *OLLA* romanticizes post-industrial and urban landscapes as a colourblind opportunity for Edenic gentrification and posthumanist individuals, it de-historicizes and de-materializes the violation and theft of racialized bodies, a violence that produces the neoliberal vampiric vitality that Jim Jarmusch apparently overlooks.

Whereas *OLLA* engulfs a critique of the rights-bearing human in its re-constitution of the category through water neutrality and apathetic vitality, *Lemonade* historicizes the violent, racialized exclusions inherent to the category of “rights-bearing human” through water formations and hyper vitalities. Both *OLLA* and *Lemonade* thus engage with atemporal responses to neoliberal, racialized violence in variously urbanized spaces, harkening to the all-too material reality and its history in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This history connects to the reality of water being systematically shut off to increasing numbers of urban, oftentimes racialized residents of Detroit. However, the two films produce vastly different accounts of posthumanist possibility through their opposite relations—water neutrality as against water formations—to water’s historical role in producing the conditions for those possibilities. What water offers in such narratives, as highlighted in *Lemonade* and its relationship to Black Lives Matter and protests around the Detroit water shutoffs, is an undeniably material conduit for re-materializing and historicizing these simultaneous emergenc(i)es.

## NOTES

- 1 In July 2014, water was reported to be “gushing” from an abandoned building in Detroit, signaling poor use of water to many residents.
- 2 “Detroit has lost more than a million residents since 1950, but the city limits and water infrastructure haven’t similarly shrunk. That’s part of why Detroiters pay some of the highest water rates in the country—despite a poverty rate more than double the national average” (Abbey-Lambertz, 2014). In other words, Detroit residents literally pay for the white flight of urban centres, while their corresponding poverty is used to blame them for not being able to pay their bills.
- 3 This stop at the theater also frames the abandonment of the city and its arts in a past tense, ripe for rock and hip, liberal aesthetics to gentrify it; yet, in Detroit, as residents know, there are still historic theaters that produce and attract many concerts, including Motown-inspired popular music, such as at The Fox Theater and The Fillmore. Even in

other scenes of the film, the two lovers slow dance together to Denise LaSalle, known as the “Queen of the Blues” and a musician out of Tennessee, again belying the blues history local to where they dance. Further, the scene spotlights reaping the benefits of Black arts cultures without avowing any historical roots in the violent dependency on racial capital-slavery and its afterlives.

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