

# TABOO

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## Introduction to *Lemonade* Black Womanhood, Identity, & Sexuality

Venus Evans-Winters & Jennifer Esposito

Due to the growth of social media, images and sounds of Black women and girls are more widely circulated, interpreted, and critiqued by cultural critics, laypersons, and academicians alike. With the call to give more attention to the need for critical media literacy (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000; Kellner & Share, 2006), there is an urgent need to include discussions of Black women's everyday lived realities and messages into these conversations. Collectively, critical race and feminist scholars are reimagining and theorizing the role of popular culture in co-constructing girls' and women's lives within the popular imagination.

When we invited contributions that interrogated Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade*, to this special issue of *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, we knew we would receive an interdisciplinary collection of cultural critique. We were not prepared for just how many scholars would be eager to discuss the visual album, the cultural icon known as Beyoncé, and popular culture in general. To be clear, the special issue is not about a cultural icon, but how music, sounds, images, and words help to construct identities, relationships, perceptions, and the world around us. We put out a call for manuscripts on theoretical, conceptual, research, and/or practical issues specifically related to the social construction of Black womanhood, identity, and sexuality in media. Specifically, we were interested in manuscripts where scholars engaged with the *Lemonade* text as well as discussions centered on Beyoncé, race, and feminism.

The following six articles grapple with a collection of interesting and compelling topics regarding the *Lemonade* album.

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Cienna Davis, in “From Colorism to Conjurations: Tracing the Dust in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*” takes up the issue of colorism in relation to *Lemonade* and the 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*. Davis argues that both texts are important Black feminist projects. Davis recognizes many connections between the visual album and the film including “shared setting, narrative content, hair, and styling along with the purposeful demonstrations of the continuation of African spiritual tradition and cultural forces in the diaspora and its intense focus on the particularity of the Black female experience.” She compares Beyoncé to one of the film’s most contentious characters, Yellow Mary Peazant, and examines the ways skin color shapes Black female performances. Davis ends by (re)affirming Beyoncé’s work as both political and critical as well as important in Afrodiasporic genealogies of Black womanhood.

Jeanine Staples, in “How #BlackGirlMagic Cultivates Supreme Love to Heal and Save Souls that Can Heal and Save the World: An Introduction to Endarkened, Feminist Epistemological, and Ontological Evolutions of Self Through a Critique of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*,” discusses *Lemonade* as “a delectable new literacies artifact—one that can be understood as portraiture for not only the lived experiences of many Black girls and women, but also as portraiture for the effects of complex patriarchal ideologies that pervade the lives of those girls and women.” While Staples recognizes the importance of many of the cultural references Beyoncé alludes to or includes in, she does not let Beyoncé off the hook for centering male figures as “elusive, powerful ghosts and ubiquitous, necessary gods, things to be feared and worshiped.” Staples argues that Beyoncé, in her exploration of partner based aggressions and microaggressions centers Black girls’ and women’s lives on men though, all the while, Staples recognizes that the creation of the Supreme Love(r) that Beyoncé embodies is an exemplar of #Blackgirlmagic.

Robin J Phelps-Ward, Courtney Allen, and Jimmy L. Howard, in “A Rhetorical Analysis of Beyoncé’s ‘Freedom’: An Examination of Black College Women’s Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions,” focuses on a piece of Beyoncé’s work, *Freedom*. This song was performed at the 2016 BET Music Awards and Phelps-Ward relates it to a metaphorical and symbolic representation of the experiences of Black women attending Predominately White institutions of higher education. Specifically, the author argues that “Beyoncé’s *Freedom* performance helps frame Black women’s call for freedom, after the promise of education has not been as liberatory as was promised.”

Crystal LaVoullé and Tisha Lewis Ellison, in “*Bad Bitch Barbie* Craze and Beyoncé: African American Women Bodies as a Commodity in Hip-Hop Culture, Images, and Media.” utilize the conceptual framework of *Bad Bitch Barbie* to interrogate the complexities of Black women’s bodies as sites of empowerment while simultaneously being used as commodities. After an exploration of the historical representations of Black women’s bodies, the authors examine how *Lemonade* embraces the concept of the *Bad Bitch Barbie*—a woman who accepts her objectification and aims to participate in it for economic gain.

Erica B Edwards, Jennifer Esposito, and Venus Evans-Winters, in “Does Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* Really Teach Us How to Turn Lemons into Lemonade? Exploring the Limits and Possibilities Through Black Feminism,” explores the ways *Lemonade* “makes a compelling intellectual statement” despite some significant shortcomings investigated by the authors. Black feminism and postmodern theory frame the argument as the authors ponder in what ways Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* can be called, as it has been in the media, a feminist performance. The authors also argue that given Beyoncé’s popularity, she must be continually critiqued through media literacy given that so much of Black girlhood has been shaped by popular culture representations.

Zeffie Gaines, in “A Black Girl’s Song: Misogynoir, Love, and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*,” explores the ways the trope of infidelity (as represented in *Lemonade*) is connected to Black feminist art, literature, and activism and symbolizes an ontological crisis of Black womanhood. Gaines continually shows us how Beyoncé’s text embraces both the personal and the political and tackles the complex issues of race and love. In the end, Gaines argues, *Lemonade* is a compelling Black feminist text which celebrates love and self-love of Black women.

As cultural theorists, the writers in this volume take seriously the ways in which Black women have been represented in *Lemonade* as well as how a Black woman (Beyoncé) chose to represent herself and other Black women. So many representations of Black women are hegemonic ones, representations that are shaped by a history of racism, colonialism, and sexism. We know that, as Stuart Hall (1981) argued,

. . . popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged . . . it is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises and where it is secured. (p. 239)

Popular culture matters and it is an institution where power can be up for grabs.

We invite readers to delve into this issue with the understanding that these articles represent an interdisciplinary group of scholars problematizing a popular culture icon who has become a symbol of womanhood, and arguably, feminism as a “performance.” The conversations presented are messy but they are crucial to our public grappling with racism and sexism as well as traditional feminism. The reading of this special issue should be considered an integrated but alternative approach to critical pedagogy; it is a pedagogy situated within critical race, gender, and sexuality discourse embedded in popular culture. It is up to readers of these academic texts and consumers of popular culture (as texts) to decide how cultural icons, music, and sound empower us to seek alternative representations of love, struggle, and power.

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## From Colorism to Conjuring Tracing the Dust in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

Cienna Davis

### Abstract

Colorism creates relentless tension and pressure in the lives of Black women. Pop-star Beyoncé Gisele Knowles-Carter is an interesting case in the discussion of colorism because her career has expressed a rich intimacy to Southern Black culture and female empowerment while also playing into tropes of the mulatta “fancy girl,” whose relative proximity to whiteness adheres social value within mainstream culture. Finding aesthetic and thematic parallels between Beyoncé’s recent project *Lemonade* (2016) and Julie Dash’s cult-classic film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) I draw a critical connection between Yellow Mary Peazant and Beyoncé, the prodigal child and the licentious “post-racial,” pop-star to argue that while *Lemonade* may not present the same critique of exclusionary Black womanhood present within *Daughters of the Dust*, reactions to the Beyoncé’s visual album and the “Formation” music video inadvertently demonstrate the longevity of harmful colorist prejudices and the disparaging of Black female sexual and creative agency within the Black community. This article engages conflicting reactions between the “Formation” music video and *Lemonade* visual album, as well as some of Beyoncé’s earlier works, to consider the continued role of colorism, as it intersects with racism and sexism, to construct exclusionary notions of Blackness that attempt to restrict the expressivity of those considered “outside” of Blackness. Through a barrage of specifically Black feminist conjurings, *Lemonade* draws upon the legacy of *Daughters of the Dust* to break through the colorist barriers placed upon the Black female body while practicing *diasporic melancholia* to link the trauma of the past and the struggles of the present to articulate grievances and express desires for improved Black future.

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### Introduction

Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter represents a rather controversial figure of gender, racial, and even skin color politics in popular culture. As one of the most successful recording artists of the 21st century with an extensive musical and visual catalogue, her work has repeatedly engaged with themes of female empowerment, financial independence, and sisterhood. Additionally, Beyoncé's music and performances reflect her southern upbringing and a loving relationship with Black America. Many critics, however, cite the 'overly' sexual nature of her performances, the championing of her marriage and motherhood, the lack of direct engagement with racial politics, as well as her expressed Creole heritage, complementary light-skin privilege, and mainstream appeal to call Beyoncé's Black feminist credentials into question. But in February 2016, the release of the single "Formation" and its subsequent performance on Super Bowl Sunday sparked national outrage for its unambiguously pro-Black, pro-woman message.

With a music video that evoked the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina to express a desire for Black women to "get in formation" against the unjust and disproportionate extrajudicial killings of unarmed Black-Americans in conjunction with a militant homage to the Black Panthers at the highest-viewed television event of 2016, it would seem that such a bold pro-Black message during Black History Month would at least evoke enthusiasm equal to that of Kendrick Lamar's controversial Grammy performance of songs from his widely-acclaimed album *To Pimp a Butterfly*. This, however, was not the case. Beyoncé's performance was praised by many within the Black community, but unlike with Kendrick's performance where he emerged on stage in shackles as part of a chain gang before joining a circle of dancers with indistinct African tribal markings and clothing, think-pieces emerged en masse calling into question every visual and lyrical component of "Formation." The most striking criticisms, however, were those decrying Beyoncé as a Black capitalist conveniently appropriating Black suffering for commercial gain. It is within this often forgotten context that Beyoncé's sixth studio album, a masterwork of Black feminism, *Lemonade* was released. By drawing comparison to one of the visual album's major filmic influences, namely Julie Dash's film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), this paper engages conflicting reactions between the "Formation" music video and *Lemonade* visual album, as well as some of Beyoncé's earlier works, to consider the continued role of colorism, as it intersects with racism and sexism, to construct exclusionary notions of Blackness that attempt to restrict the expressivity of those considered "outside" of Blackness.

I begin my article by briefly introducing Black feminism as the theoretical standpoint that guides my research. Next, I expound upon the significance of *Lemonade* and *Daughters of the Dust* as important Black feminist projects. Finding parallels between Beyoncé and *Daughters*' most contentious character, Yellow Mary Peazant, I then present the largely unexamined role of skin color in interpretations of Black

female performances. At this point, I refer to JeffriAnne Wilder's recent book to explain colorism, its continued significance, and its importance within *Daughters* before considering the role of skin color in Beyoncé's successful career and criticisms of "Formation." Finally, drawing upon the notion of *diasporic melancholia* which scholar Sarah Clark Kaplan employs to negotiate the scapegoating of skin color against the traumas of slavery, I conclude my paper by affirming Beyoncé's Blackness and her capacity for creating critical and political dialogue in her work, past and present, to acknowledge the significance of both *Lemonade* and "Formation" in Afrodiasporic genealogies of Black womanhood.

### Black Feminist Theory

Black feminism emerged out of the failures of the women's movement, the Black liberation movement, and anti-capitalist movements to acknowledge and respect the differences in experience of those with the least political power within the movements, particularly that of Black women living simultaneously under gender, racial, sexual, and class oppression. Black feminism demands an intersectional analytical approach to political activism and outreach that acknowledges the interlocking ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality impact the life outcomes of Black women (The Combahee River Collective, 2003). Unlike Black liberation movements which often focused on uplifting the heterosexual Black man to the position of the patriarch and women's movements which centered the experiences of racially and class-privileged white women, Black feminism is uniquely invested in acknowledging social differences and challenging the determinants to the freedom and justice for people of all backgrounds. Because Black women cannot necessarily rely upon the power of whiteness, patriarchy, or generational wealth to elevate their humanity, the revolutionary force behind Black feminism is the necessary impulse to end all forms of oppression.

*Daughters* and *Lemonade* represent Black feminist approaches to film-making that lovingly elevate the particularity of the Black female experiences in the United States on both systematic and interpersonal levels crossing sexual, class, and even skin color lines. Black feminism offers a useful theoretical framework to approach these two projects because it not only affirms the personal narratives and experiences of Black women as valuable and relevant starting points for assessing inequality in the United States, but also because its emphasis on intersectionality enables consideration of the impact of colorism on the lives of women within Black communities in the United States.

Colorism is often understood to be a very contentious topic for Black Americans, with many downplaying its social and political impact for the sake of demonstrating communal harmony. Others fear that discussions of color prejudice magnifies Black America's dirty laundry for the scrutiny of the already unsympathetic masses (Wilder, 2015, p. 25). Though well-intentioned, these efforts leave the very real

impacts of colorism unaddressed, silence the experiences of Black women under intra-communal color hierarchies, and limit the possibility for educational intervention on this topic. Black feminist theory is an analytic that doesn't accept the re-distribution of the "master's tools" (Lorde, 1984), or colonial mechanisms of domination, to certain members of oppressed groups that would, for example, enable lighter-skinned Black Americans greater access to the socioeconomic privileges of whiteness at the expense of darker-skinned Black Americans. Black feminist theory provides space broad enough for thorough consideration and education on differences within the Black community that delimit the potentiality of all Black subjects. In utilizing this theoretical framework, my research gives attention to multiple levels of oppression relating to sexuality, class, and gender while focusing most closely upon the topic of colorism in relation to Beyoncé's performances of racial and gender politics.

### *Lemonade and Daughters of the Dust*

On April 23rd 2016, Beyoncé released her sixth solo album and second visual album *Lemonade* on her streaming platform *Tidal*. The hour-long visual album, which was produced in almost total secrecy, debuted the same day on HBO with minimal advertising or explanation of the content. *Lemonade* quickly took the world by storm and was met with enthusiastic, shallow, confused, and enraged reviews.

On the surface, most mainstream media outlets praised the project as an unmatched musical and cinematic feat comparable only to the surprise release of her last visual album *Beyoncé* (2013), but anxiously over-reported speculations of infidelity surrounding Beyoncé's husband Sean Carter, otherwise known as hip hop mogul Jay Z. White media tried to figure out who "Becky with the good hair" was and what "good hair" even meant, while some white viewers felt discomfort at seeing their "post-racial" pop queen producing an album in which they weren't completely able to identify (Cashmere, 2010). Conservatives raged that Knowles's militaristic performances were "race baiting," jumping to erroneously adopt "Becky" as a racial slur. Even police departments across the United States responded with threats to boycott security work at her concerts.

Meanwhile, Black Twitter exploded in praise of Beyoncé's transition from hip hop diva to "woke queen." Article after article, excavated the gems of Black gold buried within Beyoncé's seminal work from allusions to Voodoo, Santería, Candomblé, and Egyptian royalty; to the fusion of Victorian and Antebellum, Southern style with bold Ankara prints and sacred Yoruba body painting; to the catalogue of Black music that Knowles flawlessly evoked including country, caribbean, rock, and gospel. Amongst the praise, you would've forgotten that just two months earlier, Black bloggers were split over opinions of the prior-released music video for her single "Formation" where line by line and scene by scene dissections positioned Beyoncé as a Black capitalist, appropriating the suffering of Black working class

victims of Hurricane Katrina and Black queer bodies and voices with a convenient and opportunistic pro-Black message (Lewis, 2016). Heavy criticism also emerged from Black men who appeared disturbed by the de-centering of Black heterosexual maleness in such a popular sociopolitical project of Blackness. There was a palpable sense that the Black community was having difficulty accepting or respecting that this wealthy, famous, normatively beautiful and desirable, light-skinned, Black woman of Creole descent who wears long blonde weaves could truly comprehend the trauma and suffering of the Black diaspora. While many critiques provided valid insight into the evident contradictions and troubling appropriations of visual imagery within the single in comparison to her previous works, underneath the surface of some of these well-meaning critiques were the lingering traces of a longstanding tradition within the United States to delimit not only Black women's potential for self-determination, agency, and transformation, but also their capacity to be multidimensional, feeling human beings living through histories of racist and sexist oppression. It is within this intra-communal conflict that I find an intriguing and complex connection between Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and Julie Dash's groundbreaking film *Daughters of the Dust*.

Unlike "Formation," *Lemonade* was quickly praised as a modern representation of Black feminism within popular culture. Beyond the raw and potentially revelatory narrative of heartbreak, anger, denial, reconciliation, forgiveness, and transformation, one of *Lemonade*'s most remarkable features is its blatant allusions and even obvious replication of oeuvres within Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Despite its cult film status, *Daughters of the Dust* revised cinematic iconography of Black women of the diaspora as the first film by an African American woman with a theatrical release (Machiorlatti, 2005, p. 99). Twenty-five years later, the seeds of Dash's subversive cinematic feat blossomed into a lemon tree, of which Knowles and her team of collaborators have turned into a refreshing glass of *Lemonade*. The shared setting, narrative content, hair, and styling along with the purposeful demonstrations of the continuation of African spiritual tradition and cultural forces in the diaspora and its intense focus on the particularity of the Black female experience creates an unbreakable connection between the two projects that even prompted the digital restoration and anticipated theatrical re-release of *Daughters* in 2017 (Murphy, 2016). Building upon Dash's legacy, Knowles fearlessly carries *Daughters'* Black feminist message to a new generation of Black women desperately in need of redefinition while simultaneously transporting her massive global audience into the hugely uncharted territories of multifarious and multi-dimensional Black womanhood.

*Daughters of the Dust* follows the women of the Peasant family living on Ibo Landing at the Sea Islands of the Georgia-South Carolina Coast. The film's narrative takes place on the eve of the family's departure from the secluded southern islands to the northern states for greater opportunities in the thriving social, cultural, and economic life that was marketed in the emergent 20th century United States. During the day, lyrical vignettes portray various scenes of preparation for the family's final

supper together. The play of the youngest Peasant children along the waves of the ever-present sea that frames their lives, intimate conversations and gossip between women, husband and wife, matriarch and ancestral spirits, unborn child and living family are gracefully strung between composed portraits documenting the family's life before their grand migration to the mainland. While the Peasants enjoy their final hours together on Ibo Landing, the family's matriarch, Nana Peasant, works on a plan to ensure her departing family's retention of their spiritual and cultural connection to their African ancestors. Using magic, conjuring, and charms, Nana Peasant ensures the safe arrival of her unborn great grandchild into the world and creates an eternal link between her spirit and her descendants.

The film memorably portrays the significance of Black women as the conveyors, or rather griots, of ancestral wisdom and familial unity, but relations between the women of the Peasant family are far from harmonious. Conflict emerges at several points throughout the film, but the source of persisting controversy is the return of Yellow Mary Peasant from the mainland to Ibo Landing. On one hand, Yellow Mary “embodies an unashamed black female sexuality that encompasses both exploitation and agency” that the Peasant women struggle to accept despite pleas from the family matriarch (Kaplan, 2007, p. 520). On the other hand, Yellow Mary is marginalized within her family because of her light complexion and the perceived misuse of its endowed privileges. In this article I will draw upon these critical points to make a connection between Yellow Mary, the prodigal child, and Beyoncé, the licentious, “post-racial,” pop-star. I argue that while *Lemonade* may not present the same critique of exclusionary Black womanhood present within *Daughters of the Dust*, disparate reactions to the Beyoncé's visual album and the “Formation” music video inadvertently demonstrate the longevity of harmful colorist prejudices that disparage the agency and self-determination of women within the Black community. To absolve this tendency to disregard the relevancy of racial and gender oppression within the lives of lighter-skinned Black women, I employ diasporic melancholia to forge a new relationship between traumas of the past and the struggles of the present to articulate grievances and express desires for improved Black futures. Through a barrage of black feminist conjurings, *Lemonade* draws upon the legacy of *Daughters of the Dust* to break through barriers presently placed upon multi-hued Black female bodies.

### Color Names and Color Notions

In the book *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century*, sociologist JeffriAnne Wilder (2015) defines colorism as “the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals *belonging to the same racial or ethnic minority group* (e.g., African Americans) based upon difference in physical features—most notably skin complexion (color), but also facial features and hair texture” (p. 6). The roots of colorism in the African-American community can be traced directly to slavery

when designations were made between darker-skinned slaves (“field negroes”) who performed the harshest physical labor in the fields and lighter-skinned slaves (“house negroes”) who performed domestic labor within the master’s house. Although the “one-drop rule” assured that mixed-race children of enslaved Black women and white male sexual predators would be racially classified as Black, mixed-race slaves were afforded opportunities not available to those of a darker complexion, including access to their freedom, education, and property. In some southern states like Louisiana, those racially mixed individuals with African, European, and Native American ancestry were even able to establish their own communities, which came to constitute a new mixed-race “Creole” class that was viewed as superior to less racially ambiguous Blacks. The continued significance of these demarcations is apparent in the color names used by Black Americans today and the notions that we associate with them.

In 1946, sociologist Charles Parrish published a study titled *Color Names and Color Notions* which explored the names used by African-Americans to describe varying skin shades. Sixty years later, when executing a similar task with her Black female research subjects, Wilder found that between the two studies nine color names for light, medium, and dark brown skin tones remained in common use today including “high yellow,” “bright,” “light,” and “yellow.” So while colorism is a term that has yet to be fully incorporated into everyday Black American language and culture, the color names and notions that have been maintained by members of the Black community since slavery constitute a common sense knowledge of color that continues a divisive and psychologically damaging intra-communal regime of color hierarchy (Wilder 2015, pp. 6-7, 69-70). Wilder’s research explores the topic deeper to reveal how gendered colorism creates an especially unrelenting strain in the lives of Black women who find themselves being cruelly sorted within hierarchies of both beauty and Blackness that work to undermine their own self-conception and sense of worth.

In her research, Wilder asked Black women to share their associations with different terms relating to skin color and found, unsurprisingly, that “blue-black,” “purple,” “burnt” and other terms associated with darker skin tones were largely attached to negative connotations like “suspicious,” “loud,” “ghetto,” “less intelligent,” and “unattractive” (p. 75). In comparison, common terms for lighter skin tones like “redbone” and “high yellow” connoted attractiveness, amiability, and trustworthiness (p. 70). But beyond confirming the continuation of positive and negative attributes with lightness and darkness respectively, Wilder’s discussions demonstrated that darker-skin tones were also linked positively with African ancestry and a post-Black Power sense of Black pride, while lighter-skinned women in the discussions emphasized a need to overcompensate in order to prove their Blackness (pp. 73, 75). In spite of their privileges, lighter-skinned participants shared feelings of constraint, subjection to stereotyping, questions of their identity, and perceptions that they never experienced racial discrimination (p. 73). It became

apparent within the study that only medium-toned Black (or “brown”) women were protected within discourses of colorism from the overdetermined expectations and prejudices uniquely reserved for darker and lighter-skinned Black women (p. 81). To speak to how colorism works against lighter-skinned Black women I observe the example of Yellow Mary Peasant in *Daughters of the Dust*.

The historical application of color names in delineating between Black Americans is made apparent through the character Yellow Mary in *Daughters of the Dust*, where “yellow” serves as the verbal pronouncement of the visual difference we see between Mary and her darker-skinned relatives on Ibo Landing. From the moment she appears in the film, Dash decisively portrays Yellow Mary’s complexion as a point of contention amongst the other Peasant women. Almost immediately, Yellow Mary is taunted on the basis of her complexion by her cousin Viola Peasant who, after glancing at “Yellow’s” even lighter-skinned companion Trula, spitefully japes, “Of course, compared to some people, Yellow Mary isn’t all that light-skinned.” Viola’s remark not only comments upon the precarious presence of Trula, but highlights how color names can be used within Black families as artillery to target phenotypic difference. Acknowledging the women’s varying skin tones, Viola’s comment attempts to spitefully level Yellow’s otherwise privileged social positioning by placing Trula, an even lighter woman, at an unreachable distance from the Peasant family (Cucinella & Curry, 2001, p. 207). In response to this slight, Yellow Mary and Trula haughtily laugh when Viola tries to engage them in further conversation. We see as Viola makes fun of the women’s lighter complexions to break through their anticipated superiority complex, the women respond by embracing the stereotype of conceit and arrogance associated with Black women of a lighter complexion (Wilder, 2015, p. 65).

Finally setting foot on the island, Yellow Mary is met with scornful glances and mocking tones from the Peasant women who are fearful, fascinated, and disgusted by her return (Streeter, 2004, p. 777). Color and sexuality are portrayed as interlocking points of ostracism and ridicule among the women of the family. As such, at the sight of Yellow, one of the Peasant women reminds the family that “Yellow Mary went off and got ruind.” Before the women are even aware of the homosexual relationship between Yellow and Trula or certain of the women’s professions as prostitutes, Yellow is immediately placed into the category of a “ruined woman” because of the sexual transgression previously enacted upon her by her white employer in Cuba (Streeter, 2004, p. 772). Additionally, the skin tone of the two women also lend further evidence to a history of sexual violence enacted upon their mothers by white men. The sexual transgressions of others are cruelly twisted to define the character of the women themselves and the view that they have been “contaminated” by their close proximity to whiteness (Streeter, 2004, p. 772, 780).

At a later point in the film when Yellow Mary’s back is turned, Viola snidely remarks “All that yellow wasted.” It remains unclear in the statement if Viola is referring to Yellow’s failure to adhere to norms of heterosexuality, her ruination by sexual assault, or her career as a prostitute. Within the remark, however, it remains

clear that there is something valuable to be gained by virtue of one's "yellowness." As such, all of these perceived transgressions are further exacerbated by the expectations placed upon her skin. After being exiled within her home, expectations of racial uplift placed upon her lightness provides an additional level of color prejudice that attempt to stifle the agency of Yellow Mary's individual development and personal ambitions (Cucinella & Curry, 2001).

With bright glowing skin and thick long hair Yellow Mary and Trula's appearance in *Daughters* acts as a counter to world of Ibo Landing. The wealth and fine clothing of the young women when compared even to Viola, a missionary also living on the mainland, speaks to their greater access to socioeconomic success in the burgeoning United States. These phenotypic features that privilege lighter-skinned women, however, does not completely protect them from white racism or racialized sexual violence. It also makes them targets of disdain and prejudice within their race. Stigmas of contamination and sexual ruination as well as expectations of ease and unconstrained social advancement stifle Yellow's relationship with many of the darker-skinned women in her family. In response to the callousness, Yellow Mary responds to her tormentors with an air of triviality and conceit, which re-appropriates colorist stereotypes as a method of resistance and self-protection against the taboos associated with her skin color, sexuality, and profession. As Wilder's research on colorism amongst black women today demonstrates, the dynamic of cross-color disparagement present in the fictional Peasant family persists in reality often preventing those on opposite ends of the color spectrum from finding middle ground.

In summary, colorism rewards phenotypic proximity to whiteness, but it also establishes hierarchies of Blackness that deny Black women of a lighter skin tone to their racial identity and associate them with stereotypes of arrogance and undue comfort. This is not meant to suggest that Black women with fairer complexions are equally oppressed under colorism. It remains evident that darker-skinned Black women endure more widespread and measurable social disadvantages when it comes to employment, education, relationships, and psychological development (Hunter, 2002). What I am instead drawing attention to is the way that colorism can also negatively affect women of lighter-skin tones within the Black community who are denied their experience as racialized people of color because they are not accepted as authentically or fully Black.

### Beyoncé's Color Controversy

Like many Black Americans, Beyoncé Knowles is of mixed racial heritage. She was raised in a middle-class suburb of Houston, Texas by her African-American father Matthew Knowles and her Black Creole mother later remarried as Tina Lawson. Both of her grandparents on her mother's side were mixed-raced Creoles of African, French, and Native American heritage who married in Louisiana (Griffin, 2011, p. 137). Although her mother heavily disavowed her Creole upbringing

while growing up in a Black neighborhood in Texas during the 1960's, Beyoncé has embraced her Creole heritage in numerous ways. First, with a little known song titled "Creole," followed by a controversial L'Oreal makeup ad where she traces the "story behind her skin" to her mixed-race roots, and, most recently, in praising her Creole and Negro heritage in "Formation" (Blay, 2016; kwaiyimey, 2008; Stodgehill, 2012).

For many Black Americans, the word Creole instinctively triggers negative connotations closely tied to the traumas of slavery including implications of a presumed sense of superiority and disparagement of Blackness. *Colorlines* contributor Yaba Blay (2016) took particular issue with the lyrics of "Formation" where Beyoncé proclaims "You mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas bama" offering that "while it may seem innocent that Beyoncé describes herself as a mixture of Creole and 'Negro,' this particular celebration of herself invokes a historical narrative that forces some of us to look at her sideways." Citing real-life experience and research on colorism in the American South, Blay asserts that for "those of us who are not Creole and whose skin is dark brown, the claiming of a Creole identity is read as rejection" adding that "much of the investment in Creole identity is predicated on a vehement rejection of Blackness." Though distinct in its reflection on the history of Creole identity, this critique provides auxiliary to established criticisms that Beyoncé's signature long blonde weaves are proof that the "post-racial pop star" embraces white standards of beauty and rejects her African-American heritage (Cashmore, 2010).

There is, of course, evidence that distance from Blackness is an asset for popular Black female performers. Considering the top three Black female performing artists of the moment—Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Nicki Minaj—it is without doubt that phenotypically common African features (wide nose, full lips, dark skin, and kinky hair) carry little esteem within mainstream American culture, that is, unless those features are linked to sexuality, particularly the rear end. In recognizing her mixed-race identity, Farah Jasmine Griffith (2011) argues that Beyoncé purposefully builds on the fantasy of the "mulatta temptress" citing the "fancy girl" imagery of her 2006 album titled *B'Day* (p. 139, 140). Viewed as beautiful through their proximity to whiteness and licentious through their Blackness, "fancy girls" were mixed-race women of Louisiana who were sold alongside laboring African slaves as sexual concubines. When slavery ended and it was no longer acceptable for white men to have Black mistresses, the institutionalized devaluation of Black woman created the conditions for all Black women to be regarded as whores or prostitutes (hooks, 1981, p. 62). It is under such circumstances that the character Yellow Mary was raped ("ruined" in the view of her family) while serving as a wet nurse for a wealthy white family in Cuba and perhaps the catalyst for her foray into sex work. Despite the fancy girl's ability to escape labor in the field, the devaluation of Black women into sexual objects of white male fantasy reflects a shared history of racialized sexualization.

In keeping with the discussion of colorism and sexuality, Caroline A. Streeter's

(2004) analysis of mulatta characters in African-American literature demonstrates how these figures often represent access to class mobility and escape from the stigmas of Blackness while simultaneously symbolizing the traumatic history of enslavement and sexual violence (p. 768). In her analysis of *Daughters of the Dust*, Streeter explains how the vilification of Trula and Yellow Mary by the Peasant women represents a form of “moral scapegoat[ing]” whereby “making the mulatta the abject symbol of painful histories” is used to distance themselves from the sexual trauma of slavery (p. 772). Dash problematizes these desperate efforts to reclaim an imagined “black female purity” through Eula Peasant, Nana Peasant’s granddaughter-in-law who is unsure the paternity of her unborn child after being raped by a white landowner (Kaplan, 2007, p. 521). In her final emotional appeal, Eula reminds the women:

As far as this placed is concerned, we never enjoyed our womanhood. . . Deep inside, we believed that they ruined our mothers, and their mothers before them. And we live our lives always expecting the worst because we feel we don’t deserve any better. Deep inside we believe that even God can’t heal the wounds of our past or protect us from the world that put shackles on our feet.

Streeter persuasively argues that *Daughters* offers a “critique of ‘race pride’ which relies upon stable categories and normative behaviors” (p. 783). Though I would argue that legalized miscegenation and intermarriage between Black people of various hues have made it such that light skin today does not immediately represent a “visible scar of slavery and rape” as it did at the turn of the twentieth century, it is important to acknowledge the historical continuity of these ideas as well as how the oppositional knowledge established during the era of Black Power that inspired Black racial pride also established exclusionary definitions of Blackness—one which excluded Black queer identities, condemned Black female strength and sexual agency, dictated Black hair and aesthetic styling, and marginalized mixed-race identities (Streeter, 2004, p. 777). When efforts are made to escape past traumas by constructing a form of Black pride that relies heavily on methods of exclusion and scapegoating to promote an imagined black female sexual purity, be it racial purity or sexual abstinence, we lose track of the continued persistence of the one-drop rule in shaping perceptions of black female sexuality.

Like the fancy girls of the early twentieth century, lighter-skinned Black women have a greater ability to exploit and profit from this fetishization of their Blackness while maintaining access to ideals and protections of beauty and womanhood within white heteropatriarchy not afforded to darker-skinned Black women who are extremely delimited by stereotypes of the hypersexual Jezebel and the angry, harsh Sapphire (hooks, 1981, pp. 85-86; Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 62). Beyoncé’s capacity to be viewed as pleasing by the dominant beauty standards of western society with the added bonus of the embodied sexuality associated with Blackness, has enabled her to move beyond “urban” music charts and become a

verifiable global pop superstar with immeasurable mainstream appeal. Given this, it is interesting that in the earlier parts of her career while still under the management of her father and before openly embracing her feminism, Beyoncé adopted methods of compartmentalization to separate her respectable, conservative side from her more sexually adventurous alter ego Sasha Fierce suggesting that regardless of the hue of her skin, “black women have yet to be granted the full privilege of expressing their sexual agency without paying the price” (Griffith, 2011, p. 138; Weidhase, 2015, p. 129). The same cannot be said of numerous white and non-black female performing artists like Kylie Minogue, Christina Aguilera, and Jennifer Lopez whose displays of sexuality have not defined their music careers, limited their success, or discredited their ability to be viewed as role models (Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 51; Hobson, 2003, p. 97-98). But even as famous feminists’ condescension towards Beyoncé’s burgeoning feminism<sup>1</sup> and reference her as a “terrorist”<sup>2</sup> whose embodied sexuality is disempowering for girls and women (as though Black femme representation isn’t valuable for Black female empowerment against the historical masculinization of Black women), works to deny Beyoncé’s ability to be read beyond her racialized and sexualized flesh, Beyoncé has managed to maintain a multifaceted and respected music and acting career (hooks, 1982, p. 22; Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 62). Unable to navigate as freely in the broader society and entertainment industry, many darker-skinned African-American women maintain justifiable hostility toward lighter-skinned sisters like Beyoncé, despite a shared history of racialized sexualization that makes them both susceptible to sexual stereotyping. Though there is clear inequity within the color hierarchy that may garner lighter-hued Black women continued commercial appeal alongside critiques of their supposed “hyper-sexuality,” it remains evident that Black female sexuality is always embodied and fixed to the flesh of Black women regardless of hue in a way that is not expected of white female performers.

This returns us to the problem many African-Americans find with creole self-identification. For many, Beyoncé’s embrace of her mixed-race heritage is a reminder of the difference between herself and the broader Black American community and her improved access to success within mainstream society, but it obscures the dilemma of those like Beyoncé’s own mother Tina who, living primarily amongst African-Americans in the 1960’s felt compelled to reject their Creole identity and family history and prioritize her Black identity in favor of quelling an exclusionary pro-Black mentality looking to disparagingly escape the continued trauma of colonial color hierarchies. So, when we criticize Beyoncé’s embrace of her mixed-race heritage, are we not falling into the same exclusionary traps of race pride that prioritize the trauma of slavery and its created color hierarchies over the multiplicity, fragmentation, and dynamism of the Black experience in the United States? The same unattainable image of Black female purity that haunts Yellow Mary is also held over Beyoncé’s head, but the expectation for Beyoncé to neglect her own family history, her class privilege, and her racial heritage only attempt to satisfy a sense of Black racial purity and Black

female purity that does not exist in the United States. The divisiveness of such criticism while important for demonstrating the continuation of color hierarchies in the Black community, also runs the risk of marginalizing large segments of the Black community rather than opening the space for the multiplicity of Black experiences (Cucinella & Curry, 2001, p. 207).

### *Lemonade* as a Practice of Diasporic Melancholia

In Freudian terms, melancholia is understood as the effect of failed mourning for the loss of that which cannot be fully known. Contemporary psychology has individualized and pathologized melancholia as an unproductive and paralyzing psychic conflict (Kaplan, 2007, p. 513). Scholar Sara Clarke Kaplan, however, in her analysis of *Daughters of the Dust* rejects the notion that the work of mourning must come to an end, particularly for the tragedies endured by the African diaspora, the genocide of African chattel slavery, the Middle Passage, and the continuing systems of Black unfreedom which fully constitute the modern world (p. 513). Kaplan argues that the mourning of these tragedies should not be attributed to racialized subjects' "regressive attachment to the past," but can be seen instead as a "militant refusal" (p. 514). She describes *diasporic melancholia* as "an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the political potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievance that traverse continents and cross time" (Kaplan, 2007, p. 513).

Given this, Kaplan reads *Daughters* as a diasporic ceremony - "a spatio-temporal nexus that collocates the past, the present, and the future; the living, the dead, and the unborn; Africa, the Americas, and the Middle Passage" - whereby diasporic religious practices perform the transmission of collective histories, memories, and forms of knowledge that maintain connections to African spiritual traditions (p. 516, 517). For example, Kaplan describes how the permeating presence of white clothing in *Daughters* channels the customary dress worn by initiates of Voodoo, Santeria, and Candomblé—West African spiritual traditions maintained by diasporic subjects under different names in the Americas. She also demonstrates that Nana Peasant's submersion into water within the film can also be read as a means of summoning the spirits of her African ancestors from across the ocean (p. 517). And though Nana Peasant's tin can containing "scraps of memories" is mocked as "Hoodoo mess," most of the Peasant children have adopted the matriarch's infamous can to collect trinkets of their own that connect them to their personal history and their ancestry.

In addition to these retentive practices which connect the Peazants to precolonial spiritual and cultural traditions, one shared history expressed within the film tells the story of Ibo Landing's name. The myth says that when the Igbo people descended from the slave ships at the Sea Islands, they took one look at the would-be land of their bondage, swiftly turned backs, and walked across the water back to their homes. The story is later revealed to be a folkloric retelling of the Igbo peoples' mass suicide.

The diasporic ceremonies within *Daughters* demonstrates the significance

of diasporic melancholia whose potential lies in the ways in which the refusal to let go of the racial trauma of the past enables greater clarity into the continuation of these processes in the present to provoke strategies of resistance for the future. The story of Ibo Landing mourns the tragic genocide of the Middle Passage and of those lost who cannot and should never be forgotten. It asserts the continued unfreedoms of the present of which the Igbo people preferred to escape through self-mortem. But it also reminds the family that they are the descendants of those who chose to survive and the strategies which guided their survival, providing their descendants with the opportunity for eventual socioeconomic progress through migration. Diasporic melancholia acknowledges past tragedies to provide a strategy for navigating the present and guiding the future.

Following the model of *Daughters*, many elements of *Lemonade* perform diasporic ceremonies, but the pervasiveness of colorism and colorist assumptions of light-skinned Black women have made it difficult for some critiques to assess Beyoncé's work within lineages of the African diaspora, Black womanhood, and Black feminist filmmaking. I believe, however, when we are able to take Beyoncé's Blackness and her capacity and openness for creating critical and political dialogue in her work seriously, it is possible to assess Beyoncé's evocation of past and present traumas of the Black diaspora through *diasporic melancholia*.

Beyond honest acknowledgement of her Creole ancestry, Beyoncé has always demonstrated strong ties in her music to her Blackness and her southern upbringing with frequent use of Black English, southern vernacular speech and musical styles, while purposefully highlighting the talents of Black performers and musicians in her music videos and on tour. Additionally, Beyoncé and her husband Jay Z donated 1.5 million dollars to the Black Lives Matter Movement and other civil rights organizations through their streaming platform Tidal, while also quietly giving tens of thousands of dollars to bail out protestors in Ferguson, Missouri following the resulting unrest after the murder of eighteen year-old Mike Brown by white police officer Darren Wilson (Stutz, 2016). Yet in her most unabashedly pro-Black work to date, criticism arises of Beyoncé visually appropriating Black suffering to promote western capitalist ideology (i.e. "Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper"). One prominent critique by Blacktivist scholar from New Orleans Maris Jones (2016) took particular issue with Beyoncé's evocations of Hurricane Katrina in the "Formation" music video stating "Our trauma is not an accessory to put on when you decide to openly claim your Louisiana heritage... the trauma is not yours to appropriate or perform." Jones' criticism of "Formation" calls out the opportunistic emulations of southern Black life in Louisiana, the reasonable sense that Beyoncé could not possibly relate to the suffering of working class Black Americans affected by the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, and feelings that the visual message of the music video did not match its lyrical content. Opportunism and exploitation are reasonable concerns, when one is able to assume disinterest in Black suffering by a Black woman. Though many celebrities quickly turn to colorblind rhetoric and

deny the continued prevalence of racism with the shield of their wealth and social esteem, Beyoncé's body of work has demonstrated a high regard for Blackness and the specificity of the Black female experience. It should also be added that until the murder of Trayvon Martin, the growing prevalence of digital footage of police misconduct, and the rise of Black Lives Matter movement, it was rare for any popular, contemporary Black celebrity to publicly express allegiance to any social movement. It would appear that as #BlackLivesMatter gained traction online sparking the start of a modern-day civil rights movement, celebrities, musicians, and athletes have been compelled to reflect the radicalization of the culture in their performative field. Additionally, in the view of diasporic melancholia, the trauma of Hurricane Katrina speaks not just to the experience of those directly affected by the flooding but to the repetitious nature of Black unfreedom and devaluation. In choosing to recreate the flooding of Hurricane Katrina ten years after its initial devastation and marrying it with contemporary images of state violence, "Formation" demonstrates the continuity of trauma and violence against Black bodies across time and space, thus enacting the process of diasporic melancholia.

In response to Jones' criticism, it is important to also note that Beyoncé's visual evocation of Louisiana and southern bayou culture in the aftermath of the Gulf Crisis is not without precedent. Eight years prior to the release of "Formation," scholar Daphne Brooks (2008) argued that it was possible to listen to Beyoncé's 2006 album *B'Day*, released on the one year anniversary of Katrina, "on another frequency so as to hear the register of post-Katrina discontent in pop music... and the ways in which Knowles reconfigures a sort of dissent as fleet, urgent desire, and aspiration" (p. 192). The visual markers of southern bayou culture in *B'Day*'s marketing as well as the apparent plantation setting and the ornate Victorian design present in the music video from the album's single "Déjà vu" mirrors much of the design within the music video for "Formation" and the entirety of the visual album. It is almost unnerving how Brooks' assessment of *B'Day* speaks directly to *Lemonade*, while simultaneously responding to Jones' view of the lyrical superficiality of "Formation":

Although the album returns time and again to conflicts between love and money, the material on *B'Day* examines an ever-sophisticated range of emotions tied to black women's personal and spiritual discontent, satiation, self-worth, and agency... consider shrewd and complicated articulation of rage, "resentment" (closing track), desperation, and aspiration that Beyoncé's album charts at a time when public and sociopolitical voices of black female discontent remain muted, mediated, circumscribed, and misappropriated. (p. 184)

Brooks' analysis engages directly with the devastation of Hurricane Katrina while also, at a rather early point in Beyoncé's solo career, creates an analytical space that respects Beyoncé's Blackness and her capacity to be a voice of Black female discontentment in pop music (184). And with the growing popularity of social media in helping the Black community to become more conscious and vocal about the systematic impact of anti-Black racism in the United States, the atmo-

sphere was ripe for the reimagining of earlier works with a more explicit political message in its unequivocal reverence for the resiliency of Black womanhood. Beyoncé's *Lemonade* conjures the anguish of historical trauma and in refusing to allow the devastation of Katrina to remain in the past, she creates a historical continuum to express contemporary grievances. In re-establishing the analytical space that respects Beyoncé's Blackness and her capacity to create critical and political dialogue in her work, I will conclude by demonstrating the numerous ways that Beyoncé's *Lemonade* and "Formation" are deeply invested in diasporic ceremony and lineages of Black womanhood.

After the release of "Formation," *Ms Magazine* published an article by scholar Janell Hobson (2016). Looking particularly at her all black attire and large-brimmed hat, Hobson recognized a channeling of Voodoo Mama Brigitte, loa or spirit of Haitian and Louisiana Voodoo believed to be guardian of the souls of the dead who favors obscenities (e.g. middle fingers up, "when he fuck me good...") and drinks rum with hot peppers ("hot sauce in my bag"). Through such a reading, Beyoncé's persona is repositioned as the figure of the conjure woman, who sits at the crossroads "between the living and the dead, between the feminine and the masculine, between the heteronormative and the queer, between the sacred and the profane" (Hobson, 2016). She begins by resurrecting the voice of New Orleans comedian, Messy Mya. The twenty-two year old who was shot and killed under mysterious circumstances in 2010, can be heard in the first seconds of the video asking "What happened at the New Wildin's?" (heard as "New Orleans"). This resurrected sample not only highlights the unsolved murder of the queer Black artists, but asserts the failed response of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the ensuing chaos of medical maltreatment, violence, and police corruption of post-Katrina New Orleans.

And though "Formation" is the only sequence of the visual album with explicit credit to the direction of Melina Matsoukas, filmmaker and cultural critic dream hampton (Bradley & hampton, 2016) refers to the visual album's co-director Kahlil Joseph (who, along with Beyoncé, likely had his hands in the entire project) as a modern day visual folklorist invested in realistically portraying Black life. hampton reminds audiences unfamiliar with his previous work that Joseph's interest in black magic are evident in the "conjuring video" he directed for Flying Lotus' "Until the Quiet Comes" where Lotus embodies Elegba/Eshu, the Yoruba trickster deity that is a messenger between the spirit world and the living, who collects the dancing soul of a murdered Black man and carries him off in a Cadillac car (Flying Lotus, 2013; Bradley and hampton, 2016). Re-imagined in "Formation," the young Black boy in a hooded sweatshirt who dances before a row of white police officers with their hands up is perhaps the strongest visual imagery of the video and performs a conjuring of both the unarmed seventeen year-old Trayvon Martin who was killed by a white vigilante while walking through his own neighborhood wearing a hooded sweatshirt and twelve year-old Tamir Rice who was murdered while playing with a

toy gun at the park by the Ohio police within seconds of their arrival at the scene. This conjuring is further exalted in *Lemonade* where the “Mothers of the Black Lives Matter Movement” are seen holding photographs of their slain sons, including the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown.

With explicit imagery, past traumas collide with the present as Beyoncé sinks into the Louisiana flood waters atop a police car. This provocative recreation of Hurricane Katrina’s devastation alongside the conjurings of murdered Black men and boys works to unite the contemporary devaluation of Black life under the US justice system and the suffocating forces of white supremacy to the exercised agency of the Africans crossing the Middle Passage who chose suicide over life as a slave. Projecting colorist assumptions onto Beyoncé’s work in ways which attempt to reserve the traumas of Hurricane Katrina and police brutality to “authentic” and local Black folks, prevents us from recognizing the power of diasporic melancholia in her work. In conjuring these historical and present traumas, Beyoncé concludes “Formation” by making her demand explicit: “Stop shooting us.”

*Lemonade*’s diasporic ceremonial sequence titled “Reformation” begins with Beyoncé garbed in all white with tears rolling down her eyes, laying in the center of the Louisiana Superdome, which was used as an ill-equipped shelter for the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Like Kaplan’s identifying components of diasporic religious practice, the long white dresses adorning Black female bodies throughout the this sequence of the short film who wade through the ocean water, staring out into the horizon with their arms locked and raised, is unmistakable in its references to Nana Peasant’s submersion in *Daughters* and the initiation ceremonies of Santería in Cuba and Candomblé in Brazil. This sequence in particular also reimagines the myth of Ibo Landing as an act of collective resistance against the chains of enslavement which pulls against Beyoncé’s waist as she appears stranded along the beach. During “Reformation,” we are even momentarily granted access to the performance of what would appear to be a sacred ritual of witches or conjure women. The short and indistinct clip reflects the true secrecy and inaccessibility of these ceremonies for those who have not undergone initiation into these diasporic traditions. The invented ceremonial ritual between Black women along the swampy shores and beachfront demonstrate a deep investment in resistive Afrodiasporic spirituality and reflect a mission to make Black people “more curious about where they came from and their own identity and pride in that identity” (*What Happened Miss Simone*). These are the words of the revolutionary, pro-black singer and pianist Nina Simone, and while controversy exists in the casting of a lighter-skinned Afro-Latina actress in her biopic who has gone on record in refuting the saliency of Blackness in her life, it is important to demonstrate that Black women performers of fairer skin tones can, in their own right, be aligned with the pride of their darker-skinned counterparts.

Finally, going beyond ambiguously “African” body painting frequently appropriated by many African-Americans to connect to an unknown African heritage (as in the previously mentioned Kendrick Lamar performance), Beyoncé called

upon Nigerian visual artist Laolu Senbanjo for his Yoruba-inspired “Sacred Art of Ori” which uses white ink to trace the essence of individuals upon their skin as a means of worshipping the Orishas, the goddesses of Yoruba culture. Diasporic religious practice such as these act “as living ‘repertoire,’ capable of producing and transmitting collective histories, memories, and forms of knowledge that must be addressed, but which the written archive cannot-or will not-contain” (Kaplan, 2007, p. 516). Combining diasporic ceremonial sequences with footage intimately documenting the realism of everyday Black life, *Lemonade* creates a modern Afrodiasporic visual folklore that not only places Beyoncé within Afrodiasporic genealogies and alongside histories of Black trauma, but creates the space for the matrilineal transmission of collective histories, memories, and knowledge that are sacred to Black feminine consciousness- such as the magical ability to turn lemons into lemonade (Bradley & hampton, 2016; Mudede, 2016).

### Conclusion

Colorism creates unrelenting strains in the lives of Black women. There is an understandable degree of resentment between those on opposite ends of the color spectrum who recognize value in the benefits of skin tones unlike their own. Part of the difficulties in assessing color prejudice is the historical context of slavery that designated cultural capital and devaluation upon certain bodies and the traumas those valuations continue to have over Black subjects. But without careful evaluation of colorism within Black communities across the United States, there is a risk of exalting a reductive and unstable light-dark color binary that ignores the complexities of prejudice and discrimination across the color spectrum. There needs to be widespread acknowledgement and education of the ways in which darker-skinned individuals are more likely to experience negative race-based associations within mainstream society as well as devaluation within the Black community that lighter-skinned Black women do not experience with the same intensity so that action may take place to uplift all Black people. At the same time, it does no good to attempt to strip lighter-skinned Black people of their racial identity and deny their suffering under racial oppression to exalt dark-skinned colorist oppression as the sole crux of racism. Such dichotomous thinking supports white supremacy’s model of ‘divide of conquer’ that creates polarizing effects within Black America and makes us less likely to “get in formation” and challenge cross-color racial oppression.

Beyoncé is an interesting case in the discussion of colorism because her career has expressed a rich intimacy to Southern Black culture and female empowerment while also playing into tropes of the mulatta “fancy girl,” a life experienced by Yellow Mary Peasant, whose relative proximity to whiteness adheres social value within mainstream culture. For those unable to traverse between Blackness and whiteness with the same ease, Beyoncé’s acceptance of her Creole lineage

can be read as a rejection of Blackness making her evocations of Black suffering and Blackness in general appear disingenuous. But at what point do we accept that Blackness as an apparently coherent race is not a biological fact or cultural predisposition, but rather emerges from the doubleness of being both inside and outside of modern conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic values (Gilroy, 1993, .p. 73)? The dispersal of the African diaspora across the West into social worlds that continually bar those with even one drop of ‘black blood’ from full access to whiteness is the point from which Black expressive cultures emerge - in response to the perpetual state of double consciousness. And despite the relative ease with which Beyoncé has managed to climb the ladder of popular culture compared to darker-skinned Black female performers, it does not detract from her investment in the matrilineal transmission of collective histories, memories, and knowledge that are sacred to Black feminine consciousness.

Diasporic melancholia, as a “process and practice by which racial violence is internalized as racial grief,” refuses to let go of racism’s irrevocable damages. Its political power rests in its capacity to transform that grief into expressions of grievance and political desires that travels across space and time (Kaplan, 2007, p. 514). Diasporic melancholia would not allow color hierarchies to be dismissed as a mere historical occurrence but demands acknowledgement of its continued impacts. To stagnate in this trauma, however, does not productively transform grief into political desires. Black Americans must question whether the desire to discredit someone’s position within genealogies of the Black diaspora comes from an attempt to prioritize their own trauma under colonial regimes of color hierarchy and whether this prioritization risks cross-color solidarity against white supremacist racial oppression. Recognizing the role of diasporic melancholia and the numerous ways in which *Lemonade* and “Formation” adopts elements of diasporic ceremony from *Daughters of the Dust*, we re-establish the analytical space that respects Beyoncé’s Blackness and her capacity to create critical and political dialogue in her work. For Beyoncé to evade colorist preconceptions and use her fame, wealth, and visibility to demonstrate the continuity of racial trauma and violence against Black bodies across time and space in the most popular Black feminist musical film project of recent history, she not only asserts the relevancy of Blackness for those on the lighter end of the color spectrum, but also uses her platform to express the militancy and demands of a new generation of Black activists.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Singer, activist, and philanthropist Annie Lennox famously called Beyoncé “feminism lite” and stated that “twerking is not feminism. It’s not liberating [or] empowering.”

<sup>2</sup> During a 2014 panel discussion at The New School, feminist scholar bell hooks referred to Beyoncé as a “terrorist” for the damage her sexualized performances have on young Black girls.

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## How #BlackGirlMagic Cultivates Supreme Love to Heal and Save Souls That Can Heal and Save the World An Introduction to Endarkened Feminist Epistemological and Ontological Evolutions of Self Through a Critique of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

Jeanine M. Staples

### The Lemons in Lemonade

Beyoncé's 2016 visual album, *Lemonade*, is an artistic and conceptual triumph. It is filled with cultural references from powerhouse literature like Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, Butler's *Kindred*, and the poetry of newcomer Warsan Shire.<sup>1</sup> It presents a tapestry of journey method through iterations of consciousness and experiences that are tied to a feminine and Black feminist tradition/s. Each of the album's eleven chapters, from "Intuition" to "Redemption," contains critical expressions and creative embodiments of a human predicament assigned to women, to Black women in particular: t/Terror in love. This t/Terror consists of the intimate partner-based relational microaggressions many of us endure and ineffectually discuss with our affinity groups (e.g., mothers and daughters, nieces and aunties, sisterfriends, and colleagues). These aggressions, fielded from very early childhood to elder adulthood, result in emotional tax, psychological breaks, and somatic pain (Staples, 2012, 2016; Williams & Nichols, 2012). These microaggressions include (and are not limited to) infidelity, gaslighting (the practice of convincing a mentally healthy person that their con-

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cept of reality is false), splitting (the practice of regarding people and situations as completely “good” or completely “bad,” leaving no room for human nuance), proxy recruitment (a way of controlling or manipulating a partner by subversively enlisting their close family member or friend to promote a return to abuse/abuser), and ranking and comparing (the process of drawing unnecessary, inappropriate, and unhealthy comparisons between individuals and groups in order to shame and blame an other).

Beyoncé masterfully performs the results of these aggressions by showing their manifestations in soma (prostrate bodies, crying eyes, swinging baseball bats, peripatetic movements, silent stares) and soul (profane outbursts, complex ruminations, lyrical twists, and incessant questioning). She does this in all of her theatrical, physical, emotional, and intellectual #BlackGirlMagic. Yet, while many critics have lauded *Lemonade* for its unique centering of many Black women’s experiences, I argue that it actually crowds those articulations by inserting male and masculine figures as elusive, powerful ghosts and ubiquitous, necessary gods, things to be feared and worshiped. These insertions, in effect, promote the idolatry of men and masculinity because, in the album, they function as the taken-for-granted center of girls’ and women’s experiences in love and life. I do not condemn the work for such centering, featuring Beyoncé as the worrying, wandering woman, attempting to understand herself in relation to her father and husband, as the object of various aggressions. She contends with herself as ravenous to understand why she must understand herself through these vantage points. I see this work as a delectable new literacies artifact—one that can be understood as portraiture for not only the lived experiences of many Black girls and women, but also as portraiture for the effects of complex patriarchal ideologies that pervade the lives of those girls and women. I argue that this work presents visual representations of the toxic lover identities that a number of women reactively and defensively construct for emotional sense making, relational coping, and social survival; it makes clearer the often elusive and various relational and social t/Terrors Black girls and women field in soul and soma, over the lifespan; and, it stills the masculine figure(s) for which many women pine, offering alternative ways of constructing gaze so that we can notice women’s complex sociocultural and socioemotional power sincerely and, eventually, revere it.

*Lemonade*’s artistic and cultural triumph is notable because it centers these politics of relating (e.g. how it is socialized, racialized, sexualized, and gendered). Social justice movements include attention to relating, grasping deeply a woman’s reactionary construction of her lover identity—her entire relational ideology and way of being. This inclusion is imperative to understanding the scope and sequence of abuses rooted in a supremacist patriarchal ideology, in addition to that of redemption and healing. Beyoncé’s work presents an opportunity to further the work of deconstructing the lover identities that are built in relation to supremacist patriarchal ideologies, as they (re)produce t/Terrors in love and life. She does this through her #BlackGirlMagic, by showing us what the lover identities do to make

sense of violations, suffering, sacrifice, choice, expression, control, power, and (r)evolution. This demonstration provides a means for our understanding of the relationship between lover identity and social and emotional justice, better positioning us to do womanhood wondrously and justice dynamically, both now and in the future.

To further a critique of this possibility and new embodiment of womanhood (as opposed to a mere, reactionary performance of womanhood), I intend to understand better how #BlackGirlMagic functions as a heuristic for understanding the essential power of Black girls and women. In this article, I explore how #BlackGirlMagic seems to be commonly named and conceptualized, as is anecdotally described in popular parlance. I will tie this definition to #BlackGirlMagic's relationship to Blackness, Girlness, and Womaness. Next, I present a more detailed description of relational and social t/Terrors and the iterative fragments of Self that are affected by these t/Terrors. Then, I share the ways these fragmented selves form five (5) toxic, reactionary lover identities, like the ones Beyoncé performs in *Lemonade*. I close with a clear articulation of the ways supremacist patriarchal ideologies hurt and kill people (through the antagonism, abuse, and figurative or literal deaths preceding these lover identities, and often following them). I conclude with a presentation of a solution to this pain and death.

### Regarding Magic, Blackness, Girlness, and Womaness

Magic can be difficult to explain. It is essentially mysterious, enchanting, power. It is captivating, fascinating, and spellbinding in its effects. It crafts realities and alters the course of events by challenging senses and beliefs. There is magic at the intersection of Blackness, Girlness, and Womaness. I see Blackness as a deeply soulful, kinetic, inclusive identity phenomenon that one can embody *through* Diasporic cultural lineages, *as* communal heritage, and *in* personal wholeness (Staples, 2016; Alexander-Floyd, 2007; Lorde, 1984). It is *anchored* by historical weights, *informed* by contemporary nuances, and a *generator* of afro futuristic now (Barr, 2008; Staples, 2016). Blackness has apparent and obscured languages, sign systems, artifacts, and effects that people who are Black generate, push forward, and revise. This generating, pushing, and revising happens for various purposes and in various places (spiritual, soulful, and somatic). Some include, but are not limited to, commanding ethereal appointments, initiating social visibility, securing economic stability, realizing self-actualization, pushing forward various justice movements, and achieving political solvency. This dynamism comes from Black people at all developmental stages, across all socioeconomic statuses, along a vast spectrum of gender orientations, and within all nations on earth (Staples, 2016). This broad inclusivity and substantial range are what make Blackness so complex and heavy. *Lemonade's* entire scope represents this Blackness.

Girlness and Blackness can cooperate with each other. I understand Girlness as

a multifarious sensibility of youth. Girlness is imaginative, expressive, expansive, organic, fun, curious, smart, quick, faithful energy. Girlness bounces, brightens, and soars. People who are girls can lead with buoyant vitality. They often breed visions and enterprising energy. Girlness, like Blackness, is complex, yet light. Womaness describes a graduated state of mind, emerging from, and intertwined with, Girlness. Womaness often carries within it wisdom, temperance, patience, grace, courage, and a bolder power. This identity phenomenon is informed by, and informs, generations, and even other worlds. It charts course. It paves ways to make happen that which needs to happen to anchor and elevate Self, Others, communities, and worlds. Although this identity provokes movement, it is actually fairly still in its effect; Womaness is as much, perhaps more, about being energy as it is about doing energy. Womaness embodies (i.e. holding immovable and immutable within Self) beauty, sensuality, reproduction, and creativity, among other things.

### Considering Black Girls' and Women's Magic in Relation to the White (and Black) Male Power Structure(s)

People who have Blackness, Girlness, and Womaness operating within their collected person generate magic. This Black Girl Magic<sup>2</sup> (BGM) manifests more life than can be articulated here. For example, BGM (re)produces, from the people who possess it, art, music, performances, literatures, languages, literacies, sciences, mathematics, technologies, landscapes, relationships, communities, and civilizations. This (re)productivity happens despite relational hardships, material poverty, physical violence, sexual abuse, social marginalization, socioeconomic oppression, academic neglect, mental accosting, and emotional pain (Staples, 2012, 2016). In fact, Black Girl Magic is *so magical* it can actually withstand and use such injustices and attempts to dehumanize and erase as fodder for its persistent existence (hence, *Lemonade*). As such, this magic is seen as unbelievably weird, undeniably alluring, incomparably inspiring, and absolutely threatening. This is evident when Beyoncé shows the ethereal parts of her Black Girl Magic in her visual album (see, for instance, 4:51, 36:12, 38:47, 45:57, and 50:01 in *Lemonade*'s respective chapters).

The people who possess, (re)produce, and perform this magic (i.e., Black girls and women, whether in reality or surreality) bear the same complicated portraiture which frames the magic itself. Those who do *not* possess Black Girl Magic both love and hate it. This love and hate happen because Black Girl Magic is immediately recognized as the bedrock of humanity, and so, is understood as inherently worthy of reverence and deep regard. Simultaneously, Black Girl Magic is recognized as a prime source for devising epistemological processes and ontological embodiments that can decolonize souls and spaces. It is also a prime source for dismantling White (and Black/Brown) supremacist patriarchal ideologies and enactments. In addition, this magic can illuminate previously hidden impetuses for unjust social policies, cultural practices, legal pipelines, and curricula that perpetuate the reign

of Whiteness, hyper-masculinity, typical bodies and mentalities, and capitalism/capitalistic practices in local, regional, national, and global contexts. This renders the power structure stuck. It is continually drawn to, and deeply in love with the majesty and mastery of Black Girl Magic, and also petrified by it, simmering in fearful, defensive, murderous hate with regard to its range, variation, depth, scope, ability to annihilate and begin again on its own terms—just outside the oppressive reach of hyper-patriarchal webs.

To push forward understanding about this magic—the ways it enables, becomes embodied, is (re)produced, and enacted—I will briefly explore the ways a group of ten (10) Black women<sup>3</sup> overcame t/Terror in love and life after 9/11. First, I introduce the term “t/Terror” and define how I use it in the context of my phenomenological inquiry into Black women’s epistemological and ontological (re)productions. Next, I clarify how a proliferation of relational and social t/Terrors can produce toxic *lover identities* by which some women live. I also describe these reactionary lover identities and clarify how their performance unwittingly does the work of supremacist patriarchies in girls’ and women’s romantic, kinship, and affiliate circles. Finally, I introduce a lover identity discovered through #BlackGirlMagic called Supreme Lover Identity. I note how development of a Supreme Lover Identity can interrupt and heal cycles of dehumanization, erasures, lovelessness, fear, and pain within (and ascribed to) Black girls and women, and thereby, heal and save the world – those phenomena featured in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*.

### Regarding t/Terror-ible Things and the Fragmented Selves That Are Relationally and Socially Affected

Like *Lemonade*, I explore Black women’s t/Terror in love and life in *The Revelations of Asher: Toward Supreme Love In Self* (Staples, 2016). I define t/Terrors as relational and social aggressions that occur over time, in various contexts, and with multiple individuals and/or groups. The aggressions appear and function at micro, macro, and institutional levels. Unlike *Lemonade*, in which Beyoncé mainly focuses on relational microaggressions, in *The Revelations* I focus on both micro and macroaggressive t/Terrors.<sup>4</sup> I name *White* supremacist patriarchal ideologies<sup>5</sup> as productive and reproductive forces that engender these t/Terrors and provoke them to escalation and entanglement. For instance, a (heterosexual<sup>6</sup>) relational terror happens when a man tells a woman with whom he shares a narcissistic/codependent emotional and/or sexual dynamic that she is slow, stupid, weak, or unwanted. Chronic infidelities, splitting, and proxy recruitments are other forms of relational terrors.<sup>7</sup> Gaslighting is another example of a relational terror. Gaslighting happens when a person talks about, instigates, and promotes an experience or promise then later acts as if the idea or experience was not mentioned, or did not occur, and pretends it was not made. Gaslighting is a terrorizing tactic because it destabilizes one’s sense of reality and incrementally deconstructs self-trust when most relationally vulnerable.

The Patriarchy enables such terrors by privileging and making automatically trustworthy, reasonable, logical, and credible the voices and stories of men while also minimizing, hystericizing, and denigrating the voices and stories of women. Girls and women learn and ingest these sensibilities as matters-of-fact, over time.

Social terrors can be similar to relational terrors. The distinction is that social terrors are microaggressions that occur most often in schools and society (although they can certainly occur in other contexts). A social terror happens, for instance, when an employer is continually dismissive of the contributions of a racially or gender marginalized colleague (be they a subordinate or supervisor). Such microaggressions can occur between educators and students in pre-K-20 education as well. Social terrors also happen when a marginalized person is offered a lower wage or salary for the same position in which a centralized person is paid more. In addition, these terrors take place when a marginalized person is called by a pet name instead of given due respect through professional address. Being touched or talked to inappropriately in the workplace (e.g. hair fondled, skin grazed, clothes commented upon disapprovingly when they meet dress code requirements, etc.) are also examples of social terrors. Relational and social terrors are almost ubiquitous. They are also minute, fleeting, called debatable, and often normalized, rendering the recipient solely responsible for any offense, shock, fear, or indignation they produce. They are easily dismissed when noted in isolation. However, because microaggressive terrors are multiplicitous and continual, they bear a cumulative effect that can result in low self-esteem, poor self-concept, and even self-loathing (McCabe, 2009; Staples, 2012; 2016). In addition to these psychological stressors, relational and social terrors can also lead to adverse emotional and physical conditions (Solorzano & Yosso, 2000; Williams & Nichols, 2012). To understand how t/Terrors affect people, particularly those that can be considered relationally and socially vulnerable because of the hate, fear, envy, and greed projected onto their souls and somas (i.e., those of Black girls and women), one must understand fragmented selves.

### Finding Fragmented Selves

I center Black women's magical wisdom and ways of being as primary heuristics through which to understand relational and social t/Terrors and dismantle the supremacist patriarchal ideologies that generate them. *The Revelations of Asher* features and complexly explores endarkened epistemologies and ontologies through the voices and stories of seven (7) fragmented selves belonging to ten (10) Black women. Each of these can also be located in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. They are most evident when she animates or articulates one of these iterations of Self by expressing the emotive center they respectively represent. For example, in chapter 3: "Anger", Beyoncé draws from a fragmented self I call Sash. She (Sash) is an emotive center for rage, volatility, offense and defense, antagonism, and revenge. I came to identify and understand each of the seven (7) fragmented selves by employing ethnographic

methods and a phenomenological methodological frame to collect and organize data and member experiences during the two-year interpretive inquiry on which my book is based. I triangulated an analytic framework to organize, explore, and make sense of themes rising from the data (i.e., individual and whole group interviews, journal entries, email correspondences, and instant messages). The framework used to analyze data consisted of a theory of endarkened feminist epistemology, a theory of critical new literacies, and phenomenology (see *The Revelations of Asher: Toward Supreme Love In Self* for more on this constructive methodology and interpretive analysis). While employing this triangulated analytic frame, I found the fragmented selves of the Black women speaking and teaching in the data.

A fragmented self (Staples, 2016) is an iteration of one's collective identity. It is one semblance of the whole, humanist, ideal "I" in the conceptions of every person (De Freitas & Paton, 2009; Wright, 2003). Fragmentations are different from characters because they are not full or well rounded. Rather, they lean more toward archetypal formations. I explain further:

Fragmentations are performed as aspects of Self because they voice one particular sensibility in fairly unilateral ways; they articulate an individual's dominant inclinations through language and its effects. Fragmentations do not necessarily evolve, so they are not overly concerned, necessarily, with growth, or learning. They simply express and pursue manifestation. They are only focused on giving voice to the stories and inherent sensibility of the person they belong to, given the aspect of Self they represent. Fragmentations do this through language, selections of image, music, story, and the like. For instance, in an elementary sense, a fragmented self may singularly voice an individual's anger, inquisitiveness, her melancholy, wisdom, or faith. In a graduated sense, a fragmentation may evolve to speak as an angry "whore," inquiring "teacher," melancholy "servant," wise "mother," or adamant "savior/warrior." Subsequently, she continually contributes stories or sentiments of/from/as these ways of *being*. She also interprets lived experiences from her vantage point and offers the *knowledge* she gleans as "truth," and as REALITY, at one's core. (Staples, 2016, p. 14)

When a person experiences a disproportionate number of relational and social t/Terrors over the course of a particular period of time (as Beyoncé demonstrates in *Lemonade*), various fragmented selves are affected with emotional disease, psychological disorder, and sociocultural dismemberment. This means, the voices with which fragments of Self communicate knowledge in the interior life of a girl or woman can become mean or anxious. In addition, the stories they produce, structuring a sense of reality, can become toxic. For example, the fragmented self that holds emotive energies for rage, anger, and defense can merge with the fragmented self that holds emotive energies for insecurity, worry, doubt, and a sense of unworthiness. See Appendix A to read brief descriptions of each of the seven (7) fragmented selves. See the following references in *Lemonade* to see performances of these selves (2:10 & 2:32—*Rajah*; 16:20 *Asher*; 17:08 & 30:01—*Maven*; 10:32—*Nason*; 23:42 & 24:51

*Kagan*; 00:53 & 30:43—*Laish*; and 7:04 & 14:40—*Sash*). Note that these selves are given names for personification. This tactic is intended to make these fragmented, emotive energies more personally relatable to scholars and seekers. The unmediated merging of selves, when they've been t/Terrorized, can produce a reactionary lover identity through which a girl or woman engages with Self, Other, communities, and the world. A "lover identity is a person's entire relational ideology and way of being" (Staples, 2016, p. 13). A "reactionary lover identity (one ruled by intoxicated, reactionary, unhealed, t/Terrorized fragmented selves) not only disables the formation of social, sexual, and romantic relationships, it disables familial, phileo, and communal relationships as well" (Staples, 2016, p. 15).

### Regarding Terrified Lover Identities

Whereas fragmented selves are phenomena bound to the interior, lover identities are performed for witnesses of the exterior. I found five (5) toxic lover identities (comprised of variously formed fragmented selves) in the data I produced with Black women. Most people who have suffered chronic relational or social t/Terrors (i.e. microaggressions and macroaggressions) have both a dominant and subordinate reactionary lover identity. It is important to note that lover identity (like other social identities) can be fluid because it is constructed. It can (and often does) change. It can shift over the lifespan and in relation to evolutions of Self and healthy, affirming, impacting communions and relations with Self and Others. What follows is a brief description of each of the five (5) toxic lover identities. As these descriptions are presented, I refer to iconic women found in "popular culture narratives" (PCNs) to contextualize them.

PCNs have five primary descriptors (Staples, 2008a, b). First, popular culture narratives portray nuances of social constructs. Race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality are often at issue in them. Second, they commonly depict archetypes—representative human paradigms that embody "types" of identity. Third, these narratives frequently mingle standardized English and variations of English. This mingling affords characters, authors, or narrators the ability to texturize social situations and individuals in specific ways. Fourth, PCNs produce or describe visual representations that signify and complicate language. That is, compositions of rich moving and still images are depicted and invoked to pictorially translate what is expressed. Lastly, they provoke readers to deeper revelations about predicaments of human conditions and the complexities of personhood, place, word, and image. These provocations can be (and often are) initiated by both print and visual popular culture texts.

PCNs offer a point of entry into the literate lives of many marginalized groups because they are widely consumed, readily accessible, and consistently (re)present (for study and entertainment) innumerable scenarios of various lived experiences (both "real" and "contrived"). Engagements with popular culture narratives often produce creative, artistic responses in talk and writing. Research suggests that in-

teractivity—visual, aural, and tactile engagements with media texts—arouses such responses because individual senses and sensibilities are in mutual play through these engagements and they motivate expression (Lovejoy, 2004; Manovich, 2001; Morse, 2003). Popular culture narratives are helpful in couching the descriptions of lover identities. Descriptions of the lover identities found in my research are presented below as direct-to-second-person address, for impact. Note that Supreme Lover Identity, the lover identity created by #BlackGirlMagic, subsumes and triumphs over all of the toxic, reactionary lover identities presented next.

**Main Chick.** A Main Chick is the head of a pack. If you are a Main Chick, you are a leader. You are an overachiever and desirous of, if not accustomed to, the finer things in life. Although it's not your preference, you don't mind being out in front, and running the show. You know how to get things done. You are responsible. You keep up appearances. You want the rights, titles, privileges, and accoutrement that come with having a person who gives you social capital...from the basic necessities to the most exclusive extravagances...along with a notable title (such as "wife" or "wifey"). So, you keep someone in your life at all times, or, you make it a point to do so. A great deal of your energy is tied up within this goal. You can be very judgmental and controlling...sometimes flippant. You can be privately and publicly very hard on other women. It's been said that you have little tolerance for "foolishness". You know how to take care of people and they look up to you for that reason (and many other reasons). You're good at being the head of a household. Although you want to be cared for, you're not quite sure how to accept care. This is ironic and confusing to many people because you *expect* care... along with respect. You're pretty tense.... a little stressed. You worry a lot. At times, you have been envied by other women and, quietly, you've enjoyed that quite a bit. Your lover identity enables chronically abusive men, thereby endangering other women, in addition to children, in schools and society. Examples of women storied in various popular culture narratives who appear to embody the Main Chick lover identity: Camille Cosby<sup>8</sup> and Dottie Sandusky.<sup>9</sup> In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé reveals herself to be a recovering Main Chick, calling for death to Side Chicks (10:47).

**Side Chick.** You are a woman on the side (or you have been before...or you are regularly). You are in want of attention, affection, and affirmation from others. You are desirous of time and energy from outside yourself (preferably from a man). You see yourself as deprived of gifts, great sex, and good times. Your desires are heightened and often the center of your attention. You're actually pretty strong on the inside, but you're weak on the outside. You melt with touch, taste, tickles, and stimulations. You want presents, trips, time, attention...or something much less grand...you'll take crumbs from a man and you've spun inside of "imaginary relationships" for months, even years. You're not quite sure what a real, bonafide, public, interdependent, healthy relationship really is. You have had semblances of the titles that a Main Chick enjoys (such as "wife" or "wifey"). However, they're

only given in flashes. The titles granted to you are bestowed in secret. They are not rooted or grounded in a pattern of observable normalcy that happens outside of a bedroom or hiding place. You feel desperate a lot. You feel confused often. You struggle with obsession and anxiety. You talk, a regularly, about your “relationship” and make ultimatums in relation to it. They are ultimatums you do not fulfill. You struggle with a particular kind of depression. It’s a depression that feels normal, even while it keeps you sick. You think it’s normal to not have what you want and exceptional to get what you need. Examples of women storied in various popular culture narratives who appear to (allegedly) embody the Side Chick lover identity: Rachel Roy<sup>10</sup> and Rhianna.<sup>11</sup>

**Bonnie.** You are a powerhouse. You are a ride-or-die chick. You believe in standing up for your man and standing in for him too. Men take advantage of your work ethic, your grind, your resources, your enterprising energy, your kindness, and your blindness. (Then again, you offer these things freely.) You stomach abuse and see it as a part of the process of winning the admiration of your Clyde. Bonnies are usually weak on the inside and very strong on the outside. You put on a good show externally, full of defensiveness, explanations, and justifications for all manner of emotional neglect, psychological abuse, financial extortion, and even physical violence. You put on this show with bravado, sometimes flair, a real defiance for counter-arguments, all while you die internally. You need to please. You need external affirmation like a drug. You’ve given your money, home, and self-respect to your Clyde at various times and in various degrees. You have no real idea or understanding of boundaries or standards. You believe this is a way to earn your status, to make yourself indispensable, to distinguish yourself from other women. You believe this even though this way of being is destroying you, very slowly and certainly. Examples of women storied in various popular culture narratives who appear to embody the Bonnie lover identity: Janay Palmer Rice.<sup>12</sup> Bonnie is probably Beyoncé’s subordinate lover identity.

**Victim.** You are the trickiest lover. You are the hardest to heal. You’ve either engaged in relationships with many counterparts or very, very few. You hate and fear those counterparts and want desperately for their approval and closeness too. You are a paradox. Because of the actual abuse and trauma you’ve suffered you are both desperate for attachment and also eager to avoid it. Your memory is spotty. It’s difficult to recall some (or much) of what has happened in your past, from childhood to adulthood. You have a level of dissociative disorder. You’ve blocked out various parts of your past. So, you’re often, in danger of making up abuse that didn’t happen, along with the abuse that did happen. You protect yourself and hurt yourself. You love yourself and hate yourself. You are either meek, mild, timid, and unsure, OR, you are cunning, deceitful, evasive, and slick. You are stuck in survival mode. People have to prove themselves to you, even though there is no way to win your authentic approval. You don’t really approve of anyone. You certainly don’t

approve of yourself. You think everyone is out to get you. You think everyone has left you out. You abandon and avoid yourself frequently. You do not know how to set boundaries. You use absolute language to say you are “never” wrong. You’re in danger of stunted growth when this is not acknowledged. You suffer relentlessly. You don’t apologize. You play the martyr. In love you “always” win and “always” lose, simultaneously. Examples of women storied in various popular culture narratives who appear to embody the Victim lover identity: Mary Lee Johnston, mother of Claireece “Precious” Jones, in the novel *Push* and film *Precious*. (Occasionally) Kenya Moore of the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* reality TV series.

**Bitch.** You are the baddest chick. People know not to mess with you, cross you, talk to you, or look at you wrong. You are generally angry, defensive, brash, and caustic. You yell at people in your head and in your life. You stand up for yourself, even if it means standing on top of others. You can be profane, sarcastic, argumentative, and fiercely protective. You tell it like it is. You can dismiss other’s experiences and feelings fairly easily. You’re smart as a whip. You can argue other people away, belittling them into oblivion. You are hardened, doubtful, negative, and non-believing. You are rolling your eyes at this description. While you’re tough inside and out, you can also be touchy and fretful. This binary makes you vibrate with tensions that other people can feel when they’re around you. You’ve noticed this and picked up on their distancing. This has made you harder, faster, stronger, and ready to pounce or retreat. You can disappear when/if confronted (although very, very, very few people know or would even believe this is true). Although, deep down, you know how afraid you are. You’re terrified...and you hate me for saying so. Examples of women storied in various popular culture narratives who appear to embody the Bitch lover identity: Joseline Hernandez of the *Love & Hip Hop Atlanta* reality TV series. Annalise Keating of the television drama, *How To Get Away With Murder*.

These toxic, reactionary lover identities are commonly manufactured among women who have been t/Terrorized in love and life. Because lover identity is one’s entire relational ideology and way of being, it can be a particularly powerful impetus for social and emotional justice movements, while also being a necessarily central subject of social and emotional justice work. This is true because, if lover identity is built in reaction to progressive and unmediated t/Terrors over the course of weeks, months, years, or lifetimes, it harms not only the one embodying the identity, but also every relationship she participates in. This includes relationships that are romantic, platonic, sexual, familial, and social, in addition to those that are professional, cultural, academic, and political. Thus, toxic lover identities can result in painful, deleterious, and broad-ranging intergenerational, communal, even global effects. That means, global consciousness can be understood as ultimately a result of waves of individually substantiated collectives of various lover identities embodied by each member of humanity. Various lover identities can then be examined

to understand and conceptualize social and emotional justice movements for all humankind. So, Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, presents a glimpse of this ultimate outcome through the examination of one ripple: her lived experience with relational terrors in love. Imagine the gargantuan depth, breadth, and impact of the collective.

In the next section, I will explore the ways supremacist patriarchal ideologies and enactments provoke dis-ease, dis-order, and dis-memberment of the iterative seven (7) fragmented selves and incite their clustering to form these five (5) toxic, reactionary lover identities. I will do this by exploring how supremacist patriarchies hurt and kill people. I will then briefly explain how these identities reveal a three-part problem (3) that foregrounds them: disease, disorder, and dismemberment in the *soul* and *flesh/body*. Finally, I will conclude with how Supreme Lover Identity, born of #BlackGirlMagic, can function as the one (1) solution to this cycle and its terrifying sociocultural and socioemotional outcomes.

### Regarding Supremacist Patriarchal Ideologies and Enactments

This section of this essay is taken from *The Revelations of Asher: Toward Supreme Love In Self* (Staples, 2016, pp. 549-554). It is used with permission. Here, I will make one of the most basic, accurate, and essential points about supremacist patriarchal ideologies. I will make a second point about how to dismantle such ideologies through #BlackGirlMagic, in the section that immediately follows:

#### ***Point #1. Supremacist Patriarchies Hurt and Kill People.***

The reach and influence of supremacist patriarchies extends to, and includes, ALL people. No one is immune to their outcomes. Both victims and perpetrators of supremacist patriarchies are at risk of figurative and literal deaths every day, over the course of their entire lives. We each suffer all manner of slights and unspeakable terrors that extend from these patriarchies. For example, people who self-identify as women, particularly those of us who self-identify as women of color, are subject to a pervasive and relentless range of anti-subject biases, social rejections, moral abandonments and outright erasures, cultural disregards, demoralizing body critiques, variations of neglect, physical harassments, batteries, assaults, rapes, etc. (see Alexander-Floyd, 2007; Crenshaw, 2015; Staples, 2016). These terrors wound the most vulnerable and unreconciled fragments of our Self. They trigger the voices and stories of our unmediated fragmented selves in particular ways. The existence and perpetuation of terrors trigger survivalist knowledge frames, incite fictive constructions of reactionary REALITIES, and encourage the “reasonableness” of deleterious and disabling ways of being. All realms bearing hallmarks of human identity (including the place of the spirit, the place of the soul, and the place of the flesh/body) and forming guidelines for human engagements, are affected by these phenomena. In effect, social relationships, practices, and institutions; cultural norms and values; and vast emotional and psychological terrains and enactments that are

occupied and operationalized by women, can become dangerously diseased. All of humanity is affected by these diseases...these terrors turned to Terrors.

Conversely, people who self-identify as men, particularly men of color, are too often trained to associate and interpret their social worth, cultural capital, political savvy, interpersonal intelligence, and physical prowess with their ability to uphold and perpetuate supremacist patriarchies in personal and public relationships.<sup>13</sup> These associations and interpretations are embraced even as one performs a range of dismissals and indifferences to the existence of terrors (*it's all in your head; that didn't happen*). They are often embraced while one minimizes the influence of the psychological and emotional outcomes of terror (*it wasn't that bad; get over it; that was a long time ago; it shouldn't matter anymore*). Training in racist, supremacist, patriarchal ideologies depends on defense of its normalization (*that's how men are; that's how it is; you should have expected this; it is what it is*). It also depends on degradation and/or objectification of others (*you're an ice princess; she's a tease; you're crazy; that one's a whore; she's a slut; you're so touchy, too sensitive; she got what she deserved; what did you expect; she was asking for it*). This training also depends on outright entitlement to the perceived privileges one gains from enacting racist and sexist patriarchal norms that perpetuate terrors (*I'm a man; I have needs; if you won't, someone else will; it's a man's world*). I say "perceived privileges" because people who self-identify as men do not actually benefit from supremacist patriarchies. They are, instead, subject to the same toxicities, differently ordered in the Spectrum of their Personhoods. These toxicities cause blindness, deafness, muting, and tastelessness in the place of the flesh/body; they cause de-sensitizations and cauterizations in the place of the *soul*; and, they incite aimlessness, Godlessness, and tendencies for irreverent dismissals in the place of the spirit. They further alienate people who claim manhood from the range and variation of constructed REALITIES, knowledges, and reactionary ways of *being* perpetuated among people who claim womanhood. This further roots the idea of separation (which, as discussed in footnote #75 in *The Revelations of Asher*,<sup>14</sup> is a terrifying illusion). It also makes relational and social t/Terrors probable and even inevitable.

### Regarding Supreme Lover Identity

#### *Point # 2. Supreme Love Heals and Saves People.*

Cultivating a Supreme Lover Identity means building up the internal constitution required to identify, interpret, and facilitate your trajectory of voices, stories, and terrors. It means demonstrating wisdom, compassion, acceptance, and inclusion in relation to every aspect of Self...becoming selectively and strategically involved with however the fragmented selves voice and whatever they story. Supreme Lover Identity is dependent on developing a highly and deeply literate life. It means learning to read, write, speak, and listen to selves on a regular basis. When supremacist patriarchies (constructing racism, sexism, homophobia, classism,

ageism, xenophobia, fatphobia, colorism, ableism, and the like) fulfill themselves through people and within relationships, invocations of Supreme Love can act as mediator, healer, even as savior, in the Spectrum of Personhood (where terrors are stored). Supreme Lover Identity enables the work of mediating not only the selves that voice and story the REALITIES, knowledges, and ways of being formed as reaction to supremacist patriarchies, it acts as grace too. It does this by redeeming and enacting the highest form of consciousness in relation to these REALITIES, knowledges, and ways of being. Such a consciousness saves by invoking radical acceptance, radical wisdom, radical inclusion, and soulful appropriation of all that is present (whether active or dormant). All of this means that when the spiritual, psychological, emotional, and physical terrors associated with supremacist patriarchies happen to people, especially women... particularly women of color... there is a way to do healing and configure counter-action to stave off figurative deaths and the entrenchment of hurtful ways of being.<sup>15</sup>

This is significant. It means that overcoming diseased lover identities is possible. This overcoming is so necessary, because, as I stated previously, in the chapter entitled, "This book is different: An introduction: A warped lover identity"... not only disables the formation of social, sexual, and romantic relationships, it disables familial, phileo, and communal relationships as well. Such disabilities undercut social and emotional justice work and activism because they stunt empathy, compassion, and altruism at their core.

**CAUTION:** The cultivation of this Love and Identity does not absolve oppressors or perpetrators of their guilt and shame for intentionally or unwittingly perpetuating supremacist patriarchies. Supreme Love doesn't do that. The forgiveness it extends does not let anyone off the hook. The forgiveness it extends creates space within Self for absolute nakedness, benevolent observation, complex acknowledgment, awareness of multifaceted connection, and the possibility for deliverance, healing, and atonement. It empowers people to meet with the effects of patriarchies by developing revelatory consciousness as a *spirit*, within their own wounded *soul*, and *soma* (*flesh/body*).

Once this extension in Self is made, it then becomes possible to branch it out to Others, and to the World. This extension... this blanket hope, and deific power... alters global consciousness, one person, one partnership, one community, and one nation at a time. It results in a dismantling of patriarchies. When taken seriously, the cultivation of a Supreme Lover Identity then makes justice work palpable, personal, and perpetual. It really anchors social and emotional justice work by securing the respectful regard and inalienable rights of people who are singularly or multifariously marginalized, victimized, brutalized, neglected, penalized, etc. Such people Self-identify as women, persons of color, those who are called [dis]abled, homosexual, transgender, queer, fat, old, etc. (although, of course, Supreme Love

is not reserved for any one type of person... Supreme Love and Supreme Lover Identity is for *everyone* and *everybody*).

Remember this takeaway, if you remember nothing else from this endarkened, feminist, new literacies event: Suppressed and enacted supremacist patriarchies hurt and kill people. The ideologies, words, behaviors, actions, and systems they construct, sanction, justify and perpetuate from the personal to the public, through all manner of relationships, wound the place of the *spirit*, the place of the *soul*, and the place of the *flesh/body*. The social justice movements developed to support the oppressed, marginalized, disenfranchised, rejected, abandoned, erased, murdered people who bear their brunts cannot have the deep roots and far-reaching effects of our wildest dreams unless they are paired with emotional justice work that privileges the complex knowledge, REALITIES, and generated ways of being among terrorized Black women.

**To Be Clear:** Being a Supreme Lover does not mean coaching women to be doormats (when I write this, I am considering how Supreme Love's emphasis on acceptance, forgiveness, inclusion, etc. can be misunderstood in its application). It does not mean allowing male-generated or systemically sustained violence from the personal to the public to be ignored or [God forbid] condoned (when I write this, I am considering Supreme Love's emphasis on the Self as primary context for work instead of the Oppressing Other). Rather, it means acknowledging the inherent authority and government of the One who can be healed and saved: You, Me, Us—Self: by cooperating with/learning from/emulating sincerely and consistently the Highest Order of Divine Thought in relation to humanity from the inside out. This vantage point results in impacting resistances, protests, scaffolds of dissent, and methods for transgression, transformation, wholeness, and cure. These emotional justice movements generatively affect both oppressors and oppressive systems. This is evolution of collective consciousness, paradigm shift, cultural progress, and social re-design that can reasonably coincide with altered laws, policies, curricula, media landscapes, and social practices. This is how change happens and takes root. And people who say they are men can be... must be... allies in this work. #LetsGetSome #SupremeLove #SupremeLoversUnite.

### Disease, Disorder, and Dismemberment in the *Soul* and *Soma* (*Flesh/Body*)

When the fragmented selves of individuals are inflamed at the intersections of racism, sexism, ableism, ageism, transphobia, xenophobia, etc. there is disease in one's interior space (as exemplified in Beyoncé's naked expression of internal strife in *Lemonade*). The emotional disease is a lack of certainty, health, strength, and soundness. This disease inhibits one's ability to perceive or accept affection, respect, and compassion. Inhibitions in receipt of these gifts result in inhibitions

in giving these gifts. Disorder in the place of the *soul* and *soma* (*flesh/body*) is lack of deliberative arrangement; it is psychological chaos. Disorder happens when the fragments of one's Self are repeatedly t/Terrorized and one lacks integral method for communication and relating. This results in confusion, random hoarding of thoughts, questions, and ideas, and crippled pathways for intimacy and empathy. To be dismembered in the *soul* and *soma* (*flesh/body*) is to be crippled and broken as a result of unmediated and untreated relational and social t/Terrors; it has to do with lack of coherence, unity, and solidity in social spheres. Its outcome is a vapid, aimless person without root or core.

Each of the five (5) toxic, reactionary lover identities is the external representation of the internal disease, disorder, and dismemberment that comes from a t/Terrorized collective Self. Each of the seven (7) fragmented selves, variously triggered and demoralized by relational and social t/Terrors compounded by intersectional pain points reproduced in a white supremacist patriarchal society, comprise a whole Self. Supreme Lover Identity—a product of #BlackGirlMagic—can heal t/Terrors, cure disease, repair disorder, and reverse dismemberment in the *soul* and *soma* (*flesh/body*).

### Supreme Lover Identity—A Product of #BlackGirlMagic: A Conclusion

Beyoncé comes to hint at the presence of a Supreme Lover Identity when, at the end of *Lemonade*, she accepts all of her disease, disorder, and dismemberment by recognizing the voices and stories of her terrorized fragmented selves. As she performs various lover identities, holding to her dominant and subordinate expressions powerfully, she orchestrates her multivocality and organically produces balm through verse. Her radical acceptance and compassion of selves and stories leads her to author her own conclusion, noting, “my torture became my remedy” (52:01). This exemplifies a crux of this ultimate, encompassing lover identity: A Supreme Lover is one who loves without conditions. S/he is so filled with the power of radical acceptance and forgiveness, deep wisdom and courage, that s/he cannot be deterred in her quest to fulfill the fullness of her/him/themselves by anything, such as fear-inducing social risks, perceived relational failures, un/intended emotional hurts, threats of personal humiliation or pain, physical abuses and violations, psychological manipulations and traumas, and relational disappointments. A Supreme Lover is both respectful and relentless. She is aware of fear and is dominant in relation to it, perhaps even integrated with it, and able to transform its crippling powers into energy that fosters forward, (r)evolutionary motion in lived experiences and relationships.

To cultivate a Supreme Lover Identity means to know the iterations of one's Self in fragments, to really dig them out, hear their voices, learn their stories and the revelations they contribute to the center, to the whole of one's Self. It means to then choose, from both the most divine and base aspects of Self, ways to access,

engage with, and learn from those voices and stories on a daily basis (perhaps even an hourly basis). It means learning methods for respectfully being (with) ourselves and all that we know as REAL. It also means positioning and integrating aspects of Self toward wholeness and completeness. A Supreme Lover Identity is a critical, creative power in consciousness endowed to every human being by his or her Creator. This identity is already in you, as it is in me. It only needs to be recognized in the Spectrum of Personhood,<sup>16</sup> learned, and cultivated to maturity. The study that grounds *The Revelations of Asher* taught me that being in touch with a Supreme Lover Identity and living with/for/in service to it at the forefront of consciousness, so that it deeply informs thoughts, words, and actions in the formation of every interaction and relationship, is very difficult work. Yet, it warrants commitment.

Such work is worth every effort because not only does this Identity result in immeasurable levels of personal freedom and strength, learning and bolstering the presence of a Supreme Lover Identity also results in social, cultural, and political capital. This is true because Supreme Love and Loving form the impetuses for all creation and destruction, all perceptions of good and all evil, every emotional, intellectual, spiritual, physical, and sexual intimacy, in addition to all sources of empathy, communion, and power. A Supreme Lover Identity contains All Things. When we know Supremely facilitated methods of love and loving, perceiving and relating, reading and writing, speaking, and listening...methods that access the wholeness of our Self, orchestrating and participating masterfully with the full Spectrum of our Personhood...we can be free to thoroughly know and save ourselves, righteously fulfill ourselves, tirelessly and deeply empathize with ourselves, and radically accept, forgive, and also serve ourselves. If we can do this for ourselves, we can begin to do this for and with Others. These abilities inherently enable us to initiate, respond to, and cooperate in the formation of communions that fertilize communities that can change the world. This is real talk. It is REAL being and REAL knowledge. It came from REAL writing that emerged from REAL Black women's souls. This is #BlackGirlMagic. The magic that is at the intersection of Blackness, Girlness, and Womanness in the scope of humanity makes Supreme Lover Identity possible, rendering its ideologies and ontologies not only accessible, but also generative and expandable. Thus, #BlackGirlMagic produces Supreme Love, providing a way to heal our *souls*, heal our *soma* (*flesh/body*), and heal the world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Poems: "For Women Who Are Difficult to Love," "The Unbearable Weight of Staying," and "Nail Technician As Palm Reader."

<sup>2</sup> I see Black Girl Magic (BGM) as preceding, enlivening, and following Black Woman Magic (BWM). I use BGM as a dominant term in this essay to note its significance as a precursor to, and stabilizer of, BWM. I refer to BGM as a necessary originator of freedoms for oppressed and marginalized people because the unique balance of innocence and fearlessness in BGM is the germinating spark required for the development of BWM. So, I write about

BGM here, though not yet about its indelible and intertwined relationship with BWM.

<sup>3</sup> The ten (10) individuals who were members of the ethnographic, narrative inquiry upon which *The Revelations of Asher* was built each identified as heterosexual, cisgender, African American, middle class, Christian women. For the purposes of my research, I defined inquiry members as college-educated, post-adolescent/young adult women. At the time of the study, each member was between the ages of 26 and 32. I (the author), was also counted as a member of the inquiry.

<sup>4</sup> I define macroaggressive Terrors as relational or social abuses - linked to intimate partners or community members. Terrors stem from terrors the way trees come from seeds. Terrors manifest in the flesh/body, are exacted by the flesh/body, and do damage to the flesh/body. Terrors are easily documented (i.e. they make the news and one can file a police report testifying to their existence). Some relational Terrors are: child molestation or sexual abuse, rape, bunny boiling, and physical battery. Some social Terrors are: corporal punishment in schools [for more on this, see Crenshaw. K. (2015). *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected* (African American Policy Forum). New York: Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies] police brutality, and anti-black, anti-woman, anti-gay, anti-(dis)abled, anti-fat, anti-aged vigilante terrorism. Terrors often erupt in bruised, broken, maimed, and/or dead flesh/bodies. Terrors are anchored in substantive materials like skin, bones, blood, in addition to matter whereby we make clothing or tools that can inflict pain or bring demise to flesh/bodies. So, Terrors are overtly brutal to the extent that terrors are covertly disorienting.

<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, I also, to a lesser extent, explore the ways Black supremacist patriarchal ideologies and enactments perpetuate t/Terrors in the lives of Black women.

<sup>6</sup> t/Terrors are not confined or even defined by gender identity or sexual orientation. I note this qualifier only to expound upon the example provided.

<sup>7</sup> Learn more about these microaggressions as habits of individuals who suffer with various personality disorders by visiting this site: <http://outofthefog.website/traits>

<sup>8</sup> Camille Cosby's husband of 50 years, Bill Cosby, has been accused of drugging, molesting, and raping women over the course of their marriage. Camille Cosby publicly denies knowledge of these crimes and rejects culpability in their perpetuation.

<sup>9</sup> Dottie Sandusky's husband of 45 years, Jerry Sandusky, has been convicted of grooming, molesting, emotionally terrorizing, and raping children. Dottie Sandusky publicly denies knowledge of these crimes, refutes the conviction, and rejects culpability in their perpetuation.

<sup>10</sup> Rachel Roy, a high-end fashion designer, has been accused of inappropriate relations with Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter, a man who is married to Beyoncé Knowles-Carter.

<sup>11</sup> Rhianna, a pop singer, has been accused of various affairs with multiple men in the entertainment industry.

<sup>12</sup> Janay Palmer Rice is the wife of Ray Rice, an NFL player, formerly of the Baltimore Ravens. The two were captured on surveillance video in an altercation in which Ray Rice sucker punched Janay Rice, knocking her unconscious then dragging her body across the threshold of an open elevator. Janay Rice later publicly forgave Ray Rice, denied that he beat her, married him, and defends him vehemently.

<sup>13</sup> To read more about the construction of masculinities in relation to the racist, homophobic, capitalist, imperialist ideologies of Western patriarchies, in particular, see: hooks, b. (2004). *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*. New York: Routledge; hooks, b. (2004). *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. New York: Atria; Majors, R., & Billson, J.M. (1992). *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books; Neal, M.A. (2013). *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities*. New York: New

York University. To read more about how White, supremacist patriarchal norms and values are etched into the fabric of American (Western) sociocultural and socioemotional terrain, see: Kimmel, M. (2008). *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men*. New York: Harper Collins; Kimmel, K. (2012). *Manhood In America: A Cultural History*. New York: Oxford University.

<sup>14</sup> “Here is another truth: There is no separation. Separation is an illusion. This illusion is also a result of racist, sexist, supremacist patriarchies. The sociocultural and sociopolitical divisions they introduce within and across communities actually serves in perpetuating manifold oppressions by pitting women against each other, thereby, weakening our individual sensitivities, associations, and respect, and also crippling our group power” (Staples, 2016, p. 332).

<sup>15</sup> terrors cause figurative deaths in the Spectrum of Personhood. terrors can be categorically organized by noting the ways people voice and story accounts of mental confusion, social humiliation, emotional neglect, and physical violence in the context of all manner of relationship (including romantic, sexual, social, professional, familial, and phileo). All of these types of terror meet in a nexus that is signified by, cyclically responsive to, and resulting in, emotional and psychological trauma that manifests in various ways. As personal and public ideologies supported by deeply complex systems of oppression and dehumanization (e.g., racism and sexism) play out in relationships via the connections we bear to one another, we are stuck in the spin of unreconciled post-traumatic stress and disordered spectrums. When this happens and is not interrupted and healed, no one can realize justice, be it emotional or social. This is true no matter how many rallies we stage, how many laws get changed, what policies are revised, and whatever curricula and counseling programs are implemented.

<sup>16</sup> This entire section is an excerpt from Staples, J. (2016). *The revelations of Asher: Toward Supreme Love in Self [An Endarkened, Feminist New Literacies Event]* (pp. 19-21). New York: Peter Lang.

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## Appendix

### The Seven [7] Fragmented Selves

**Rajah**—a spiritually inclined fragmented self who performs iterations of ethereal wisdom and peace; she refers to Biblical scripture and mystical thought; she demonstrates patience; she invokes stillness and quiet through her voice and stories; a prayer warrior; Rajah is a bearer of hope, faith, and love.

**Maven**—a maternal fragmented self who performs oversight and advising; she cautions, warns, tempers, and justifies; Maven is serious, she believes in tradition; Maven provides boundaries, and reminds of laws and reason.

**Asher**—a teacherly fragmented self who performs inquiry, commends searches, gathers information, passes judgments, processes knowledge, explores binaries, and asks questions through her voice and stories; a leader; Asher is resistant, curious, sassy, determined, and a little sarcastic; she keeps records, keeps scores, and charts course, accordingly.

**Kagan**—a sensuous, vivacious, funny fragmented self who performs sexuality, heightened energy, style, and vivaciousness; she is bold; she explicates, insists, relies on pragmatism, and appreciates material, concretized things; she enjoys attention and indulgence; Kagan is challenging, impulsive, desirous, and emphatic, even brash.

**Nason**—an approval seeking fragmented self who performs pursuits of external validation; she longs to please through her voice and stories; she enacts desperation and neediness; she tries too hard and yet, can be evasive; she simultaneously embodies unencumbered and unregulated kindness and fear; Nason is a people pleaser, regarding the opinions of men and women above her own; she is mindlessly loyal and can be easily controlled.

**Laish**—an insecure, small, timid fragmentation who performs brokenness and uncertainty; she contemplates (un)worthiness and power; she gives voice to silences and can perform fading, even erasure in her diminutive stature; Laish provides energy for hesitations, contemplations, and sympathies; she embodies tenderness, stillness, and quiet.

**Sash**—a dissenting, contentious, angry fragmented self; she embodies all that is contrary, competitive, disagreeable and base; she can be loud (thrashing) or quiet (smoldering); Sash defends and confronts; she is an armed guard; she is argumentative; she is resistant, bold, and brave; she can bind and serve as wedge; she haunts and halts.

# A Rhetorical Analysis of Beyoncé's "Freedom"

## An Examination of Black College Women's Experiences at Predominately White Institutions

*Robin J. Phelps-Ward, Courtney Allen, & Jimmy L. Howard*

### Abstract

In this article we discuss the illusions of freedom and the complicated relationship Black women have with institutions of higher education. We suggest Beyoncé's performance of "Freedom" at the 2016 BET Awards metaphorically and symbolically underscores the experiences of Black women in college. Through a rhetorical analysis of Beyoncé and Kendrick Lamar's BET Music Awards performance of "Freedom," we explore how the venue, visual style, and lyrics symbolize the feelings of unity, frustration, resistance, resilience, struggle, and disposability embodied in the experiences of Black women enrolled at colleges and universities in the United States. Using Black feminist thought and intersectional frameworks we highlight the contemporary struggle for freedom and the failed promises of higher education, and encourage critical media literacy as a way for scholars and practitioners in higher education to allow Black women to own their freedom.

Keywords: Black, women, freedom, higher education

### Introduction

Public response to Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance at the 2016 BET Awards was overwhelming, positive, and inspirational especially given the current racial

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climate of the United States for Blacks (e.g., frequency of racialized police violence, race-centered hate crimes and college student activism, and race-related platforms of presidential candidates). The “Freedom” song from Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* album and BET Awards performance created a space for expression at a time when Black lives, Black activism, and Black culture have been at the forefront of media coverage while simultaneously at the periphery of broader public concern. Beyoncé’s opening BET Awards performance set the tone for an incredibly powerful and moving award show. The 2016 BET Awards show was explicit in the need to showcase performances and curate an environment that supported the new Black consciousness of the time and in many ways gave viewers at home permission to be unapologetically Black, even just for three hours. However, Beyoncé’s performance did more than serve as a warm-up for her home and live audiences. Her performance, featuring rapper Kendrick Lamar, gave viewers a glimpse into her successful *Lemonade* Tour. More importantly, Beyoncé’s performance represents a set of contradictions about Black<sup>1</sup> women in America and offers illustrative symbolism into the promise of freedom that has yet to be granted.

We argue that Beyoncé’s “Freedom” performance and lyrics vividly tell a story of Black freedom in the United States, especially for Black collegiate women. The call to higher education is one that Black women have met in droves. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2014), Black women are one of the most educated groups of American citizens (in terms of enrollment in post-secondary institutions). However, the myth of freedom shrouds their education, particularly given Black women’s lagging completion rates at every degree level. Black women are the cornerstone for much of Black life in America through their often held role of matriarch within Black families. Black women have consistently been at the forefront of liberatory movements and higher education has been no different. Throughout American history, Black women have exercised the little power they had to leverage the advancement of the Black community (Barnett 1993; Collins, 2000). This fight has often come at the cost of Black women’s freedom, and liberation for Blacks in spaces of higher education mimics the national trend of adversity. Within this paper we define freedom as the ability of Black women to define, express, and own their minds, bodies, and spirits independent of external influence and depiction. Blacks have constantly tried to find ways to insert their humanity into the consciousness of the academy, but to no avail as systems perpetuate White supremacist imperialist patriarchy (hooks, 2006). Beyoncé’s “Freedom” performance helps frame Black women’s call for freedom, after the promise of education has not been as liberatory as was promised.

### Responses to “Freedom”

Critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007) and rhetorical analysis (Bitzer, 1992) of Beyoncé’s “Freedom” performance offer effective ways to reflect on the text

and public responses to the text with a more informed lens. According to Kellner and Share (2005),

Critical media literacy involves cultivating skills in analyzing media codes and conventions, abilities to criticize stereotypes, dominant values, and ideologies, and competencies to interpret the multiple meanings and messages generated by media texts. Media literacy helps people to use media intelligently, to discriminate and evaluate media content, to critically dissect media forms, to investigate media effects and uses, and to construct alternative media. (p. 372)

Understanding the concept of media and the arts through a critical lens illuminates how the public can internalize and express themselves in media outlets. To gain a better understanding of the public response to Beyoncé's Freedom performance at the BET Awards we examined Twitter and Facebook. Within both social media channels, the lyrics of the song "Freedom" were a recurring theme among the text posted. The chorus of the song was the most frequently seen text. "I break the chains all by myself" and "cause a winner don't quit on themselves" appeared frequently through the hashtag #beyonceFreedom. Some users had strong reactions to the performance and used the hashtag #beyonceFreedom. One user posted, "We must use our voices to contact the politicians and legislators in our districts and demand social and judicial charges." Others noted the impact of the performance and addressed the effect it had on them, "What a POWERFUL performance last night", "#Revolution Televised Yeah!", "Just gave me a little more push," "We refuse to believe the bank of justice is bankrupt #MLK," "Starting to feel real Black powerish." The public response to the performance and the song displays a strong sentiment of the power within the community of Black women and the symbolism within the lyrics portray a powerful message to the public as well. Although, there was a large positive and empowering response to the "Freedom" performance, there was a negative backlash about Beyoncé leaving right after her performance because she needed to leave for her European tour. However, it seems this negative response, did not overshadow the uplifting and empowering "Freedom" performance. While a quick review of public responses to Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance reveal that reactions were overwhelmingly positive and spurred activist dialogue on social media outlets, a deeper analysis of the rhetoric within the performance is necessary to truly understand its power and impact.

As educators in higher education and people of color who identify as Black we (the authors) have a deep connection to what *Lemonade* presents symbolically to us, but most importantly to the impact and work we do in higher education. The song and performance of "Freedom" connects the struggle of Black women in society and how they are constantly made to prove their existence and place in the world. In higher education there is a similar thread of themes, tied to the lyrics in "Freedom" and the experience for Blacks, especially Black collegiate women, which we expose by answering the following questions: What does Beyoncé's "Freedom"

performance and song symbolize about Black womanhood and what parallels can we draw between the text and the experiences of Black women at predominantly White institutions (PWIs)?

### Black Women and the Struggle for Freedom in Higher Education

Within higher education, Black women—whether faculty, administrators, or students—must constantly prove their value to the larger academic community in terms of their intelligence, worth, and scholarship (Evans, 2008; Zamani, 2003). Although many faculty and staff of color are valued within the underrepresented population, they do not feel the same sense of value from the institution overall, mainly at PWIs. In a study by Wallace, Moore, and Curtis (2014), they examined reflective essays from Black women faculty depicting their experiences as scholars and social agents. The authors highlighted Black women faculty and their challenges of battling regular encounters with racism, sexism, isolation, perceptions of hostility, and being undervalued. Many women spoke of being mentors and social agents, and described how the balance between being faculty and mentoring was almost impossible. Being a social agent for these women was difficult, because of the obligations of balancing their research, teaching and service. The Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance ties well within this concept for Black women in higher education because Black women must break through so many barriers just to have the opportunity of an actual and proverbial seat at the table.

Although *all* of the experiences of Black women in higher education matter and should be valued, the Black women college student voice is suffering and truly requires attention (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016). For most Black women undergraduates, the feeling of fear overcomes them when navigating the campus culture of a PWI, which can also be one of the hardest tasks for them. According to Winkle-Wagner (2015) varying elements contribute to a sense of fear exists for Black women. These include a fear of "not fitting into the existing mainstream, white centered campus culture or of needing to change oneself to fit in" (p. 66). For many Black college women students this experience is a shared one from year to year, which makes the process of feeling accepted at a PWI seem unattainable.

### Unfulfilled Promises to Black Women

The experiences of isolation and marginality Black faculty and staff women experience extend to that of Black undergraduate experiences at predominantly white institutions. Messages to Black women from colleges and universities include many illusions of promises in the form of an unattainable view of equality and equity—promises of academic access. Black collegiate women are fed unfulfilled promises at every point throughout their higher education journeys. These neglected promises manifest in college pamphlets depicting smiling faces of students from

a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, in the words spoken by orientation leaders who make blanket characterizations of faculty and staff as “friendly” and “approachable”, on posters promoting clubs and organizations that encourage “all” who are interested to join or apply, and in the mission statements of colleges and universities across the country. Despite legislation and institutional policies that have led to desegregated institutions, affirmative action, and programs designed to promote equality and equity for all, inequity, racism, and sexism persist. There is also an overwhelming idea and illusion of community for Black women, which often fails Black folks at PWIs and thus poses potential barriers to completion (Rodgers & Summers, 2008). In their examination of the marginalization Black women graduate students experience at PWIs Green, Pulley, Jackson, Martin and Fasching-Varner (2016) highlighted the racism and sexism Black women experience. The counter-stories of Black women graduate students at a predominantly White institution illustrate the inequities present in an academic system steeped in patriarchal and racist ways of knowing and being. Green et al. argued for use of Black feminist realism (BFR), a framework woven from Collins (1986) and Bell (1992), which emphasizes the voices of women at the margins and the intersecting raced, classed, and gendered constructs that shape reality. They explained that a lack of representation, prevalent misconceptions about what constitutes scholarship, and identity crisis are the main realities that perpetuate inequity in higher education. More specifically, they asserted that “neoliberals, neoconservatives, and incrementalists have hijacked the idea that through education Black women are somewhat less excluded from the promise of social mobility in the ‘new post-racial America’” (p. 4). The red herring fallacy that asserts Black women’s progress and success in a “post-racial” society is the exact reason we have chosen to take a step back to re-examine and re-conceptualize the experiences of Black women in the academy who have lived as outsiders within the ivory tower.

### Black College Women’s Experiences

In her examination of the empirical treatment of Black women’s college success, Winkle-Wagner (2015) cautioned against jumping to conclusions about the success of Black, collegiate women in order to more clearly define the unique needs that exist. Researchers have essentialized Black women’s experiences and presented them as a homogenous group without class, gender, sexuality, age, or immigration status differences. Such treatment does little to dismantle oppressive systems that present obstacles along the path for Black women to graduate. However, the reality is that Black women always have to manage and negotiate their experience as a woman and as Black (Esposito, 2011). Intersectionality is a large part of Black women’s identity, and within higher education the concept of intersectionality helps scholars examine the double-bind, doubled-edged sword (Shavers & Moore, 2014), and double-jeopardy (Beale, 1979) associated with being both Black and a woman.

According to Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014), “Intersectionality is a fundamental to holistically explore the experiences of Black women at a PWI. To view their identities as separate experiences would be an injustice to their experiences would be an injustice to their experiences as Black women” (p. 284). The intersectionality of being Black and a woman in higher education creates more of a challenge in the navigational process. There is no way to think of these two identities apart from each other; they are inextricably tied, interrelated, and constantly in interplay with each other as Black women brush up against racist and sexist individuals, programs, policies, and other barriers. When understanding the navigation process, this can be empowering but also a barrier in higher education.

Ultimately, higher education scholars have generally framed success in terms of completion through degree programs attributed to Black women’s individual responsibility without a focus on Black women’s satisfaction or well-being in the context of institutional actions (Winkle-Wagner, 2015). Sociological and intersectional frameworks work to better examine Black women’s diverse experiences in the academy and lend solutions to discrepancy between Black women’s collegiate enrollment and completion.

According to Collins (2001), “Black women in academia differ in experiences, background, appearances, and beliefs; however they are connected in the academy in ‘their struggle to be accepted and respected members of society, and their desire to have a voice’” (as cited in Wallace, Moore, & Curtis, 2014, p. 45). The experience of the Black women, whether faculty, staff, or student is limited and at most times requires one to self-support and navigate alone through the process. There is an outward perception of the Black women’s experience as exciting and of value, but the actual internal experience does not mirror assumptions. Winkle-Wagner (2009) described the experience of the Black women student.

The feeling of difference of “being the only one”, of “being outnumbered” resulted in a sense that women ultimately did not belong on campus—or worse that they were among enemies. The overwhelming presence of White students on campus diminished the sense of belonging for many Black women. (p. 68)

While Black women possess a range of experience within the system of higher education, institutions have built support systems within this community to help Black women thrive. An intentional effort on the part of institutions to make space and understand the role and impact of Black women in higher education is necessary for retention (Hannon, Woodside, Pollard, & Roman, 2016; Patton & McClure, 2009; Porter & Dean, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). In their qualitative study Porter and Dean (2015) employed a phenomenological approach to identify factors that influence the identity development and meaning making of four Black undergraduate women at a PWI. The research in this study illuminated the ways in which Black women understand and make meaning of their identity in critical and powerful ways. The researchers attempted to understand the daily lives and

experiences of these women on campus and how identity impacted their navigation process and development. Porter and Dean found that support systems, maternal and familial influences, articulation of Black identity, and interactions with other Black undergraduate women played a major role in Black women's experiences. Such critical examination pushes the needle forward to understand the elements of the collegiate experience that challenge and support Black women collegians.

### Conceptual Framework

Theorizing from Patricia Hill Collins and Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) lend a particularly relevant conceptual framework through which to analyze Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance. While intersectionality focuses on interlocking systems of oppression that create barriers particularly for people at the intersections of race and class, Black feminist thought emphasizes Black women's experiences (Collins, 1986, 2000). Black feminist intellectuals emphasize self-definition and self-valuation, recognize the interlocking nature of oppression, and value Black women's culture (Collins, 1986). "Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-valuation process that has resulted in externally defined stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood" (p. 16). Self-definition is well illustrated in terms of Black women and their natural hair. For decades, the media has bombarded Black women with images that showcase and privilege Eurocentric standards of beauty and thus kinky, coily, and curly-textured natural hair has been viewed by popular culture as unprofessional, radical, and undesirable. However, Black women have resisted media's representations and redefined beauty through Twitter hashtags, blogs, YouTube videos, and other demonstrations in an effort to center Black women's beauty. The self-valuation implicit in Black women's self-definitions of beauty include sentiments that Black women are "happy to be nappy" (hooks, 1999), have made the personal political through their hair (see Lorde, 1990), and do not desire to fit in within the status quo. Black feminists are also concerned with the intersections of race, class, and gender and interlocking systems of oppression that dehumanize, relegate, and marginalize Black women.

Although strides for Blacks in the United States exist in some respects (e.g., increased access to jobs, education, and housing since the Civil Rights movement), progress for women has stalled because of the inherent patriarchy within oppressive systems that cut across race and class. Lastly, Black feminists celebrate and value Black women's culture. This culture is present in "creative expression of art, music, and dance, and if unsuppressed, in patterns of economic and political activity" (Collins, 1986, p. 22). Black feminists and intersectional scholars are concerned not only with the ways in which Black women, bound at the intersection of race and gender, self-define and self-value within oppressive systems, but how they re-create womanhood, sisterhood, and motherhood through activities in opposition of living on the margins or at the bottom in society. We argue that Beyoncé's "Freedom"

contributes to the self-defining, self-valuing, and unapologetically honest culture that Black women are (re)creating for themselves.

### Methods

Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance with Kendrick Lamar at the 2016 BET Awards, through its lyrics and symbolic imagery problematizes notions of freedom for Black women in the U.S. Specifically, we are concerned with how the performance framed and augmented the conversation of the contemporary experiences of Black women in higher education. In the post-modern era, art provides us with non-linear and abstract constructions of symbols, stories, narratives, and counter narratives from which the audience must draw their own conclusions (Auslander, 1992). We frame this performance as a post-modern art, which we argue provides a rhetorical situation from which we aim to analyze through our theoretical framework (Bitzer, 1992). The performance underscores the ways in which Black women are simultaneously restrained while fighting for their freedoms.

Through a rhetorical analysis of the visual and lyrical content, we identify the ways in which Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance at the 2016 BET Awards was not a passive, innocuous event, but is nested in the contemporary context and Black feminist imagination (hooks, 2000; Fraser, 2005; Weiler, 2008). Rhetorical analysis is defined by Selzer (2004) as "an effort to understand how people with specific social situations attempt to influence others through language" (p. 281). It should be noted that we do not believe that Beyoncé's rhetorical strategies are insincere or dishonest, but rather persuasive in nature (Yar, 2008). We believe that the use of rhetorical analysis is justifiable due to its influence on culture, audience response, and the persuasion of the performance (Finell & Liebkind, 2010).

Through our analysis, we explore how the rhetorical content was structured to frame and refute the dominant and essentialized narrative about Black women's success in higher education, and readjusted it to provide a counter-narrative which embraces the struggle toward true emancipation. Thus, our analysis was not only concerned with deconstructing the meaning of the messages communicated to the public, but also with the ways in which the audience is asked to (re)think and consider new ways of understanding.

Our analysis was constructed in three passes of analyzing the rhetorical content. During the first pass, we coded the performance for physical blocking for the live performance. This included lighting, movement of performers, stage happenings, and audience reaction. During the second pass, we coded the song lyrics through a Black feminist lens in order to draw connections between the symbolism of the text and Black women's experiences at PWIs in the United States. Through our analyses of the lyrics, we were concerned with symbolism, imagery, perspective of the artist, and style. In our third pass, we combined the visual and lyrical to perform a thematic analysis to assess symbolism and persuasive intent (Selzer, 2004). We

used electronic software (e.g., Microsoft Excel) to assist in tracking the timing (i.e., minutes and seconds) of the blocking and combined each line of the lyrics within the song to analyze the data of the performative texts.

As we were conducting this analysis, we (the researchers) engaged in active reflexivity by making meaning of our positionalities, reactions, emotions, assumptions, and interpretations of the content. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers engaged a peer debrief to address the credibility of the findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### Findings

Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance with Kendrick Lamar at the 2016 BET Awards was similar to her visual album in the way in which it articulated themes challenging feminism, love, Black womanhood, Black legacy, Black identity and a variety of other deep thought-provoking symbols. Many of the songs and videos on the album explore feminism, Black womanhood, and Black identity; however, the song "Freedom" intersects all of these themes to provide a stand-alone anthem, giving Black women the voice to express their anger with the world that continually ignores and dismisses them. However, "Freedom" also displays the essence of the Black woman gaining her stripes and being a warrior and freeing herself, and others, from mental and physical captivity. Themes related to unity, frustration, resistance and resilience, struggle, and disposability comprise the essence of the findings from the rhetorical analysis of the "Freedom" performance.

#### The Unity of the Black Female Experience

Beyoncé's performance helped narrate the necessity of unity among Black women. From the marching lines, to running in unison, there is much to be understood about the survival of Black women within institutions of higher education. The moments in the performance when the women marched or danced together in unison, were more than just choreographed dance moves. Each move was calculated to showcase the strength that Black women have in unison. The literature on the experiences of Black college women mirrors the "Freedom" performance and speaks to the ways in which Black women have thrived despite racist and sexist campus environments through support from their peers, Black faculty and staff, mothers, and Sister Circles (Croom, Beatty, Acker, & Butler, 2017; Grant, 2012; Porter & Dean, 2015; Shavers & Moore, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2008).

Shavers and Moore (2014) discussed the role of communalist attitudes of 15 Black women enrolled in doctoral programs at PWIs and found that the women involved in the study not only valued the Afrocentric worldview of communalism, but emphasized the good of the Black women community over their own goals. Through these findings the researchers suggested that "although the value of communalism

helped the participants persist, they also admitted to feeling challenged when the values of the department did not seem to emphasize communalism” (p. 26). Feeling “part-of-a-bigger-whole” (p. 23) and being in community with other Black women (Porter & Dean, 2015) serve as significant coping strategies Black women employ when navigating the challenges of higher education. The “Freedom” performance invokes unity in both the joy and struggle with their fight for freedom.

### Frustration with Lack of Progress

Often during the “Freedom” performance, the women dancing can be seen running on stage, but essentially going nowhere. At the end of their running they stand in formation to then frolic in the water, before dropping to their knees to bash the water with their hands in seeming frustration. The running expresses a sense of escaping toward freedom reminiscent of the experience of so many Black women when education was suggested as a way to free themselves from the shackles of America (Evans, 2008). There is a moment of celebration the dancers express, which is similar to the expressions of joy once women are accepted and admitted to institutions of higher education. However, that joy is quickly met with the realities of attending an institution that still has oppressive policies and practices that do not benefit Black women.

The reality is that a disproportionate amount of Black women are the most dissatisfied students at PWIs. Though academia is often portrayed as a field that combats inequities, many Black women find it as the field that actually reifies ‘racial hierarchies’ and gender-biases by marginalizing some groups and privileging others. (Green, Pulley, Jackson, Martin, & Fasching-Varner, 2016, p. 12)

Black women’s frustration with promises that do not match realities and lived experiences are reflected in the stagnancy performed by the “Freedom” dancers who essentially go nowhere and demonstrate with fierce gestures their dissatisfaction. The dancers’ performance, along with the lyrics, “Freedom! Freedom! I can’t move”, illuminate the ongoing non-linear progress and struggle Black women face in higher education.

### Resisting the Oppressive Structures of Higher Education and Resilience

Repeatedly during the “Freedom” performance and throughout the song lyrics, there is a sense of resistance to the structures that deny freedom. Beyoncé even articulates that she does not need help to break her chains, which implies that she can fight on her own. Nonetheless, the consistent call for freedom, suggests that there is a limit to what Black women can do without help. Beyoncé communicates the call to freedom in a more declarative than interrogative way; she is not asking for freedom. As Beyoncé demonstrates through her lyrics, she will continue to

resist until she gets freedom. This is indicative of Black women continually resisting oppressive structures of higher education. The symbolism of resistance in the "Freedom" performance is reflected in the literature on Black collegiate women's experiences, which emphasizes the determinism and motivation pulled from within during challenging times throughout the educational journey (Everett, 2015; Patton & McClure, 2009; Winkle-Wagner, 2015). In an effort to combat negative racial stereotypes some Black women have exhibited "prove-them-wrong-syndrome" which is "a response of determination and dedication to a task or goal that African American students use to overcome adversity and combat stereotypes" (Shavers & Moore, 2014, p. 26). Further, Black women have resisted oppressive structures in higher education by cultivating their own standpoints and spaces in the academy irrespective of dominant ideologies of community, mentorship, and success (Grant, 2012; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Winkle-Wagner, 2008, 2015).

As Beyoncé calls for freedom in her song, she must answer her own call. She is not interested in hearing back from others; she expresses a sense of self-empowerment. Beyoncé calls attention to the undeniable freedom that has come as a result of Black women's pain, perseverance, and implying that not only can she break her own chains, she is likely to free others as well. Not only can she provide herself the freedom she is promised, but she will do so at any cost. Black women show the same type of resilience in PWI spaces—in their classes where they are often judged by racial inference (Russell & Russell, 2015; Winkle-Wagner, 2008) and in social spaces as well. Often, Black communities must find their own ways to provide for themselves, as the institutions' structures do not provide adequate support. Black women are at the center of the movement to reform higher education for all Black students, and can be seen leading the charge for freedom for all. Throughout history, Black women have routinely equipped themselves with the tools they needed to liberate themselves and thrive, even in the worst conditions.

### The Struggle of Women Shadowed by Black Men

Toward the end of the performance, men dance on stage and seemingly gaze at the women dancers. In many ways their presence instantly objectifies the women and their bodies. Soon, the men join the women and stand in solidarity with them. However, after the men join the stage, there is a shift in tone from the more feminine ways of expression to more masculine. This includes rhythmic stomping and loud unified grunting. After the expressions of maleness, there is a show-stopping performance from Kendrick Lamar. Kendrick provides not only an amazing commentary on Black life during reconstruction, he reminds the audience that men often steal the spotlight from their Black counterparts. At one point, Beyoncé kneels and becomes an apparent accessory to Kendrick as he performs. This is symbolic in many ways. As in higher education, Black women's needs are often overshadowed by those of Black men. Patriarchy demands that women step out of the way to let men enjoy

the fruits of their labor and that men's issues are perceived to be more real than women's. No more clear is this concept than in higher education research, where scholars often neglect or do not attempt to understand Black women's experiences. Black women are constantly overshadowed by their counterpart's struggles, while they are concurrently fighting for their own struggles in addition to the struggles of Black men. Black women are alone in the fight for what would truly liberate them. In a conversation between bell hooks and Cornel West, hooks highlighted the division between Black men's and women's causes. "In the past few years, especially among Black critical thinkers and writers, there's been a great deal of jockeying for positions between Black women and Black men. There has been a kind of proliferation of the false notion that if Black women are being heard, Black men's voices are necessarily silenced, and if Black men's voices are heard, Black women must assume a voiceless position" (hooks & West, 1991, p. 3). The commentary on such gender jockeying in multiple aspects of society—from music to education—manifests itself in Beyoncé and Kendrick's "Freedom" performance.

### The Disposability of Black Bodies in Higher Education

At the end of the performance, the dancers lie still in the water. Even after their fight and call for freedom, they are motionless and lifeless in the water. The entire performance was dedicated to a narrative of a battle for freedom, which could be perceived as gained through death or a lost battle for true freedom. More to the point, this ending captures the notion of the disposability of and attention to Black women's bodies and helps illustrate the ongoing battle for humanity and liberation. Within higher education, Black women's bodies are seen as figures and numbers for diversity reports or made the focus instead of Black women's intellectual and emotional labor. Frequently Black women are used as props for institutional propaganda to suggest that the institution is more culturally diverse than its administration ever intend to be. Additionally, a focus on Black women's hair and physique consumes discussions and leads to stereotypical and negative attributions of Black women. Predominantly white institutions of higher education fail at supporting women of color, specifically Black women in terms of education and culturally relevant curriculum, mentoring, and support en route to professional careers. Time after time Black women are rendered invisible when it comes to receiving support and when their race or raced bodies become the focus on campus, in the classroom, and in the college community.

### Conclusion: A Path to Freedom

Through a rhetorical examination of the Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance we sought to answer two questions: What does Beyoncé's "Freedom" performance and song symbolize about Black womanhood and what parallels can we draw between the text and the experiences of Black women at predominantly White institutions

(PWIs)? With attention to critical media literacy and through an analysis of the "Freedom" song lyrics and performance, we found connections with the literature that discussed Black women's experiences of unity within a community of Black women, frustration with the lack of progress, resistance to oppressive structures, resilience, and the struggle of Black women shadowed by Black men. These findings align with the concepts of intersectionality and Black feminist thought, which explain the ways in which Black women must navigate interrelated oppressive systems while standing at the margins of almost every aspect of life.

We end this article with a path for those in higher education to understand the experiences of Black college women in the U.S. and what they can do to better uphold the promises of freedom within higher education. Promises to keep Black women safe, to care for their well-being, and offer psychological, psychosocial, and material support have not gone unnoticed. Beyoncé's "Freedom" implores higher education scholars to reexamine notions of success and achievement in a seemingly post-racial world and to examine not only what Black womanhood means generally-speaking, but how it is created in its infinitely unique manifestations from the standpoint of Black women themselves. Although we do not herald Beyoncé as a perfect public figure or feminist (see hooks' "Moving Beyond Pain", 2016), we do believe her "Freedom" performance and *Lemonade* album create spaces that shift conversations, breed activism, and spur dialogue for future generations to consider. While Black women have continued to create spaces where they feel known, safe, and powerful, institutions of higher education must work to proactively support activities that allow for Black women to gain increased access to community, mentoring, and developmental skills. Higher education must change its culture and how it views women in order to make good on its promises and allow Black women to own their freedom.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> We use the term "Black" throughout this article to refer to Americans of African descent across the African diaspora.

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## The *Bad Bitch Barbie* Craze and Beyoncé African American Women's Bodies as Commodities in Hip-Hop Culture, Images, and Media

Crystal LaVoullé & Tisha Lewis Ellison

### Abstract

In this special issue of *Taboo*, the authors use Beyoncé's album, *Lemonade*, to introduce the concept of the *Bad Bitch Barbie*, a term used to identify a woman who embraces her body while simultaneously using it as a commodity. Representing a Black body ideal in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses images of Black women's bodies to express empowerment, boldness, and resilience as Black women struggle to live in a racist and sexist society. There has been recent interest in the ways Black women have been portrayed in current media and popular culture, and many individuals have taken the opportunity to honor Black women's beauty, power, and resilience in the era of #BlackGirlMagic by paying homage to women who use music, sound, and the arts to tell their stories (Wilson, 2016; also see Jessica Care Moore's website, "Black Women Rock" [<http://www.blackwomenrock.com>]). In this article, our aim is two-fold: first, we offer a historical review of the ways Black women and their bodies have been portrayed in music as well as in the political, cultural, and social spaces associated with Black women's worldviews. Second, we review songs from *Lemonade* to describe the *Bad Bitch Barbie*, who welcomes glamorization and embraces the profitability associated with the racialization, sexualization, and subjugation of Black women's bodies. This information is vital in discussions about how young African American girls emulate the likes of Beyoncé, and represent themselves in a mainstream culture whose beliefs are informed by socio-historical experiences concerning sexual imagery. The *Bad Bitch Barbie* figure recognizes—and, to some

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extent, accepts—her objectification; she negotiates her image and helps to direct the ways in which she is represented.

Keywords: African American women, Black Barbie, Black music, digital media, female sexuality, hip-hop, misogyny, race, sexual imagery

### Introduction

Music, music videos, and images play a pivotal role in the messages individuals hear and see. These messages can be positive or negative, and they can influence how consumers and producers respond to and interrogate them critically, socially, physically, and emotionally. When Beyoncé's visual and conceptual album *Lemonade* launched in 2016, it called attention to salient social and political issues faced by individuals of color. While its message of “every woman's journey of self-knowledge and healing” (via *Tidal*'s<sup>1</sup> announcement) drove the album's concept and title, other themes of emancipation, womanhood, identity, and sexuality became bold statements that left an indelible mark on viewers' lives. For instance, in the wake of *Lemonade*'s release, a global explosion of posts, tweets, memes, and video images flooded social media, sparking curiosity and interest about its content, and vehemently changing the face of pop music and culture for listeners.

As African American<sup>2</sup> women researchers and teacher educators, we credit Black feminist theorists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, whose activism is best known through their written and artistic work on feminism, civil rights, women's equality, and social consciousness for Black Americans—particularly Black women. For instance, Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) became a foundational text of concepts about the Black women's experiences, self-definitions, self-knowledge, and self-validation. Situating Black women's emerging power as “agents of knowledge” (Hill Collins, 1990, p. 256), Hill Collins revealed how it is impossible to understand Black women in practice without acknowledging their agentive, dominant, and knowledgeable selves. Through its discussion of recurrent issues concerning identity, politics, race, and violence, which have continuously shaped the lives of Black women, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1991) describes the overlapping intersections of social justice problems like racism, sexism, classism, and mental/physical health. These theories are significant when thinking about the ways Black women are represented and treated in today's world as well as how the current generation of young Black girls' desires to be seen and heard in their classrooms, communities, and in the media are similar to ideas expressed in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*.

As an extension of these theories, Black women's voices (like Beyoncé's) have entered pop culture, hip-hop, and other digital spaces to unapologetically express the deepest—and at times, the darkest—parts of Black women's lives. In an attempt to understand and react to Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, which has sold over 2.2 million units and garnered \$2.4 million, it is important to examine the ways

in which this album has surpassed its predecessors, Beyoncé's earlier LPs about love, monogamy, and self-reflection. *Lemonade* created massive controversy for its alleged anti-police rhetoric, its rallying of activists, its Black Panther imagery, its allusions to protests, its illustrations of Black rage (specifically that which was caused by racial apathy after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005), and its references to the continuous killings of Black men and women. In an article for *Time* magazine, Melissa Harris-Perry (2017) states that, with *Lemonade*, "Beyoncé publicly embraced explicitly feminist blackness at a politically risky moment." Because of this unforgettable album and its myriad perspectives on the social construction of Black womanhood, identity, and sexuality, Black women are now boldly occupying larger spaces wherein, although their everyday lived realities are not necessarily appreciated, they are at least now seen.

Historically, Black women's voices, views, and bodies have been questioned and politicized. However, with *Lemonade*, Beyoncé has formulated a new perception of reimagining and re-theorizing the Black woman as a *Bad Bitch Barbie*, a woman who celebrates and embraces her body while simultaneously using it as a commodity. We offer *Bad Bitch Barbie* as a conceptual framework that should not be viewed as negative or vulgar, but as an alternative characterization that embodies past and present research about the historical representations and perceptions of Black women, their bodies, and their voices. As an ode to Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, we introduce Beyoncé as a *Bad Bitch Barbie*.

### *Bad Bitch Barbie* as a Conceptual Framework

The *Bad Bitch Barbie* is a contradiction in terms, because it represents both a western/European beauty ideal of long straight hair and keen features as well as Black standards of beauty: voluptuous hips, a small waist, and a large derriere. In the same way, the *Bad Bitch Barbie* represents direct objectification of the Black female body while simultaneously representing a performance in feminism. A *Bad Bitch Barbie* is an image of a woman who rises against opposition and stands her ground. She is both a Black feminist and someone who acknowledges that intersectionality and racism exist. The original Barbie, first introduced by Mattel in 1959, is a White, female cultural icon that some believe depicts the ideal image of a woman. Others have argued that Barbie's physical dimensions have been criticized for serving as an unrealistic depiction of how women—and particularly women of color—should look. The sometimes-curvy physiques of African Americans are not acknowledged by Mattel's previous attempts at Black dolls—the "Francine" and the "Colored Francine" dolls, which still had European features in the mid-1960s, and were later reintroduced as "Black Barbies" in 2009. However, in 2015, Mattel's "Black Barbies" have short, curly, kinky hairstyles and diverse body types.

Historically, the term "Black Bitch" was frequently used to describe Black women from blaxploitation films, such as actress Pam Grier, whose character played the he-

roic role in the 1970s. Later, Lil Kim and Da Brat extended this term in their music videos and music. To some, being a “Black Bitch” was empowering, but had other sexualized and materialistic exchanges that later became problematic (Dunn, 2008; Smith-Shomade, 2002). The *Bad Bitch Barbie* has a specific role in supporting Black women who are not over-sexualized commodities, but who understand the histories of racialized and sexualized representations of Black women. The term is not used as an attempt to garner attention as it has in various musical genres like hip-hop; for example, rap lyrics have begun to usher in a trend of sexually marginalizing women, as noted in Nicki Minaj’s album *It’s Barbie Bitch!* (see Figure 1). Minaj’s lyrics are laden with raw sexual innuendos that describe Black women as “Black Barbies in the city / [with a] Fat ass and pretty titties...the baddest bitch in America.” By describing herself in this way and emphasizes her dating preferences—e.g., she “only fuck[s] with ballers.” Such language creates a stigma that can potentially diminish the agentive and socially conscious ‘badass’ qualities that we associate with Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*.

In addition, while the authors note the stereotypical gender implication, we selected this quote as representative of the connotation derived from the missing comma in “I’m Barbie, Bitch!” This is an important point of clarity in understanding that Minaj is not calling herself a Barbie Bitch; instead, she is referring to herself as Barbie and to others as ‘bitch’. Many celebrities and hip-hop artists have used the term bitch to refer to themselves and others as a form of female empowerment. Through social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, the term “Barbie Bitch” has now become an identity that many actively claim for themselves.

In the sections that follow, we examine the myriad and often contradictory historical representations that have strong connections to the images and messages associated with Black women and their bodies. As we consider the need to address the *Bad Bitch Barbie* as a conceptual framework, we ask: how have some Black women historically recommissioned objectification of Black women’s bodies, learning to survive—and, in some cases, thrive—from them?

### Historical Journeys of the Racialized and Sexualized Representations of Black Women’s Bodies and Images

The historical images we selected are significant to our conceptualization of the *Bad Bitch Barbie* image and Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*. This section guides our discussion about the ways mainstream culture shapes images and representations of Black women’s sexualities. We begin this historical journey through Black women’s objectification with Sara Baartman, also known as Hottentot Venus.

#### *Hottentot Venus*

In the early nineteenth century, Saartjie “Sara” Baartman became a widespread symbol of female sexuality for African American women. Baartman, a South Afri-

can native labeled as “Hottentot Venus,” was objectified and demoralized because of her extremely large derriere and large labia (see Figure 2). After she was lured

**Figure 1**  
*Nicki Minaj as Barbie*



to Europe and sold to a traveling circus, her naked body was paraded in front of Whites, and was used to justify claims that Black women were genetically inferior and sexually primitive (Jackson & Weidman, 2005). Her body's objectification continued even after her death at age 26, when her reproductive organs were put on display for 150 years, and a wax mold of her body and skeleton were displayed in the French National Museum of Natural History and the Museum of Man, respectively (Qureshi, 2004).

Caricatures also exaggerated parts of Baartman's body, depicting them as massively abnormal (Scully, 2009). These overemphasized features were used to degrade not only Baartman, but all Black women, and ushered in an era of the intense male gaze onto Black women's bodies in popular culture (see Figure 3). Baartman's treatment serves as a demonstration of the significance of imagery in representing Black women's sexuality. Though there are several scholarly debates regarding whether or not Baartman willingly presented her body for exhibition, the authors contend that, regardless of her complicity, Baartman's experiences provide a historical foundation for the objectification of the Black female body. In addition to being characterized as bizarre and unnatural while simultaneously exotic and enticing, the display of Baartman's body was a means for her survival.

**Figure 2**  
Sara "Saartjie" Baartman



Baartman's body is credited for serving as the basis of Black women's proscribed sexual scripts (Crais & Scully, 2008; Gilman, 1985; Magubane, 2001; Qureshi, 2004;

**Figure 3**  
**1810 Caricature of Baartman by British Artist William Heath**



Stephens & Phillips, 2003); however, Black female objectification is not limited to Hottentot Venus's 1810 appearance in Europe. Similar to Baartman, who was continuously compared to animals in both her physical appearance and intellect, women performers in the twentieth century (such as Josephine Baker and Dorothy Dandridge) were also portrayed as animalistic women who sexually taunted men with their bodies. In addition to perpetuating the ideal that Black women were always sexually available, these images gave the impression that Black women also took advantage of their physical characteristics as a tool to attract men.

### *Plaçage*

Indeed, although the objectification of Black women continued long after Baartman's death, the ways in which some Black women advocated for themselves within those modes of objectification changed. For example, as a form of survival, some women in the French and Spanish colonies of the New World participated in *plaçage*, the practice of making African and Native American women of mixed racial heritage sexually available through unofficial unions with wealthy White men. Though *plaçage* existed throughout the colonial period, it was most popular between 1769 and 1803 (Gould, 1998). The system was supported through "quadroon balls," which were social gatherings for women who were considered one-fourth Black because they often had one White and one biracial parent. During these balls, eligible quadroons were encouraged to enter into common-law marriages with wealthy White men. Although biracial women also participated in the balls, women with a more European appearance—with long hair and fair skin—were considered more desirable (Guillory, 1997). The unions were negotiated on the woman's behalf by their mothers, and typically included emancipation for the woman and the children who resulted from the union, property settlement by contract, educational and financial support, and physical protection. Although the system of *plaçage* was not legally recognized, the women, known as "left-hand wives," could inherit up to one-third of the property of their deceased common-law husbands (Gould, 1998). Initially used as a means for survival, *plaçage* became a tool for social agency, as the women were able to usurp limited control over their own bodies, change their economic circumstances, operate businesses, and amass wealth through property ownership—all because of the ways in which their bodies were used as sexual commodities (Chandler, 2016).

Over time, *plaçage* contributed to a community of mixed-race people who increasingly became known as Creoles: French-speaking descendants of French colonists (Voltz, 2008). Beyoncé herself has embraced and lauded her Louisiana Creole ancestry. Although the authors do not suggest that her ancestors participated in *plaçage*, Beyoncé's reference to her Creole heritage in a sexually suggestive way is reminiscent of *plaçage* history. For example, in the song "Creole," Beyoncé (2016) embraces the fantasy and mystique associated with women of mixed racial heritage, rewriting the sexual script to her advantage:

baby, I see you  
 that look in your eyes  
 hips that keep shaking  
 mysterious style  
 exotically tempting  
 familiar to me  
 that Creole sexy—it's all over me

Like women who participated in *plaçage*, Beyoncé has successfully used her body as a commodity, exerting control over the representation of her sexuality.

### Framing Beyoncé as *Bad Bitch Barbie*

The *Bad Bitch Barbie* concept acknowledges the objectification of Beyoncé's body and redirects it by navigating the objectification to her own benefit. A *Bad Bitch Barbie* develops ways to move from survival to success, embracing the body while using it as a means for self-empowerment. As such, Beyoncé is a *Bad Bitch Barbie*. Through visual representation, she challenges the sexual script by taking command of her own body. For example, in "Don't Hurt Yourself," Beyoncé disrupts the sexual script with an unapologetic opening line: "Who the fuck do you think I is? / You ain't married to no average bitch, boy." With this line, Beyoncé acknowledges herself as a "bitch," but makes it clear that she is not an ordinary woman. Indeed, the authors argue that Beyoncé is a *Bad Bitch Barbie* because she is both confident in and aware of her own value. She continues to demonstrate her authority with lines like, "You keep your money, / I got my own," which express her financial independence, a key requirement of being a *Bad Bitch Barbie*. Using both the music and video imagery of "Don't Hurt Yourself," Beyoncé establishes her *Bad Bitch Barbie* status, thus demonstrating both bodily and monetary control.

Prior to releasing *Lemonade*, Beyoncé established herself as a *Bad Bitch Barbie*, excepting her dominance as an artist. For example, in the song "Bow Down/I Been On," Beyoncé exhibits female dominance over her competitors due to her tremendous success and longevity in the entertainment industry. As Beyoncé sings, "I know when you were little girls, you dreamt of being in my world, / don't forget it, don't forget it, / Respect that: bow down bitches," she is attempting to exhibit dominance over newer female competitors. And yet, in spite of their power, *Bad Bitch Barbies* are not flawless. They merely use their voices to supersede their flaws. In the hip-hop influenced song "Flawless," Beyoncé samples Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx Talk "We Should all be Feminists" (2012) to demonstrate the ways in which we begin limiting Black women's voices in girlhood:

We teach girls to shrink themselves: you should aim to be successful, but not too successful; otherwise, you will threaten the man. We raise girls to see each other as competitors—not for jobs or for accomplishments...but for the attention of

men. We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are, for fear of being labeled as promiscuous. (Adichie, 2012)

The racialized and sexualized representation of Black women's bodies provided by Hottentot Venus, provide a historical context for understanding the development of the *Bad Bitch Barbie*. Likewise, *plaçage*, which made Black women systematically sexually available, links female objectification with profitability, and contributes to the tensions surrounding images of African American women. As a *Bad Bitch Barbie*, Beyoncé offers a counter-narrative, embracing the power of her sexual image and using it as a commodity, as seen in Figure 4, wherein she is photographed dressed as a Barbie doll, thus affirming this representation of her image.

### *Lemonade*: A Multi-dimensional Presentation of Black Women

In *Lemonade*, this album demonstrates self-reflective statements of female empowerment that frame Beyoncé as a *Bad Bitch Barbie*, demonstrating that Black women can be cognizant of and qualified to challenge their own depictions in popular culture. Through *Lemonade*, Beyoncé presents multi-dimensional representations of Black women demonstrating what it means to be fearless and beautiful while admitting feelings of weakness, vulnerability, and ugliness. Acknowledging Black women's diversity disrupts the sexual script that began with Sara Baartman, which depicted Black women as independent and promiscuous. The authors view *Lemonade's* portrayal as a counter-narrative because its women are complex characters. *Lemonade's* visual album represents the continuum of emotions and expressions felt by women who are hurt, betrayed, vindicated, and loved. Through visual imagery and song, Beyoncé presents a multi-dimensional narrative that acknowledges some women's struggles, highlighting the diversity of Black women's bodies as sexually suggestive, seductive, demure, powerful, youthful, hurt, confused, and forgiving, because Black women themselves are indeed all of these things.

In the same way that Julie Dash used her film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) to cinematically present Black women as diverse characters, Beyoncé uses *Lemonade* to demonstrate the dimensions of Black women. *Lemonade* visually illustrates the concept of "BlackGirlMagic," but also portrays Black women who are afraid, unsure and struggling for self-acceptance. *Lemonade* portrays Black women as triumphant, but also shows Black mothers who have lost sons to police violence and other social injustices (including Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, who was murdered by a Neighborhood Watch coordinator; Lezley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, who was killed by police; and Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, who was also killed by police). *Lemonade* also highlights Black wives who demonstrate anger, rage, and ultimately forgiveness after infidelity (e.g., in songs like "Formation" and "Intuition: Pray You Catch Me").

The songs from *Lemonade* consequently reveal a distinction between women who use hypersexualized images such as the *Bad Bitch Barbie* as agency, versus women

who are victimized and marginalized by these stereotypical images, is not crystal clear. Stephens and Few (2007) have reminded us that “everyday consumption of cultural and interpersonal messages regarding sexual images” not only has a direct impact on Black women, but also in how young African Americans sexually self-identify, behave, and experience life (p. 2). Black girls’ and women’s bombardment with media images that depict their bodies negatively, yet describe other women’s bodies in more positive terms, demonstrates the ways racism is used to render the

**Figure 4**  
**Beyoncé as Barbie**



Black female voice powerless through the degradation of her body. In *Lemonade*, however, the *Bad Bitch Barbie* figure rejects White beauty norms and the silencing of Black women's voices by offering a parade of Black women's bodies that are both sexual and beautiful. In this way, the *Bad Bitch Barbie* survives and thrives in a world that desires her while despising her. Displaying confidence and a willingness to confidently utilize her desirability to her own advantage while facing the world on her own terms are all essential elements to being a *Bad Bitch Barbie*.

### “Sorry”

The media bombards young impressionable girls with a standard of beauty that is highly sexualized. Richardson (2013) has explored the ‘twerking’ phenomena with adolescent girls, acknowledging the ways in which this dance phenomenon illustrates how countless young girls’ identities are influenced by social constructs such as rap music and rap videos. Nevertheless, although Serena Williams twerks in Beyoncé’s video “Sorry,” the authors would argue that the song and video represent resilience. In the video for “Sorry,” Beyoncé offers a parade of beautiful women who are unapologetically asserting their independence. The lyrics also reinforce Beyoncé’s status as a *Bad Bitch Barbie* who recognizes the likelihood of partner infidelity and chooses to address it with a barrage of strongly-worded phrases. Masculine gestures and lyrics such as “suck on my balls ‘cause I’ve had enough” offer an opposing view to the visual femininity displayed on screen.

### “Sandcastles”

The overarching theme of “Sandcastles,” which is framed with images of Beyoncé and her husband, Jay Z, is forgiveness. Through the lyrics and images, Beyoncé reminds the viewer that “every promise don’t work out that way.” The authors conclude that this sentiment balances some of the album’s more confrontational approaches to the unpredictable nature of love. Weidhase (2015) has contended that *Lemonade* “serves as a catalytic moment that frames the themes of bodily and monetary control evident in Beyoncé’s earlier work as explicitly feminist” (p. 121), but feminist and singer from the 80s rock group, The Eurythmics, Annie Lennox has offered an opposing view, describing Beyoncé’s feminist stance as feminism-lite (Lennox, 2014). Lennox suggested that, on a spectrum of feminism, Beyoncé’s brand of feminism would be at one end, with grassroots feminism on the other. Lennox stated that the twerking seen in the “Sorry” video is not feminism, and that there was nothing liberating and empowering about it. In one way, Lennox attempted to limit Beyoncé’s value as a feminist, reducing the performer to a single, sexually suggestive act, yet in another, she delivered a more involved thought:

...twerking is not feminism. That’s what I’m referring to...It’s not liberating. It’s not empowering. It’s a sexual thing that you’re doing on a stage. It doesn’t empower

you. That's my feeling about it, but, you know, actually maybe this is a good thing because it creates debate. (Lennox, 2014)

Indeed, although a feminist spectrum may exist, it is inequitable to suggest that one cannot be a 'true' feminist if one presents a sexual performance or image. Black women have the unique challenge of navigating gender and race, creating a vastly different 'feminist' experience that might not be adequately addressed through a traditional feminist reading.

### Feminism and Hip-Hop Feminism

Hip-hop feminism, as defined by Joan Morgan (1995), is grounded in Black feminism, but specifically considers the issues of women who are a part of the hip-hop generation. Morgan (1999) has described hip-hop feminists as those born after 1964 who deconstruct and reconstruct feminism within the context of their own unique experiences, including the world of hip-hop. Hip-hop feminism provides a framework specific enough to examine Beyoncé as a *Bad Bitch Barbie* and examine the images of women of color that are presented in *Lemonade* because it directly confronts issues and concerns of Black women who are part of Beyoncé's generation.

As a theory, hip-hop feminism gives voice to years of dominating opposition, sexism, and discourses that attempt to dis-empower women of color and render them powerless in the utilization of their own bodies. As a movement, hip-hop feminism uses the political, cultural, and racial climates of the hip-hop era as a backdrop (Durhan, Cooper, & Morris, 2013; Morgan, 1995; Pough, 2004; Rose, 1991; Rose, 1994). Thus, hip-hop feminism presents a critical view of Black women of the hip-hop generation, including the roles these women select for themselves, and the ways in which Black women are viewed, positioned, and portrayed in the media.

Beyoncé's claim to feminism was met with skepticism with feminist scholars, who discounted her because of the ways in which she uses her body as a commodity. However, the authors argue that Beyoncé's "femme" persona does not negate her status within the feminist realm. A sexualized woman can be a feminist. In fact, to take the issue of black women's hyper-sexuality out of feminism ignores the ways that Black women have been historically presented, misrepresented, and depicted through sexualized images. Musically, the world hears evidence of Beyoncé's feminist journey in her earlier songs about independence (such as "Independent Woman"), and sexual freedom (such as in "Baby Boy").

Beyoncé's feminism can also be seen on the page. In her *Shiver Report* essay, "Gender Equity is a Myth" (Knowles-Carter, 2014), she raised important issues concerning economic equality for women, and offered some foundational insight into her own feminist views. In *Lemonade*, however, the entertainer chose to express her feminist views through a combination of music, poetry, and visual representations. Although Beyoncé has begun to publicly announce her feminist stance, the authors agree with Durham, Cooper, and Morris (2013), who have argued that Beyoncé's approach to

feminism may be more closely identified as hip-hop feminism. The “critique (too much sex, too little ‘actual’ feminist work) that removed Beyoncé from the discourse of feminism place[s] Beyoncé firmly in the discourse of hip-hop feminism and its motivation to move feminism beyond the walls of academia through the privileging of popular culture as ‘space for a new generation of feminist theorizing’” (Durhan, Cooper, & Morris, 2013, p. 722). Consequently, the authors use hip-hop feminist theory to examine the narrative Beyoncé portrays in *Lemonade*.

An examination of Beyoncé as a *Bad Bitch Barbie* helps to place the social circumstances of Black women’s bodies within a historical context. Through hip-hop feminist theory, we argue that the rise of the *Bad Bitch Barbie* craze is symptomatic of a variety of issues, including (but not limited to) the ways women view themselves and the ways Black women’s images are circulated, interpreted, and critiqued in the media. Venus Evans-Winter (2005) and Venus Evans-Winters and Jennifer Esposito (2010) have challenged society to redefine resiliency for Black and Latina girls, and we contend that this new definition also applies to Black women. Morris (2016) has demonstrated the ways in which Black girls and women are still subjugated to the Jezebel stereotype, and labeled as hyper-sexual, sassy, loud, and cunning. Through a careful examination of school institutions, Morris (2016) discussed the multidimensional stereotypes and debilitating narratives that portray Black girls and women in a negative light. The ways in which Black girls are often typecast as promiscuous ‘bad girls’ is reminiscent of the Jezebel image that is part of our social history. Why are Black girls and women so easily typecast as ‘angry,’ even when we display appropriate levels of responses? Ruth Nicole Brown (2009) has shared ways that hip-hop can be used to work successfully with Black girls. By celebrating the Black girl, we can help to change the narrative used to stereotype Black girls and women. Likewise, Beyoncé uses *Lemonade* and a medley of hip-hop beats to offer a counter-narrative, a positive way of viewing Black and Brown girls and women. In the same way that the website “Saving Our Lives Hear Our Truths” (<http://solhot.weebly.com/>) creates a digital space to celebrate Black girlhood, *Lemonade* provides a space for black women’s creative performance and expression.

*Bad Bitch Barbie* represents the complexities of being a woman during the era of hip-hop. Beyoncé is widely acknowledged and accepted in the hip-hop community, due to her collaborations with hip-hop artists and her marriage to rapper Jay Z. As a genre of music, hip-hop influences how individuals embody the self, and how they use media and digital tools as a space to create meaning for themselves and others (Lewis Ellison, 2014; Lewis Ellison & Kirkland, 2014; Petchauer, 2012; Pough, 2004; Stokes, 2007). Beyond the deep analysis of lyrics and beats lies a culture that combats the enforcement of outlandish and demeaning images and narratives of women (particularly African American women), and serves to encourage those women to compete against both males and each other in healthy ways in the industry. We live in a culture where hip-hop music and reality television shows such as “Love and Hip-Hip [Atlanta/Hollywood/New York]” and “Sisterhood of Hip-Hop” have infiltrated

the airwaves, digital media, and social networking sites with known and unknown artists who intend to make a name for themselves. Examining the *Bad Bitch Barbie* image through a hip-hop feminist lens acknowledges the complexity of all of these individuals' portrayals of Black womanhood.

### Discussion and Educational Implications

The *Bad Bitch Barbie* image developed out of the history of oversexualization and commodification of Black women's bodies. The authors used *Bad Bitch Barbie* as a conceptual framework to contend that the rise of the *Bad Bitch Barbie* craze is indicative of both the ways Black women view themselves and the ways the world views Black women. The authors found that the *Bad Bitch Barbie* image, although highly controversial, serves as an example of female sexuality and agency as well as of misogynistic representations of Black women. The *Bad Bitch Barbie* image can be viewed as an example of women asserting their sexual freedoms, and of these women's repurposing of stereotypical representations of Black women's bodies. Nevertheless, the body ideal presented by Beyoncé as a *Bad Bitch Barbie* offers a narrowly defined standard of beauty that is unattainable to countless girls and women. What does it take to look like Beyoncé? What lengths should women go to obtain the *Bad Bitch Barbie* look? Equitable representations of Black women within the hip-hop community and digital media are required to counter-act the controversial nature of the *Bad Bitch Barbie* image and the negative words associated with this type of representation. While Gourdine and Lemmons (2011) have argued that negative words and portrayals of women are unacceptable, we in turn argue that the steady stream of highly sexualized images places an unrealistic, unnatural and limited view of women within hip-hop. The authors encourage Black girls and women to critically examine the images presented in media and use their own voices to challenge limited, racial, and misogynistic representations of women in hip-hop.

At the center of the *Bad Bitch Barbie* image is the desire to be accepted and seen, and to be in control of the ways in which one's body will be used. Adolescent Black girls and women are under extreme pressure to be highly sexualized (hip-hop standard of beauty) while also being intelligent. Some television shows like "Dance Wars" and "Bring it!," which almost exclusively feature African American teenage girls, portray young Black girls with long hair weaves, tight clothing, and dancing in ways that are reminiscent of the images portrayed of women in rap videos. Gourdine and Lemmons (2011) found that, given the amount of time youth spend listening to rap music, *Lemonade* can potentially influence their perceptions about it. Frequently listening to rap music without the ability to critically analyze what one hears may be problematic. As hip-hop lovers and connoisseurs, we do not condemn hip-hop, but we do contend that women must learn to analyze the messages and meanings they consume, and learn to develop their own voices. Collins' Black feminist theory

(1990) has argued that women can use their own voices to control the messages about themselves, such as the central participant in Oesterreich's (2007) study, who utilized her written rap lyrics as a method for establishing her voice and becoming visible. In another case study, adolescent girls whose self-advocacy was informed by feminist theories helped transform teacher practices. The authors suggest that educators must problematize the ways in which Black girls are portrayed in the media and establish opportunities for girls to replace oppressive images with their own voices. Hip-hop feminism could challenge educators to view these forms of expression as valid cultural capital and examples of social activism (Oesterreich, 2007). Culturally relevant curricula could support the combating of negative imagery and serve as a foundation for Black girls to create their own images, repositioning themselves as beautiful, healthy and whole, both in the presence and absence of the male gaze (American Psychological Association, Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007).

To further extend this research, we challenge scholars to examine the ways in which the *Bad Bitch Barbie* craze influences women in other fields, including women like Serena Williams, whose physical body is beautifully powerful and strong, and who refuses to conform to or be controlled by mainstream standards of beauty. Her beauty is continuously questioned, discussed, and debated as much as her athletic abilities, and continues to be an anthem of how African American women are portrayed and acknowledged. However, as educators, we are concerned that, with a click of a button, young girls and boys can watch these portrayals and come to view them as the new normal for African American women and hip-hop without first understanding how performers like Beyoncé are not merely passive replications of sexism and misogyny, but potentially bring awareness to self-empowerment.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Tidal is a music streaming service owned by Shawn "Jay Z" Carter, Beyoncé Knowles, and a variety of musical performing artists.

<sup>2</sup> The constructs "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably.

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# Does Beyoncé's *Lemonade* Really Teach Us How to Turn Lemons into *Lemonade*?

## Exploring the Limits and Possibilities Through Black Feminism

Erica B. Edwards, Jennifer Esposito, & Venus Evans-Winters

### Introduction

Beyoncé's most recent visual album, *Lemonade*, presents itself as a Black feminist text exploring the impact of infidelity on Black women. Through the explicit use of diasporic African cosmology, iconography, and aesthetics, Beyoncé and her team of creatives masterfully craft a narrative upholding a central thesis taken from a 1962 Malcolm X speech:

The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman. (X, 1962)

*Lemonade* upholds this argument by exploring infidelity as a by-product of the persistent denigration of the Black family through systemic racism. It then offers an afro-futurist response through a distinct focus on the complex inter-play between Black history, culture, and human emotion. Beyoncé's position, however, as a hyper-capitalist sexualized pop star has rightly opened this work to critique. In as much as *Lemonade* makes a compelling intellectual statement worth exploring, some of its central arguments are underpinned by significant short-comings that mark it as inherently problematic. Still, we assert that the contemporary post-

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modern era in which the text is situated denies *Lemonade*, and really any text, the ability to be “pure” and because of this, Beyoncé’s visual album can be both and at once an important statement by and for Black women even if its arguments are limited/limiting.

### Theoretical Framework

To illustrate this point, we draw upon Black Feminist and Post-modern theory. Black Feminist Theory centers the following primary tenets: (1) Black women concurrently experience a “triple jeopardy” of race, class and gender and that their lives cannot be understood by these constructs in singular form (Guy-Sheftall, 1995); (2) that Black women’s experiences are often subsumed in discourses on race or gender alone and thus, are marginalized by notions of Blackness defined by maleness or gender defined by white femininity; and that (3) Black women’s lived experiences offer a legitimate site of knowledge as Black women’s perspectives and theories have historically been over-looked on matters of social and political import (Hill-Collins, 2000). On these terms, *Lemonade* seems to stand as a Black Feminist masterpiece by exploring our historical subjugation. Beyoncé and her team foreground Black womanhood in all of its complexity—styling their bodies in ways that celebrate and merge ancient, past and contemporary diasporic African hair, body adornment and dress; by centering Black women’s self-expression in song, dance, poetry, wisdom, and most centrally, pain; and by displaying the beauty and diversity in hue and hair texture that has historically been used as a marker to divide, conquer and instill self-hatred within us. *Lemonade* does all that Black women have long been calling for in popular culture. It provides a representation of Black womanhood that celebrates us and gives voice to our complex and over-looked pain. In particular, it destroys the archetype of the Strong Black Woman who is independent, resilient, and over-extending in work and nurturance while remaining immune to the psychological toll of abuse, neglect, and abandonment (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Randolph, 1997). *Lemonade* argues that healing is a process as it walks us through its chapters on intuition, denial, anger, apathy, emptiness, accountability, forgiveness, resurrection and hope.

Still, it is because of the Black Feminist perspective that bell hooks has been able to expose some of Beyoncé’s shortcomings. In her critique of *Lemonade* she asserts that:

It is the broad scope of *Lemonade*’s visual landscape that makes it so distinctive—the construction of a powerfully symbolic black female sisterhood that resists invisibility, that refuses to be silent. This in and of itself is no small feat—it shifts the gaze of white mainstream culture. It challenges us all to look anew, to radically revision how we see the black female body. However, this radical repositioning of black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity. (hooks, 2016)

We agree with this position because it is fundamental that there be guidelines for what does and does not constitute Black women's empowerment. Black women have to be able to name their oppression and take action toward their liberation. Although *Lemonade* attempts to do this by calling out the culture of violence promulgated under white supremacist heterosexist patriarchy, significant undertones in lyric and process undermine its ability to fully do so (as will be argued in the discussion of this article).

Using a post-modern lens, however, reconciles this tension as we understand that race, class, gender and sexuality operate as taken-for-granted assumptions about people and society. These types of grand metanarratives construct our contemporary reality, creating the illusion that identities are fixed. In reality, however, truth is unstable and identity is only a marker, which helps us name the complexity of social, political, and economic experience (Hogue, 2013). When we apply these ideas to *Lemonade*, we see it for what it is – a beautiful, resonating interpretation of diasporic melancholia (Kaplan, 2007) that is at the same time, highly problematic.

Discussion:  
The Visual Feast of *Lemonade*  
or How We Can Call It a Black Feminist Text

Using lush cinematography and a keen directorial eye for highly emotive and precise choreography and acting, Beyoncé and her collaborators succeeded in developing a tome that clearly expresses the feminist insistence that “the personal is political.” The visual album opens with a plain-faced Beyoncé wearing a black hoodie that reminds us of the unjust death of Trayvon Martin. When she begins to sing, she is alone, kneeling at center stage wearing a hoodie and black head wrap. This paired down introduction, which orients the watcher to the film's first chapter on “intuition” signals the decidedly African aesthetic that continues throughout the film. Beyoncé reminds us of the ways in which indigenous African culture has persisted throughout history though its forms, languages, and styles may have changed. She is alone throughout this chapter, singing about her suspicions of infidelity, telling her lover “I pray you catch me whispering. I pray you catch me listening” (Blake, J., Beyoncé, & Garrett, K., 2016). She, Beyoncé as every Black woman, communicates that women know when we have been betrayed, even before we do. Spirit answers her prayer and we know that Beyoncé has been devastated. We watch her surrender herself to suicide—falling off a skyscraper and landing on a city street that gives way to her body and becomes water. Beyoncé is submerged—signaling that we will embark on a journey to understand how the pain of betrayal kills whatever naivety we may have had about love and gives birth to a cycle of emotion that re-makes us.

We are then taken through chapters reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* (Alighieri, 1996) as the visual album unfolds a deepening sense of despair and frustration. We

reach the nadir in the chapter on anger. Malcolm X's sound bite plays as we meet Beyoncé stylized with a hard edge. She is wearing her hair in corn rows and dressed in gray jersey—sports clothing—seemingly prepared for a fight. Her friends, all women, stand behind her, their faces glaring as if they, too, are ready. Around her neck, Beyoncé wears a diamond encrusted ankh on a gold chain—a khemetic symbol of eternal life made in the shape of a cross with a handle on top. The ankh is said to symbolize the continuing cycle of life created through the sexual union of men (symbolized by the vertical rod at bottom) and women (symbolized by the loop at top) which creates children (symbolized by the horizontal rod in between the rod and loop) (Inman, 1875). Beyoncé allows her chain to swing as she and her girls pose with bravado and sing to her lover “When you lie to me, you lie to yourself” (Bonham, J., Jones, J. P., Plant, R., Page, J., Gordon, W., Beyoncé, & White, J., 2016). It is as if she calls up the Black feminist insistence that human beings are deeply connected to one another—that we are one in the same. Whatever harm is done to another person, is also done to the perpetrator. Her anger is directed communally and between her use of the decidedly political stance expressed through Malcolm X's words and ancient African symbolism, we begin to notice a commentary on patriarchal domination.

Infidelity is a central idea in American popular culture. It undergirds notions of hegemonic masculinity and upholds patriarchy. A man is not a man unless he has many sexual conquests with many different women. This notion of masculinity is a central construct in Western culture—even permeating the expressions of gender non-conforming people (Connell, 2005; Halberstam, 1998). In popular culture, for example, the rapper Young M.A., who is lesbian, regularly uses misogyny to express her dominance and credibility in hip hop. Beyoncé uses this notion to demonstrate infidelity's harmful effects. This is not to say that same-sex relationships are wrong. Beyoncé celebrates love in all of its forms throughout *Lemonade*. Instead, she reveals that there is a root cause for undermining the trust and expectations between lovers and that these actions, born out of the harmful ideology about what constitutes masculinity, inflicts emotional wounds as deep as physical ones.

After her anger is expressed, the next two chapters walk us across the valley of emotion called apathy and emptiness. Here, she calls upon the support of other women and sings about letting go of her need to be a kept woman. Beyoncé is going to the club—a place that might be considered socially unacceptable for a woman in a relationship. Serena Williams enacts the role of a best friend and the two women dress scantily and dance freely—celebrating their sexuality and owning their position as beings worthy of desire. The album begins to draw more heavily from the dress of ancient Africa as the chapters go on and we see women, positioned as her friends or her community, dancing in and on a school bus wearing tribal paint in the Yoruba tradition. At another point, Beyoncé is seated in regal fashion with her hair plaited in the shape of Queen Nefertiti's crown. The use of Warsan Shire's (Shire, 2012)<sup>1</sup> poetry to transition between chapters allows us to hear the wisdom

learned from our foremothers' experiences with romantic violence. The images seem to theorize in the tradition of Sankofa (Karenga, 2011; Temple, 2009). We are invited to be inspired back to ourselves. After her intuition, denial, and anger, Beyoncé comes to a place where there is nothing left to do but heal and move forward. The cinematographer shows a light at the end of a long hallway and when we finally arrive at it, we see Beyoncé wearing red and twirling a light high above her head. She seems to say, "This is mine. I have this" and she reminds women to heal by getting their finances in order. She says, "she's too smart to crave material things" suggesting a rejection of the empty practice in healing through consumerism. She has learned that she will not give herself or what she has earned away. The valley after her descent into anger, however, ends with another simple, yet profound prayer. "Come back...come back...come back" she chants, with the precision and simple rhythm of a clock—as if even through the pain, her lover remains at the center of her heart.

*Lemonade* then begins to take us on the ascent to hope. The first step, Beyoncé suggests, is through accountability. In this chapter, Beyoncé ironically uses a country song to remind us to protect what is ours.<sup>2</sup> She sings, "When trouble comes to town and men like me come around. Oh, my daddy said shoot. Oh, my daddy said shoot." Such a simple lyric also connects to the women's wisdom expressed throughout the film in Warsan Shire's poetry. Her father's wisdom acknowledges that the cycle of heartbreak and infidelity is nothing new. Our mothers and grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers before them have born the brunt of a society that encourages people—particularly men—to find their self-worth by deceiving others. As the film transitions to climb through forgiveness, resurrection and ultimately, hope, Beyoncé begins a conversation with her betrayer in which she calls out his misdeeds as a sin against himself. She acknowledges his humanity by reminding him that he is as great as she. She says, "You and me could stop this love drought" (Dean, M., Burley, I., & Beyoncé, 2016) and "9 times out of 10 I know you're lying, but 10 times out of 9 I know you're trying" (Dean, M., Burley, I., & Beyoncé, 2016). Her lover, she suggests, is not a bad person—just a misguided one.<sup>3</sup> When she has done her work and is ready to forgive, she implores her lover to acknowledge his duality—the femininity within him that calls him to balance - by asking, "Do you remember your birth?" (Knowles, 2016) and sings the intensely raw song, "Sandcastles," (Berry II, V. L., Beyoncé, Yusef, M., Mathers, M. 2016) where she sings:

I made you cry  
When I walked away  
And although I promised  
That I couldn't stay  
Every promise don't work out that way  
Every promise don't work out that way

This lyric speaks to the myth of the perfect, untainted relationship that is carried as an ideal in Western culture. There is no right way to handle betrayal. The

betrayed may leave or the betrayed may stay, but in either respect – promises are unstable and subject to our humanity. We cannot judge our foremothers who endured an abusive relationship or those who defied the standards imploring her to stay. Beyoncé’s chapter on resurrection—which focuses on wholeness—serves as the pinnacle through which this point is made. We are reminded of her swinging diamond ankh—a symbol worn by the ancient Pharaohs of Khemet to remind us of the responsibility to restore ourselves, our families, and ultimately our society to balance through wading the waters of human emotion so that we can learn the wisdom that life’s challenges have to teach us.

*Lemonade* ends with a chapter on hope. Here, Beyoncé demonstrates the universal nature of the wisdom gained through the experience of emotional pain. Women who have endured the worst abuses contemporary society promulgates against Black people are foregrounded and we see the stoic faces of Sybrina Fulton, Lezley McSpadden and Gwen Carr<sup>4</sup> holding pictures of their dead sons; communicating the depth of terror Black men continue to endure and the emotional weight the women around them carry. While on surface level, the pain of infidelity seems insignificant in comparison to the reality of state sanctioned racialized violence, the tenor of *Lemonade* makes clear that the historical denigration of Black people has interpersonal effects. A person damaged by violence against them at the systemic level does not easily shed those wounds when they come home to their lover. This pain rears its ugly head in various forms, infidelity chief among them. Hurt people, hurt people. But *Lemonade* ends with a reminder that Black people and their culture have always been and will always be resilient, beautiful, and joyful—no matter the circumstance. The film closes with imagery reminiscent of Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*. Viewers are invited through curtains into retreat with Black women of all ages, hues, and hair textures. They are gathered in the lush Louisiana Bayou walking barefoot, tending the land, playing, and relaxing together. In several scenes Black women and girls who are leading cultural producers in the United States are shown. If the album’s thesis was that Black women are the most disrespected people on earth, its implications are embodied in the very definition of womanism. The entire visual album, through its argument, aesthetic, and performance is grown up, in charge, serious, loving on other women, emotionally flexible, committed to the survival of a people, universalist, full of love for music, dance, the moon, food, roundness, spirit, struggle, folk and of course, centered on a woman who “loves herself. *Regardless*” (Walker, 1983 author’s emphasis). She has shown us how to turn lemons into *Lemonade*.

### The Short-comings of *Lemonade* as a Black Feminist Text

*Lemonade* is a distinctly important Black feminist text because it names a site of Black women’s oppression and makes a statement that supports them in claiming their power. However, when taken in context, it still falls short of the demand for

justice that Black feminism calls for. Black women in the United States experience higher rates of unemployment than the national average and than white women. Educated Black women earn less than any other group (most notably being that Black women with Bachelor's degrees earn about \$10,000 less than white men with Associate's degrees). Black women continue to be over-represented among the nation's poor, experience higher rates of mortality and inadequate health coverage, and are at greater risk for exposure to violence than white women (The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2015). Black girls are most likely among girls of any racial group and several groups of boys to be suspended from school (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) and are the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system (Sherman, 2012). Considering that *Lemonade* is a cultural work and that Beyoncé herself is a hyper-capitalist, it is right to say that the album does not fully nor explicitly work to alleviate the injustices Black women and girls face.

When we analyze the content of *Lemonade*, there remains a persistent theme throughout the work (and also in many other works in Beyoncé's catalog) that money is a woman's best source of empowerment. Beyoncé has long stood as a symbol of material glamour with songs and music videos that celebrate wealth, access to "high culture" and a luxurious lifestyle. Considering that most of the world's poor are Black women (United Nations, 2015), we have to consider the social implications of this idea and her behavior. The song "Formation" (Lee, S. & Beyoncé, 2016) which was included on the audio album, but not featured on the visual one best illustrates the tension between justice, race and capitalism that Beyoncé's most recent work carries. In the song, Beyoncé celebrates her Creole heritage, professes an appreciation for an African phenotype, and conveys an individualistic and meritocratic narrative. For example, the refrain and chorus says:

My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana  
You mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas bama  
I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros  
I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils  
Earned all this money but they never take the country out me  
I got hot sauce in my bag, swag  
I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it  
I dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it.

In historical context, these lyrics are deeply problematic. The racial label "Creole" for example, is a term that has historically been used by people of African and European descent to set themselves apart from other African people. Beyoncé has been known to celebrate her Creole ancestry (Rowley, 2016) and the suggestion that she makes use of her status as a "yellow-bone"<sup>5</sup> to support her in attaining her goals alludes to an awareness of the privileges associated with her light skin. Despite claiming a preference for an African phenotype, she does not seem to challenge the colorist notions that have persisted throughout history.

Secondly, we notice a meritocratic undertone in “Formation.” She suggests that she earned her wealth, even as she acknowledges that her appearance adheres to notions of acceptable femininity. At the song’s bridge she says:

Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, I slay  
 Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation  
 You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation  
 Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper. (Lee, S. & Beyoncé , 2016)

These lyrics suggest that getting in formation—or getting your affairs in order—lays the foundation for success. She goes on to say that the marker of success is having people talk about you. Still, a woman should remain graceful and let her money talk back. To be sure, such bravado is alluring. However, considering the millions of Black women around the world who constitute the poor—who have little or no access to systems or opportunities to create, and grow wealth, such an argument amounts more to fantasy than reality.

We cannot, however, be blind to the fact that Beyoncé’s position as a mega-pop star makes her a cultural producer. Whether or not the context surrounding her modes of production are just, she is creating a new generation of feminists. That she uses an African aesthetic to convey her understanding of women’s power is very important. It adheres to and establishes the legitimacy of the practice and promise of centering Black women’s folk wisdom. Such an undertaking is central to the Black feminist position. Beyoncé has, at least from an aesthetic point of view, brought feminist theory from margin to center. That she is, however, an international super-star, entrepreneur, and hyper-capitalist, however, has done so at a cost. Bringing Black women’s culture to the mainstream opens it to co-optation and could even cause the marginalization of Black women on a global scale at an even deeper level. That is, people may come to love and celebrate Black women’s culture through Beyoncé, but not Black women themselves. We already see this at work in mainstream magazines as Beyoncé earns credit for starting a trend in wearing “boxer braids” because she wore her hair in corn-rows and other African braid styles throughout the visual album. In reality, Black women have been wearing their hair in these ways to protect and keep their hair neat for thousands of years (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Mercer, 1994; Rooks, 1996). There is nothing new or trendy about the ways in which Beyoncé does her hair. Still, Black women who wear their hair in natural and traditional African styles continue to incur social costs. Black girls have been suspended from school and Black women are often perceived as “unprofessional” for doing so (Sini, 2016; Lutkin, 2016; Dossou, 2013; Mahr, 2016; King, 2016). Beyoncé herself has experienced this type of scrutiny as people have scrutinized her for allowing her daughter, Blue Ivy, to wear her hair naturally (Brown, 2014). In as beautiful, poignant, and inspiring her visual album may be, particularly through its commentary on white supremacist patriarchy, *Lemonade* has not and will not challenge the global conditions under late capitalism that perpetuate the material effects of Black women’s subjugation.

## Conclusion

Beyoncé and her team have succeeded in producing an afro-futurist text in *Lemonade*. That is, a work drawing from the spiritual and cultural practices of ancient Africa situated in the contemporary moment and theorizing new possibilities for Blackness in the future (Nelson, 2000). She argues that our experiences with betrayal is not disconnected from the history of subjugation Black people continue to reckon with. Rather than producing a pain narrative (Tuck & Yang, 2014), however, through a penchant for the melodramatic, *Lemonade* adds complexity to the experience by claiming that healing, reconciliation, and self-discovery are available to both the aggrieved and the perpetrator. *Lemonade* offers a new re-presentation of Black womanhood in the 21st century without sacrificing or marginalizing the social and historical realities Black people face.

Still, we must see her most recent thesis for what it is—a cultural artifact, not a pure text. Postmodern theory teaches us that the idea of an untainted discourse is inherently problematic. Jacques Lacan (1991), for example, elaborates that we are born into a circuit of discourse marking us before our birth and after our death. Black girls are born into a world that has preconceived notions of who they are and what they will become and these discourses shape the perceptions, policies, and practices that mediate their lives. Even as *Lemonade* works in resistance by celebrating Black women's resilience, beauty, traditions, and wisdom, it is not a panacea. We believe that teachers and cultural critics can become key mediators in bridging the gap between *Lemonade* and real Black women and girls.

Given the popularity of Beyoncé as well as the power of popular culture as an educative site (Esposito & Love, 2008; Kellner, 1995), we must continually critique her work and image(s) as they provide lessons for our youth about Blackness, womanhood, and feminism. Recognizing that no one text, including *Lemonade*, can do all things, we assert that it is more important to teach youth to read texts critically so they can be resistant to problematic messages. Critical media literacy (CML) is one place to begin to teach youth ways of consuming media texts with a critical eye as its focus is less on protecting youth from “bad” or negative media messages and more about empowering them to sort through messages and reflect on the impact such messages have on his/her identity (Kellner & Share, 2009). We cannot deny the power of the media, especially someone as well known as Beyoncé, in shaping lives and in teaching us about ourselves and others.

Educators could encourage students to problematize what being a feminist is and how the text/images of *Lemonade* encourage or discourage particular representations of feminism and Black womanhood. Beyoncé's fame spans generations and racial/ethnic groups. She is a revered performer and, thus, the power of her texts are increased by the large numbers of people who consume them. It certainly is not fair for Beyoncé to be asked to take particular positions about social issues as the art she creates should be what she wants. Yet, we cannot help but wonder if

all artists, including Beyoncé, were to be more cognizant of the power of their messages what a difference they could make in the world. If a Black feminist critique highlighting the tension between Beyoncé's positionality as a socially aware pop star and hyper-capitalist were made explicit, she (and her team) may come to see the contradictions in her arguments and her actions. It is deeply problematic for Black women and girls to internalize her position that consumerism and money are equated with power. As Monique Morris (2016) has demonstrated, doing so has deleterious effects in Black girls' lives—driving some into sex work and other positions of deep vulnerability. Still, the ways in which *Lemonade* celebrates Black womanhood and the community of Black mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends who rally around, care for, and nurture one another offers a critically important visual representation for Black women and girls to understand. It offers a counter-narrative to the hegemonic representations that are widely available in contemporary popular culture and offers the building blocks for rich and intellectually stimulating learning experiences about diasporic African women's history, culture, traditions, and wisdom.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Garis (2016) observed that excerpts from four of Shire's poems were used in the film: "Grief has its blue hands in her hair," "The unbearable weight of staying (the end of the relationship)," "Nail technician as palm reader," and "For women who are difficult to love." Shire has not yet published an anthology of her works, so finding citations for these titles is difficult. The citation here references two of the poems, "The unbearable weight of staying (the end of the relationship)" and "For women who are difficult to love." They are currently published on Shire's bandcamp webpage.

<sup>2</sup> The irony being that country music is also part of the Black cultural tradition, but has been co-opted within the music industry as a genre by and for white people only.

<sup>3</sup> This, too, is a clear indicator of Womanist/Black feminist theory in play, as the full humanity of the perpetrator is not dismissed nor cast aside as inherently wrong/evil (Maparyan, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> These women are the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, respectively. These men were each unjustly slain because their Black bodies were mistaken as threats. In each case, their perpetrators were found innocent of any wrong doing, although evidence to the contrary is plentiful.

<sup>5</sup> That is, slang for a light-skinned person of African descent.

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## A Black Girl's Song Misogynoir, Love, and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

Zeffie Gaines

### Abstract

This article examines Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade* in the context of black feminist theory, misogynoir, and issues of black self-love. After a brief overview of the initial response to Beyoncé's album, this essay explores the deeper, metaphorical implication of *Lemonade*. This essay demonstrates that while *Lemonade* is ostensibly about marital infidelity, the trope of unfaithfulness is used to make a more profound commentary on the ontological crisis around blackness and black womanhood in American culture. Through close readings of several important scenes and tracks in *Lemonade*, this essay demonstrates that this album constitutes a masterwork by Beyoncé and should be understood as an important intervention against racist and patriarchal representations of black womanhood. Ultimately, *Lemonade* articulates a black feminist aesthetic that embraces the tenacity and cultural originality of the black woman.

Keywords: black feminist theory, self-love, racism, patriarchy

### Introduction

I can't hear anything  
but maddening screams  
& the soft strains of death  
& you promised me  
you promised me...  
somebody/anybody

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sing a black girl's song  
 bring her out  
 to know herself  
 to know you  
 but sing her rhythms  
 carin/struggle/hard times  
 sing her song of life  
 she's been dead so long  
 closed in silence so long  
 she doesn't know the sound  
 of her own voice  
 her infinite beauty  
 she's half-notes scattered  
 without rhythm/no tune  
 sing her sighs  
 sing the song of her possibilities  
 sing a righteous gospel  
 let her be born  
 let her be born  
 & handled warmly.

—*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Enuf*,  
 Ntozake Shange (Shange, 1975, p. 4)

The internet erupted into a fury when the rapper known as “Trick Daddy” uploaded a video excoriating black women to “tighten up” or else be passed over by black men for white and Latina women. For a day or two, black women all over the “twitterverse” and on various blogs and Facebook pages dissected, analyzed, and rejected Trick Daddy’s comments which suggested that black women’s woes in the dating world were all their own fault. Trick Daddy’s comments were nothing new; one need only to peruse *Youtube* to find endless videos of black men explaining why they do not date black women. As of this writing, if one searches on *Youtube* for the phrase “Why I don’t date black women,” *Youtube* returns 2.1 million hits. Most of these videos were created not by white men, but by black men. One of the most famous of these Youtube video posters is a black man named Tommy Sotomayor, who attacks black women for wearing weaves, for acting “ghetto,” and for alienating black men. In one of his videos titled “Black Women Lack Discipline,” he viciously represents black women as unprincipled hellions. That video alone (and that is just one of his many videos about black women) has almost 300,000 views. What Trick Daddy’s video and the popularity of this underground genre of “why I hate black women” videos reveals is that there is a crisis around black women and love in American society.

I use the word “love” here purposely, for it seems that no one, in the mainstream media, has love for the black woman. American society, as a whole, generally regards black women as unattractive and black women are consistently portrayed as uncouth, “ghetto,” angry, and manly. Within the context of the black community,

as we can see by the abundance of *Youtube* videos I cite above, even black men are rejecting black women on the basis of the stereotypes perpetuated by the larger culture. This rejection by black men of black women is painfully evident in the double standard of intra-racial concern and love in the black community that is perhaps most on display when an unarmed black woman is killed. This disparity was nowhere more evident than in the response to Korryn Gaines' murder. Some black men accepted the police narrative that Gaines was mentally unstable and that this, not her race, was what caused her death. Black feminists, such as the blogger from Ashleigh, not Ashley, were quick to point out the double standard:

Last Monday, Korryn Gaines was murdered by the Baltimore Country Police on Monday and the public's response to her death validated my feelings. Castille's and Sterling's deaths prompted over a week of continuous outcry and protesting. Marches were planned for these men before their bodies touched dirt. In contrast, the only people I see consistently speaking up for Gaines is other Black women and Black LGBTQ folks. Black men, even the "woke" ones, have been silent or blaming Gaines for her demise. (Ashleigh, Not Ashley, 2016, p. 1)

Elaborating on this point, Brittany Cooper argues that,

The murders of all these women on their own are appalling and incensing enough...But somehow, we have a paltry analysis of patriarchy in this moment, and the ways in which both cis and trans Black women continue to be murdered on the daily by both cishetero men in intimate relationships and by police officers who are utterly unmoved by any claims to Black women's femininity. Our womanhood does not protect us from state-based racism and misogynoir. (Crunk Feminist Collective, 2016, p. 1)

This crisis around loving black women shows itself in all of these critical life spaces—in the establishment of intimate relationships and in the very protection of black women's lives. Ntozake Shange puts an emotional finger on the way racist, patriarchal society, both black and white, throws black women away, refusing to hear our songs. Since Shange published those words in 1975, we have not been handled warmly. It is this rough handling, on both an intimate and a political level, with which Beyoncé's groundbreaking 2016 album *Lemonade* is concerned. The tradition of black feminist and womanist critique of the mainstream view of black womanhood is well established, as even Ntozake Shange worked within an established tradition of black women "calling out" American culture for its negative representations and treatment of black women. This essay analyzes Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade* against the backdrop of a primarily literary black feminist tradition that has historically rebutted a range of stereotypical depictions of black women while also articulating black women's personal and political struggles. In this sense, *Lemonade* participates in a long-standing black feminist tradition of "singing a black girl's song."

“Okay Ladies Now Let’s Get in Formation:”  
Black Feminism on Fleek

Giving a complete overview of the long and varied history of black feminism is beyond the scope of this essay, but I want to highlight a few moments in black feminist history to help frame my argument about the particularly black and feminist overtones of Beyoncé’s album *Lemonade*. A central theme in *Lemonade* is the idea that as a black woman, Beyoncé’s partner cannot “see her.” In one interlude she asks, in a whisper, “Why can’t you see? Why can’t you see me?” The emphasis on the erasure of the black women resonates with one of the earliest black feminist articulations on American soil. It came from Sojourner Truth, who asked in 1851 at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio, “Ain’t I A Woman?” Truth’s question has become a kind of rallying cry for black feminists who have been traditionally ignored and erased by white feminism. Likewise, Truth identifies in her speech the consideration white women receive but that black women are denied: “That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And arn’t I a woman?” (Truth, 1851, p. 1) The uneven treatment, of black and white women, was prevalent in Truth’s day and the resonances of that unequal treatment remain in American society today, both outside of and within the black community. Writing about the roots of black feminism in abolitionist movements, Ula Taylor writes, “Thus, Truth’s biblically based feminism empowered black women because she called attention to the intersection of race and gender. Her personal testimony can be interpreted as the impetus for the slogan ‘All the men are not black, All the women are not white, black women exist as black women.’” (Taylor, 1998, p. 236)

On the one hand, early black feminism was concerned with racism and abolition, while on the other hand, black feminists also had to contend for themselves as women against white feminists. In fact, Truth’s famous statement at the convention was a rebuke to white feminists who refused to understand and grapple with black women’s concerns or to include black women in their platform. Therefore, to understand black feminist genealogy, it is important to note that black feminists fight battles on multiple fronts. Not only must black feminism contend with intraracial and interracial sexism, but it must also take on white feminists whose seemingly progressive agenda has historically erased black women’s voices from the broader feminist movement.

Sojourner Truth’s importance to the black feminist tradition cannot be overstated. bell hooks, perhaps one of the most visible contemporary black feminists, titled one of her books after Truth’s groundbreaking speech. The prescience of Truth’s reading of the black woman’s position in American society as doubly erased, begins a tradition of black feminist insight taken up some 40 years later by Anna Julie Cooper. Writing in 1892, Cooper articulated the broad political implications of black women’s freedom in relation to the whole black community: “Only the

black woman can say ‘when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me.’(Cooper, 1892, p. 31) What Cooper’s statement suggests is that it is only by securing the welfare of the black woman that the entire race is cared for and, in this way, Cooper transcends the potential binaries that are often implied in dialectical Western ideologies. In essence, when Beyoncé sings “When you hurt me, you hurt yourself,” she is echoing Cooper’s logic—she suggests that when black women are hurt, so is the whole race. Cooper suggests that when black women thrive, the whole race thrives. In this way, black feminism has always positioned black women as equally and indelibly connected to the whole of the black community.

There is a coherent ideological tradition in the work of black feminists, and the same complicated negotiation of gender and race that the earliest black feminists grappled with is evident in the work of later 20th century black feminist artists like Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Julie Dash. In her groundbreaking work *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Was Enuf*, Ntozake Shange represents a range of intimate issues the woman of color faces. Her text is powerfully unflinching in its depiction of a longing to be loved and the circumstances within the black community that arise from war, racism, and poverty. In the epigraph to this essay, I highlight an early poem in Shange’s masterwork. It calls out for “anyone” to sing a black girl’s song. This plaintive request suggests that black women’s stories have too long been suppressed and silenced. I argue here that Beyoncé sings that song, giving voice to a range of complicated experiences and an interior landscape that is all too often elided in a culture that is mostly interested in demonizing and dismissing black femininity. Likewise, at the heart of Alice Walker’s most famous work *The Color Purple*, is a character who is abused and unloved, and who believes herself to be unlovable. Walker’s text, like Shange’s, emphasizes the need for black women to reject narratives that construct them as inferior and unlovable. Shange powerfully claims love for black women in her text—not only through the text itself—but by marking the place of the divine black and female. Shange ends her choreopoem this way: “i found god in myself/& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely.” Beyoncé picks up on this implication of the divine female on the song “Don’t Hurt Yourself” when she sings, “Love God Herself.” Both Shange and Beyoncé radically suggest that the divine is both black and female, opening a space of self-love for black women to reject and rebut the toxic assumptions of mass culture.

This avowal of black female self-love is at the heart of the black feminist archive. Again, we see this same emphasis on self-love in *The Color Purple*. In order to heal, Celie must embrace and love herself. Like Shange’s characters, Walker’s characters articulate radical self-love: “I am an expression of the divine, just like a peach is, just like a fish is. I have a right to be this way...I can’t apologize for that, nor can I change it, nor do I want to... We will never have to be other than who we are in order

to be successful...We realize that we are as ourselves unlimited and our experiences valid. It is for the rest of the world to recognize this, if they choose.” (Walker, 2006) At stake, then, for black women in discourses of self-love is not only the personal, but a political rejection of a society that devastatingly devalues black womanhood.

My citation above of black women writers and thinkers here is by no means exhaustive, as the tradition of black feminist work is long and varied. Throughout this essay I will connect *Lemonade* to this tradition of black feminist art and activism in order to demonstrate that Beyoncé's text is about much more than marital infidelity. To elucidate the black feminist methodology of *Lemonade*, I turn to Patricia Hill Collins who offers a helpful four-part method for understanding how black feminist activism and art contend with the intersection of race and gender. She argues that the first issue black feminists address and rebut is stereotypical depictions of black women; secondly, black women engage and take on structural systems of oppression; thirdly, black feminists merge activism and “intellectualism,” though I would argue that we can understand art to fall under this category as well; and fourthly, Hill Collins argues that black women assert the beauty of black women's cultural heritage as a way to reject and revise exclusionary Eurocentric and patriarchal notions of black womanhood. (Hill-Collins, 2004) If we apply Collins' methodology for understanding black feminist texts and activism to Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, it is clear that *Lemonade* signifies on the black feminist tradition in ways that reclaim black women's culture, critiques stereotypical depictions of black women, and emphasizes community-wide activism against police brutality, against both men and women, as an important black feminist platform.

*Lemonade*'s citation of the black feminist tradition was not lost on its listeners. Reviews of *Lemonade* were overwhelmingly positive, though some reviewers were quick to call Beyoncé out for exploiting feminism for financial gain. Among her most vocal critics is bell hooks, whose first reaction to the album was, “WOW—this is the business of capitalist money-making at its best” (Hooks, 2016). Tiffanie Drayton, in an article for the online magazine *The Frisky* argued that *Lemonade* was guilty of colorism (Drayton, 2016). And Ashleigh Shackleford (2016), in a piece for *Wear Your Voice Mag: Intersectional Feminist Media*, argued that *Lemonade* erased fat black women and femmes (Shackleford, 2016). However, there were very few reviews of the album that dismissed it wholesale. hooks, despite her reservations about the piece, did admit that *Lemonade* offered “daringly multidimensional images of black female life” (hooks, 2016). And Shackleford opens her review of *Lemonade* in strikingly glowing terms:

I watched the beautiful and amazing *Lemonade* visual album on Saturday, centered and very open to the generosity of Bey's art. I was floored and enamored. It was lit as fuck, y'all! I was so proud to experience such a well-designed, politically important, empowering and intentional creative piece by a Black woman who is, hands down, one of the greatest artists of all time. Literally: what a time to be alive for Black women and femmes. (Shackleford, 2016)

For many black feminists, *Lemonade* was a shot heard around the world. Though we may not have seen ourselves directly reflected in all of its images, its hail to us could not be ignored. Within a month of its release, Candice Benbow of Rutgers University, in collaboration with other black women academics, put together a *Lemonade* syllabus. The texts on this syllabus are all foundational black feminist texts—*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, *A Raisin in the Sun*—that demonstrate that Beyoncé's album represents the culmination of four generations of black women's writing and artistic production. *Lemonade*, though it is its own unique contribution to the oeuvre of black women's work, is a praisesong to an often unacknowledged canon of black female artists. There are shades of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Julie Dash, Erykah Badu, Salt n' Peppa—and many others—in *Lemonade* which is at once spiritual, historical, poignantly beautiful, reminiscent of the Africanity of black culture, and bodaciously irreverent. *Lemonade*, then, is not just Beyoncé's creation, but is a communal piece that reflects bits of much the intellectual and artistic labor of black women. And though much of initial public attention focused on the question of infidelity in Beyoncé's high profile marriage to Jay Z, black women were quick to see that this album was about much more than a cheating husband. Aside from vocalizing what could be some very real angst about marital strife, I intend to show that *Lemonade* is a broader commentary on love and race.

### “I'm Just Too Much For You:” Reading *Lemonade*

At first glance connecting love and race may seem counter-intuitive—one is emotional and one is political; but, Beyoncé demonstrates on *Lemonade* that the personal is political. If we approach the album as less about the inter-personal dynamics between Beyoncé and Jay-Z and see it instead as a metaphor for the way society doesn't love black women then *Lemonade*'s deeper meaning, and broader political critique, becomes clear. *Lemonade* is the black girl's song that Shange called out for three decades ago and it articulates the pain of feeling unloved and exposes the back story on multiple aspects of black woman “beingness,” from issues around “good hair” to fears of being seen as “crazy,” to the irreverent rudeness of the unremorseful rejection of a trifling partner.

Significantly, *Lemonade* begins with two alternating scenes, one of Beyoncé on stage, in a black hoodie, against a red curtain and the other of her in the same hoodie in a field of tall grass blowing gently in the wind. The first sounds of the album are tentative and afraid, like the sound of barely suppressed panic. Beyoncé is alone, on the stage, and in the field, and this aloneness captures the ontological crisis of black womanhood in American society—separated from black men by gender, separated from white women by race—the black woman stands alone. The two sites of the opening song on *Lemonade* are significant. Walking, seemingly lost, in the fields, Beyoncé reminds us of our American origins—of the cotton

fields, the killing fields, the fields for clearing—that our first “place” here was on the land, in the fields, as field hands. The field, then, is the original location of black rupture. It is the place where this country and its inhumane system began to tear us apart, brother from sister, mother from children, woman from woman, man from woman. Beyoncé returns to this place; she seems to walk aimlessly looking for something lost there. For surely this is the place, this was the moment, when we began to lose ourselves. This—the fields—must be the location where the hatred of the black woman and her body was born. If this is the beginning of our pain, Beyoncé’s gaze seems to suggest, is this where we can—once again—find what was taken, what was forgotten, what was lost? Hortense Spillers argues that every generation is “compelled to reinvent” slavery and that slavery remains, “one of the most textualized and discursive fields of practice we could posit as a structure for attention.” (Spillers, 2003, p. 179) By invoking the pastoral imagery of slavery, Beyoncé structures our attention towards trauma and crisis. The importance of these opening scenes in the field, which will occur repeatedly throughout *Lemonade*, is evident by the multi-layered meanings invoked by this pastoral imagery.



As I argue above, Beyoncé’s presence in the field is a visual reference to slavery, and to the origins of all black pain in the so-called “New World.” But this pastoral imagery is also a reference to being “put out,” literally and symbolically. Being “put out” is a reference to being exasperated, taken advantage of, or kicked out of the house, as evident in this elaboration on that idea in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*:

There is a difference between being put *out* and being put *outdoors*. If you are put out, you go somewhere else; if you are outdoors, there is no place to go. The distinction was subtle but final. Outdoors was the end of something, an irrevocable, physical fact, defining and complementing our metaphysical condition. Being a minority in both caste and class, we moved about anyway on the hem of life, struggling to consolidate our weaknesses and hang on, or to creep singly up into the major folds of the garment. Our peripheral existence, however, was something we had learned to deal with—probably because it was abstract. But the concreteness of being outdoors was another matter—like the difference between the concept of death and being, in fact, dead. Dead doesn’t change and outdoors is here to stay. (Morrison, 1990, p. 17-18)

The play between being *outdoors/put out* in the opening scenes of *Lemonade* connect

to a sense of death, of annihilation. Those cottons fields, those killing cotton fields, are soaked with the blood of black people. We died, literally and symbolically, in these American fields. Likewise, Beyoncé transitions from the desolate isolation of the field into a death scene, which I discuss further below. A sequence of her jumping off a building, contemplating her own death, telling her partner that he has killed her—all connect the out of doors, being put out, and death in the irrevocable way Morrison describes in the quote above from *The Bluest Eye*.

*Lemonade* continually returns us to the scene of the American crime, the situation that produced hatred for the black woman: slavery. In another scene, we see black women, dressed in white and eggshell-colored clothes that remind us of the 19th century, sitting on the steps of shacks. The clothes speak of a time after slavery, but the shacks endure. Spanish moss hangs from trees, there is a shot of a chain hanging from the top of a tall building.



The pain that Beyoncé references, then, is historical and coded as related to the bondage of slavery. We transition from these pastoral scenes, which I argue allude to slavery, to a scene of Beyoncé jumping off a building in a cityscape. We watch her fall, but instead of seeing her hit the ground, she falls into a pool. Against the poetry of Warsan Shire, the London-based Somali poet, Beyoncé evokes a symbolic rebirth as she emerges from a building, with water breaking behind her. Multiple artists, Yoruba practitioners, and journalists have pointed out that Beyoncé's yellow dress in this scene, and the water rushing out from behind her, are indicative of the goddess Oshun. Writing about this scene for PBS.org, Kamaria Roberts and Kenya Downs argue that,

In "Hold Up," the album's second single, Beyoncé appears as Oshun, a Yoruba water goddess of female sensuality, love and fertility. Oshun is often shown in yellow and surrounded by fresh water. Donning a flowing yellow Roberto Cavalli dress, gold jewelry and bare feet, Beyoncé channels the orisha, or goddess, by appearing in an underwater dreamlike state before emerging from two large golden doors with water rushing past her and down the stairs. (Kamaria Roberts & Kenya Downs, 2016)

In this sense, *Lemonade* takes us back in time—to West Africa, to the Yoruba culture from which Oshun derives. In doing so, Beyoncé references a pre-slavery epistemology, grounding what is dismissively understood in American culture as the “angry black woman,” as the spiritual power of a beautiful and courageous Goddess. By grounding her cultural references in Africa, Beyoncé articulates a feminist tradition that diverges from Western feminism in much the same way that Paule Marshall in *Praisesong for the Widow* did. Like that novel, *Lemonade* looks for mythological inspiration not in a pantheon of Greek or Roman gods, but draws instead upon an intimately and uniquely African diasporic tradition. The African/Diasporic references throughout *Lemonade* are significant cultural departures from a Western-dictated standard that has historically maligned and excluded black women. By evoking “African retentions,” Beyoncé reveals an aspect of black experience in America that is rarely commented upon, which is the degree to which African culture inflects and informs black representation.

At stake in the representation of African retentions is not just a bit of filmic local color, but rather Beyoncé is taking on one of the most flawed premises of American thinking about formerly enslaved Africans—namely that upon being enslaved, Africans completely “lost” all trace of their former culture. Writing against this notion in American history, Jason Young notes,

In direct opposition to these claims, another historiographical tradition asserted the primacy of African culture and religion in the development of black culture in America and elsewhere. The clarion call for this approach can be found in Melville Herskovits's 1941 publication, *The Myth of the Negro Past*. In it, Herskovits argued for the substantial, significant, and continued influence of Africa in the histories, lives and cultures of blacks throughout the Americas. Herskovits' early arguments were strengthened in the work of subsequent scholars. For example, Sterling Stuckey argued not only that African cultural and religious elements persisted in the United States, but also that the realm of ritual and belief constituted the cultural center around which African Americans formed themselves into a people. In this sense, African religion was the source of African American identity. (Young, 2012)

By paying attention to the Africanity of the black culture, Beyoncé grounds her album in an African ethos separate from the Eurocentric hegemony of broader American culture. In this way, *Lemonade* represents the beautiful and unique culture of the African-inflected black American female subject, which is in contradistinction to the stereotypical representations of black women in the broader culture.

One of the most damaging stereotypes about black women is that of the “angry” black woman. Throughout *Lemonade*, Beyoncé confronts the stereotype of the angry black woman, sometimes referred to in pop culture as “the black bitch,” by reclaiming and recoding this anger as divine, righteous, and revolutionary. The crisis around black women and representation is articulated well by Patricia Hill Collins (2004) when she writes, “The controlling image of the ‘bitch’ constitutes a reworking of the image of the mule of chattel slavery. Whereas the mule was simply

stubborn (passive aggressive) and needed prodding and supervision, the bitch is confrontational and actively aggressive. The term bitch is designed to put women in their place” (Hill-Collins, 2004, p. 123). Collins later goes on to note that the term “bitch,” like the word “nigger,” has been reclaimed by black women as a term of empowerment. (Hill-Collins, 2004, p. 123) Though Beyoncé has, in other places, reclaimed the term “bitch,” that terminology is less visible in *Lemonade*. Yet the idea of an aggressive and powerful woman, which is what patriarchal society defines as a bitch, as important and necessary is everywhere throughout *Lemonade*.

This is most evident on the track “Sorry.” “Middle fingers up, put ‘em hands high. Put it in his face, tell him boy bye. Tell him boy bye. Sorry, I ain’t sorry,” Beyoncé sings. Beyoncé demonstrates that she will not wilt into self-hatred or powerlessness, celebrating the black woman’s unwillingness to surrender to the politics of racism and sexist exploitation. Significantly, Serena Williams appears in the film for this song. Excoriated for her athletic physique, Beyoncé rejects the notion that black women must all be thin, waif-like weaklings by featuring Serena twerking in “Sorry.” Serena Williams has been excoriated for her athletic body. Beyoncé’s decision to include Williams is a “middle finger up” to all the people who believe that the only appropriate female body is a tiny, white one. Beyoncé is no doubt well aware that

Williams is simultaneously sexualized and caricatured, othered and exoticized. Her body is a representation of her athletic skill. But rather than being celebrated, it’s been scrutinized mercilessly, turned into a kind of spectacle for white amusement, with painful parallels to Saartjie “Sarah” Baartman.” (Blay, 2017)

This critique of the policing of black women’s bodies by mainstream society is tied to the revelation on this track that the woman who cheated with Beyoncé’s husband, Jay-Z, may not be black. Hence, on the track “Sorry,” the same one that features Serena Williams provocatively twerking, Beyoncé unites all of the imagery of *Lemonade* around race, slavery, black female vulnerability, and anger in one brilliant line: “You better call Becky with the good hair.”

The term “Becky” in African American *lingua franca* indicates whiteness; and “good hair” suggests someone who is mixed race. In this way, Jay Z’s betrayal is not just a betrayal of the heart, it’s a betrayal of Beyoncé as a *black woman*. It’s made very clear on *Lemonade* that the “character” of Jay Z is cheating largely because he is interested in a lighter woman with straighter hair, a less “black” woman than Beyoncé. In multiple scenes, Beyoncé appears “whited out,” and in one voiceover she suggests that in order to win his love, she can wear the skin of his “perfect girl” over her own.



It's important to the narrative unfolding of *Lemonade* that the “other woman” is somehow less black than Beyoncé, or not black at all. This is a vital part of understanding the symbolic logic of Beyoncé's masterwork. Beyoncé makes a point about the way in which black women are inadequately loved when she layers in audio of Malcolm X on the song “Don't Hurt Yourself.” In that recording Malcolm X says:

The most disrespected person in America is the black woman.  
 The most unprotected person in America is the black woman.  
 The most neglected person in America is the black woman.

This statement, about the way sexism and racism make black women doubly vulnerable, resonates profoundly with Beyoncé's “calling out” of Jay Z's infidelity, presumably for a “lighter” woman with straighter hair. In another interlude, she indicates that she tried to starve herself thin, (“I fasted for 60 days”) and that she tried to change her skin color, (“I tried to lighten my skin”). The infidelity that is, on one level, the subject of *Lemonade* stands in for a variety of love's failure vis-à-vis black femininity in American society. The preference for a “whiter” lover, which threatens the black family in general, and in the particular case of *Lemonade*, the literal break-up of Blue Ivy's family, is put into direct relationship to the existential threat faced by Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Sandra Bland, Korryn Gaines, Rekia Boyd and Eric Garner—a threat morphed into death. I'm not suggesting that infidelity is equal to being killed by the police or racist vigilantes, which would minimize the importance of these murders. What I am saying is that Jay Z's rejection of Beyoncé based on her blackness resonates with other ways in which black people are rejected in American society. Hence the crisis of black anti-love is at the center of *Lemonade*'s personal and political heart.

In this way, Beyoncé contextualizes Jay Z's failure to love her in the context of a national epidemic of black anti-love. This may seem trivial until you consider the

devastating consequences of black anti-love—both in terms of our larger society and in terms of “black love,” and black women’s commitment to it. The relationship between these seemingly disparate pieces of *Lemonade*’s puzzle come together on the track “Freedom.” In it, Beyoncé makes an explicitly political statement, connecting her tears—both personal and political tears—to the need from freedom. We see this same marriage of politics and love in the song “Formation,” where she sings openly about her love for black hair and facial features, “I like my baby’s hair with baby hair and afros; I like my negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils.” She goes on to connect this to police brutality and to hurricane Katrina. It’s clear on *Lemonade* that the issue is not just love on a personal level, but also love of blackness and of black people. This crisis of black anti-love, Beyoncé suggests, manifests itself in multiple ways—in murder and also in the way in which black women are denigrated for their blackness.

The tragedy of the rejection of black women on the basis of their blackness is nowhere more evident than in the transformation of the rapper Lil’ Kim, who now resembles a white woman with alabaster skin and blonde hair. Lil’ Kim was once interviewed by *Newsweek* and asked about her radical, de-racinating plastic surgeries. She was depressingly honest in a *Newsweek* interview with Alison Samuels about her reasons for having so many procedures:

“I have low self-esteem and I always have,” she says. “Guys always cheated on me with women who were European-looking. You know, the long-hair type. Really beautiful women that left me thinking, ‘How I can I compete with that?’ Being a regular black girl wasn’t good enough.” (Samuels, 2000)



The writer Yaba Blay, in *The Daily Beast*, called Kim’s transformation an “indictment of racism.” (Blay, 2016) Kim, internalizing all of the messages implicit in

black men choosing white women, lighter women with “the long hair” over her, set out on a mission to become “Becky with the good hair.” These manifestations of black anti-love appear all over the cultural radar, on a spectrum that swings all the way from murder to infidelity to the self-harm of skin bleaching and endless plastic surgeries. We might understand Beyoncé’s latest work, also, as an indictment of racism and sexism which can, so often, produce the kind of self-hatred suffered by Lil Kim. Addressing this issue of negative representations of black women, Glenda Dickerson notes, “The depiction and perception of African American women in this country stereotypes has garbled her voice and distorted her image. The real tragedy is that the African American woman herself has too frequently bought this distortion.” (Dickerson, 1988, p. 179) Lil Kim’s self-mutilation seems to demonstrate the consequences of our society’s hatred of black women—both from the larger, non-black society, and from within the community, on an interpersonal level. And though *Lemonade* identifies black anti-love as central to the album’s trope of infidelity, Beyoncé is careful to show that interracial love is not always anathema to black self-love; and *Lemonade* rebuts any such assumption with a montage of couples, some of whom are interracial couples, at the happy ending of the visual album on the song “All Night.” But, black male infidelity fueled by a partner’s unresolved internalized racism is an index of a larger cultural crisis around dislike and hatred for the black woman that *Lemonade* unflinchingly brings to light.

I would be remiss in my examination of *Lemonade* and Beyoncé if I did not mention that some have criticized Beyoncé for what they see as her own lighter-skinned privilege. On *Lemonade*, Beyoncé grounds her visual imagery and cultural ethos firmly in the diverse cultural and phenotypic experience of American black women—which includes, rather than excludes, a variety of skin tones. I argue here that Beyoncé transcends issues of colorism by evoking an African-inflected black aesthetic which is the inheritance of all diasporic black people. Hence, while identifying the ways in which black anti-love can cause both literal and metaphorical death, Beyoncé embraces a black aesthetic rarely seen in mainstream pop culture and in doing so, writes herself and all black women—regardless of skin tone—into a sisterhood of mutual experience, struggle, and beauty. From the beginning of *Lemonade* when Beyoncé appears as Oshun in the track “Hold Up,” to the use of African prints in the clothing worn throughout the film and to the face paint in various scenes, *Lemonade* whispers and shouts a black aesthetic that references the African cultures black Americans have been encouraged to forget.



In the image above, Beyoncé dons beaded necklaces worn by the Samburu people of Kenya, as well as a jacket made from West African cloth. Likewise, her face paint, which appears in multiple scenes throughout the second half of *Lemonade*, was done by Nigerian visual artist Laolu Senbanjo. Rather than capitulating to Eurocentric standards of art and beauty, Beyoncé embraces African fashion and symbolism. In this way Beyoncé suggests that the iconography of self-love, for black women, is African—not European. *Lemonade*, then, could be read as a reclaiming of all the many aspects of black “beingness” that American culture denigrates. Hence a methodological pattern in *Lemonade* emerges, one that is about going back—into history, into time—to reclaim every unhealed site within ourselves as black women. So, though the pastoral is initially evoked to return us to the scene of the one of America’s first crimes, slavery—*Lemonade* recuperates the natural, pastoral imagery of the South as a specifically, and quintessentially, black and female space.

In this sense, Beyoncé’s visual album is a rich cinematographic feast, which alludes to Julie Dash’s film, *Daughters of the Dust*.



In the shot above, black women walk across a field with headpieces reminiscent of the African head wrap (gele) or of Nefertiti's crown. Unlike the opening scene where Beyoncé is alone, in a hoodie—which has become a symbol synonymous with murder because Trayvon Martin was demonized for wearing one when he was killed—this scene is all women, naked, with crowns upon their head, returning to nature rather than being lost in it. Nature is no longer the enemy, and Beyoncé is no longer alone. The community she crafts by the end of *Lemonade* is a black woman's community, characterized by oneness, nature, and indicative of healing.



Drawing on imagery reminiscent of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, Beyoncé stages a return to the black pastoral—a place she codes as lush, abundant, vibrantly black, and unashamedly female. By drawing on the imagery of the natural world, Beyoncé suggests that black women are more free and most beautiful in their natural state. It's a much more poignant and imagistic illustration of a sense of complete self-acceptance that echoes a line from her 2013 song, "Flawless," "I woke up like this." Beyoncé's recuperation of nature, then, is an extension of her argument about the inherent and natural beauty of black women, as we are.

In other words, rather than retreat into a placating performative whiteness or sex kitten pose, she surrounds herself with black women and trees—shunning the materialistic imagery so prevalent in pop culture. In a vibe akin to Audre Lorde's statement that women are "powerful and dangerous," Beyoncé conjures black female power and self-love as an antidote to personal and political dynamics which devalue black women and black love. *Lemonade*, then, should be understood as a revolutionary act of self-care; it is a rebuttal of all the ways in which American society tells black women they are unworthy and unlovable. It is a rejection of the notion that the black community is irrevocably broken. As Audre Lorde once said, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence; it is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1988) *Lemonade* subverts the logic of white suprema-

cist beauty standards and existential value, in favor of a black feminist ethos that makes space for black women to be angry loving, vulnerable, powerful, healed and whole; it does so by drawing on a rich black feminist tradition. Beyoncé powerfully and appropriately evoked black feminist intellectual and artistic achievements on *Lemonade*, grounding her critique of America's rejection of black femininity into a fertile tradition of black womanist self-love. *Lemonade*, then, is not only an individual artistic achievement for Beyoncé, but it is also representative of a rich history of black feminist signifying that rejects both racism and sexism and highlights the brilliance and beauty of black women.

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# Taboo

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