

2018

When Life Gives You Lemons, "Get In Formation:" A Black Feminist Analysis of Beyonce's Visual Album, Lemonade

Sina H. Webster

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Abstract

Beyonce's visual album, *Lemonade*, has been considered a Black feminist piece of work because of the ways in which it centralizes the experiences of Black women, including their love relationships with Black men, their relationships with their mothers and daughters, and their relationships with other Black women. The album shows consistent themes of motherhood, the "love and trouble tradition," and Afrocentrism. Because of its hint of Afrocentrism, however, *Lemonade* can be argued as an anti Black feminist work because Afrocentrism holds many sexist beliefs of Black women. This essay will discuss the ways in which *Lemonade*'s inextricable influences of Black feminism and Afrocentrism, along with other anti Black feminist notions, can be used as a consciousness-raising tool.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

Women's and Gender Studies

First Advisor

Dr. Ashley Falzetti

Second Advisor

Suzanne Gray

Third Advisor

Peter Higgins

Keywords

Byonce, Black Feminism, Afrocentrism, *Lemonade*, Consciousness raising

Subject Categories

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, "GET IN FORMATION": A BLACK FEMINIST
ANALYSIS OF BEYONCÉ'S VISUAL ALBUM, *LEMONADE*

By

Sina H. Webster

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Departmental Honors in Women's and Gender Studies

Approved at Ypsilanti, Michigan, on this date 4/24/18

~~Supervising Instructor (Print Name and have signed)~~

~~Honors Advisor (Print Name and have signed)~~

~~Department Head (Print Name and have signed)~~

Honors Director (Print Name and have signed)

Associate

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Abstract

Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade*, has been considered a Black feminist piece of work because of the ways in which it centralizes the experiences of Black women, including their love relationships with Black men, their relationships with their mothers and daughters, and their relationships with other Black women. The album shows consistent themes of motherhood, the "love and trouble tradition," and Afrocentrism. Because of its hint of Afrocentrism, however, *Lemonade* can be argued as an anti Black feminist work because Afrocentrism holds many sexist beliefs of Black women. This essay will discuss the ways in which *Lemonade*'s inextricable influences of Black feminism and Afrocentrism, along with other anti Black feminist notions, can be used as a consciousness-raising tool.

Introduction: "You Know You That Bitch When You Cause All This Conversation"

In this essay, I will draw attention to some of my interpretations of *Lemonade* and discuss why and how they are essential to understanding Black women's lives in the United States. *Lemonade* has excellent potential as a Black Feminist consciousness-raising tool. However, there are problems with seeing it merely as such because the feminist themes are not always overt, especially to those who have not studied Black feminist thought. *Lemonade* is as much about feminism as it is about a Black communal identity, similar to that of Afrocentrism, providing mixed political messages, rich in complex cultural symbolism which complexifies it as a Black feminist consciousness raising tool.

To follow the tradition that she established when she released her first self-titled visual album, Beyoncé "broke the internet" for a second time in 2016 when she released her second visual album, *Lemonade*. She started out with an unpromoted single on February 6th, 2016, "Formation," which included a music video. "Formation" had the internet, particularly Black

Twitter¹, responding with extreme surprise, excitement, and joy. The music video, with a bounce beat from Louisiana, featured the largest group of Black women seen before in a Beyoncé music video, with lyrics that Beyoncé explicitly sang to Black women. The lyrics celebrate Black women and young girls for the features that are the most uglified by Eurocentric beauty standards: Black hair and "negro noses." The day after the music video aired, Beyoncé performed "Formation" at the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show, honoring Michael Jackson, the Black Panther Party, and Malcolm X. Her costume, a black leotard with a Black and gold military jacket, resembled that of the one that Michael Jackson wore when he performed at the Super Bowl in 1993.² Her dance troupe was also clad in all Black outfits, wearing leather jackets and beret hats that resembled those worn by members of the Black Panther Party.

After Beyoncé officially displayed her Blackness for the world to see, she received a considerable amount of backlash from white people, who deemed her performance too political. The Formation music video itself also received backlash as it featured a young Black boy dancing in front of a line of police officers, eventually making them raise their arms to him in surrender, and graffiti on a wall saying "Stop Shooting Us," and Beyoncé standing on a sinking New Orleans police car. As a result of this blatant acknowledgment of the Black Lives Matter movement and message of anti-police violence, The Miami Fraternal Order of Police called for a union boycott of Beyoncé, suggesting that officers refuse to serve at her Formation World Tour that would begin the following April.³

¹ Black Twitter is a global community of Black people using Twitter as a way to connect. Black Twitter has its own subculture of Twitter, which includes a focus on Black culture, comedy, and social justice.

² Jacob Stolworthy, "Super Bowl 50: Beyoncé honours Michael Jackson in halftime show: She wore the same outfit the late pop icon did during his halftime performance in 1993," *Independent*, February 8, 2016. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/news/super-bowl-50-beyonc-paid-tribute-to-michael-jackson-in-halftime-show-a6860501.html>

³ Carma Hassan, Gregory Krieg and Melonyce McAfee, "Police union calls for law enforcement labor boycott Beyoncé's world tour," *CNN*, February 20, 2016. <https://www.cnn.com/2016/02/19/us/beyonce-police-boycott/index.html>.

After being advertised with little explanation of what viewers could expect, Beyoncé debuted the short film, *Lemonade*, on a highly anticipated hour-long HBO special. The visual album was released the following day for purchase. Much like the answer to the “Formation” music video, the internet, particularly Black Twitter, was incredibly responsive to the debut of *Lemonade*. Journalist Kellee Terrell, described *Lemonade* as “that much needed Black Feminist tonic” in a think piece following the special.⁴ I contend, however, that Beyoncé’s visual album, *Lemonade*, is evidence of the reality that Black women who have Black feminist values, and identities do, in fact, engage in behavior and attitudes that do not align with Black feminist thought.⁵ Consciousness-raising, adapted from the Civil Rights Movement’s practice of “telling it like it is,” aims to inform oppressed people of social issues, the root of the issue and where *they* fit into these social structures and issues by discussing their personal experiences.⁶ Additionally, by exposing groups of people with something in common, like their gender or race, to the challenges that others like them face, consciousness-raising affirms that oppressed people are not alone in what they experience.⁷ Within *Lemonade*, Beyoncé and other Black women which are featured, share stories of their experiences as individuals, mothers, Black women with Black men, and Black women with other Black women, conducting a consciousness-raising group of their own.

Beyoncé's growth as a political individual and figure in popular culture since her emergence as a celebrity is evident, considering that she exemplifies how Black women’s music can express contemporary Black Feminists lived experiences, featuring influences from

⁴ Kellee Terrell, “Commentary: ‘Lemonade’ isn’t anti-black man, it’s pro-black woman,” Black Entertainment Television, April 25, 2016. <http://www.bet.com/lifestyle/2016/04/27/commentary--no--lemonade-is-not-anti-black-man--its-pro-black-wo.html>

⁵ Aisha Durham et al. “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built: A New Directions Essay,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 3 (2013): 721-37. doi:10.1086/668843.

⁶ “Feminist Consciousness-Raising.” *National Women's Liberation*. <http://www.womensliberation.org/priorities/feminist-consciousness-raising>.

⁷ *Ibid*

womanism, Black feminist thought, hip hop feminism, and Afrocentrism. Alternatively, as Joan Morgan, author of *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip-Hop Feminist Breaks It Down* describes it: “a feminism that is brave enough to fuck with the grays,” or, one that recognizes that the belief and practices of Black feminists are not always black and white: there is a gray area.⁸ Beyoncé expresses this by embracing and in ways, celebrating some of the behaviors of stereotypical Black women that society derogates, rather than trying to create new behaviors that white supremacist standards deem appropriate. For example, she features Black women in their headscarves, and using African American Vernacular English. By being honest about her experience as a Black woman, Aisha Durham, Brittney C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris post that Beyoncé “[refuses] easy and essentialist political stances about what is right or wrong and who or what gets to be called feminist.”⁹

With the incorporation of visual, poetic, musical and cultural representation that is relatable to women around the globe, but especially relatable to U.S. Black women, Beyoncé creates a pro-Black woman piece of work. Amidst considerable influence from and incorporation of Louisiana's tradition, history, and culture, Beyoncé utilizes Louisiana as a connection to express an array of Blackness and Black women's experiences. Because of the history of American slavery, the South has the highest population of Black people in the United States, and it is a hub for evolving Black culture including style, music, and dance.¹⁰ The black culture that is created here eventually makes its way to Black people across the country where it is then sampled to develop unique Black cultures within different regions, arguably making it the heart of U.S. Black culture.

⁸ Joan Morgan. *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 59.

⁹ Durham et. al, *The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built*, P. 723

¹⁰ “United States: African American Population,” CensusScope, accessed April 14, 2018. http://www.censusscope.org/us/map_nhblack.html

What is unique about Louisiana, in particular, is the multicultural and ethnic groups of Black people that have a strong presence there, including Creoles, and Mardi Gras Indians. Unknown to many, Beyoncé is Creole, by way of her mother. Yoruba culture, especially its religion influences Creoles' culture and religion, particularly Vodou.¹¹ Beyoncé fills the visual album with Yoruba culture in the form of traditional body paint, the feature of a Yoruba deity, Oshun, who is a symbolism of fertility, and the theme of motherhood, which Yoruba tradition highly reveres.¹² Therefore, Beyoncé makes this an album welcomed by women in West Africa who are in fact, Yoruba. Although it is unclear whether or not Beyoncé chose to incorporate Yoruban practices because of her connection to them through her Creole ethnicity, the feature also fits well with Black women who are not of Creole or Yoruba. While continuing the trend of Afrocentrism in the eighties, some Black women today are increasingly learning about the practices of Yoruba spirituality with aims to replace their connections to Christianity and white, blue-eyed Jesus, and connect with their ancestry.

Whitestream feminists¹³, along with white feminists, can learn from this visual album as it spotlights some of the experiences of Black women through a Black woman's eyes, unlike works such as *The Color Purple*. A film that is formidable for giving voice to Black women, but, directed by a white man taking from a story written by a Black woman. *The Color Purple* has potential to provide non-Black people of all genders insight into some of the same themes that appear in *Lemonade*. However, the fact that a Black woman tells the story and is the executive

¹¹ Ina J. Fandrich, "Yorùbá Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo," *Journal of Black Studies* 37, no. 5 (2007): , doi:10.1177/0021934705280410.

¹² Shoniqua Roach. " 'Fucking with the grays: Black female respectability politics and contemporary black female representation in the public sphere'," *University of Florida Theses & Dissertations*. 2013. <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UFE0045659%5C00001>

¹³ Whitestream feminists are those who perpetuate the pervasive whiteness of mainstream feminism. Maile Arvin et al. "Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Connections between Settler Colonialism and Heteropatriarchy," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 8-34. doi:10.1353/ff.2013.0006.

producer gives the work a certain level of validity that stories of U.S. Black women's experiences told by someone without these identities do not have.

Historically, Black women have not had a platform to make their voices heard, and when they have, people have still ignored them. Beyoncé is a significant figure beyond the scope of Black American society with a global fan base. After her using her platform, she can reach people from all walks of life. In the U.S., she has a strong fan base in white women, including those who up until watching *Lemonade* may not have given real attention to Black women's experiences. White feminists who have applied an intersectional lens to their practice of feminism before seeing *Lemonade* then have a reference point when working to discuss the importance of intersectionality to whitemainstream feminists. Similarly, socially and politically conscious Black men who watch *Lemonade* will notice that while the album is mostly about Black women's relationships with Black men, including the harm that Black men do, the album is not separatist. By watching, Black men can then use their male privilege to begin conversations with other Black men about their understanding of relationships with Black women, and Black feminism. The contribution of Afrocentrism and hip hop feminism may play a helpful role in making these discussions more easy to engage in discussion, as they both have had extensive presences in U.S. Black male history and culture.

“Hold Up” & The Love and Trouble Tradition: “Big Homie Better Grow Up”

The music video for “Hold Up,” the second song on the album follows a poem called “Denial,” by the Somali-British poet: Warsan Shire.¹⁴ The poem is recited as she is underwater, awakened from her sleep in a flooded Southern gothic home. When she begins to swim up and out of the home, she steps out of the doors of a building in what looks like a small town. As

¹⁴ Rafia Zakaria, “Warsan Shire: the Somali-British poet quoted by Beyoncé in *Lemonade*” last modified April 27, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/apr/27/warsan-shire-young-poet-laureate-beyonce-lemonade-london>.

water is gushing out of the building that, externally, has a similar look to a city hall building, she is barefoot with ankles decorated in golden anklets. After undressing herself from a hooded, black dress to reveal a golden gown under water, Beyoncé emerges from the building in a bright, yellow gold ruffled dress with her hair flowing down to her sides.

She walks through the city she has just emerged into initially smiling and laughing until she gets a hold of a baseball bat labeled “Hot Sauce.” Her joyous laughter and smiles quickly shift into enraged destruction, where she takes her anger out on cars, shop windows, security cameras, and fire hydrants. Beyoncé channels the character of a Yoruba deity, Oshun through her behavior and her dress in “Hold Up.” Oshun is most known for being a symbol of fertility, sensuality, and her association with “sweet waters,” including rivers.¹⁵ Beyoncé mimics Oshun’s turbulent character that quickly changes from rage to playfulness, as Oshun is also known to have human characteristics like jealousy and spite.¹⁶ This back and forth behavior of love and anger are describable as the embodiment of a theme in Black feminist thought: the “love and trouble tradition”.

The poem ends with a straightforward and heavy question that many women have never dared to ask their partner, out of fear or denial: “Are you cheating? Are you cheating on me?”¹⁷ In this video, Beyoncé represents a truth of Black American women that Patricia Hill Collins calls the “Love and Trouble Tradition.” Author of “Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment,” dedicates an entire chapter to “Black Women’s Love Relationships.” Here, Collins describes the “love and trouble tradition” as the tension between Black men and women that is caused by “the great love Black women feel for

¹⁵ Bayyinah Jeffries, “Oshun: Yoruba deity,” Accessed April 4, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Oshun>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Beyoncé “Pray you catch me,” *Lemonade*. [visual album]. United States. Parkwood Entertainment. 2016.

Black men,” and the hurt, frustration and oppressive behavior that Black women face in their relationships with Black men. Though all women face oppression from men due to sexism, Black women’s desire to protect Black men from racial oppression complexifies the relationship between black women and men. While watching *Lemonade*, a Black Feminist thinker who has studied Black feminist thought extensively is far more likely to recognize the influence that racial oppression plays in interpersonal relationships than the masses.

The “love and trouble tradition” also shapes how Black men act oppressively toward Black women. A white man may mistreat his partner or hurt her in some way for an underlying reason that connects to how he does not “feel like a man” because he feels that she is too involved in the public sphere. A Black man, who is unlikely to fit into the hegemonic standards of masculinity which include wealth, education and status due to factors like institutionalized racism and classism, on the other hand, may cheat on or abuse his wife for the same underlying feelings. However, his feeling of emasculation intensifies because he does not fit the hegemonic requirements of masculinity that white men created and as a result, still dominate. As a result of this, he may seek a reinforcement of his manhood and power in a different place: dominating his female partner, which, is most commonly a Black woman. Because Black men are not equal to white men in society, and Black women typically have to work, thus, are substantially involved in the public sphere as much as they are the private sphere, Black men feel that this threatens their masculinity. This feeling can lead them to have an affair with someone who makes them feel more like a man or mistreat their partner in other ways. In other words, because Black men and women’s gender roles and relationship dynamics are influenced by hegemonic notions that do not and are not meant to fit them, the way that Black women experience trials in their relationships can be significantly different from the way that white heterosexual couples do.

In Beyoncé's performance of Oshun, we see the love in her joyous behavior and the trouble that exhibits in her destructive and angry behavior. Lyrically, the Tradition rings through in the repetitious course. She sings:

Hold up, they don't love you like I love you / Slow down, they don't love you like I love you / Back up, they don't love you like I love you / Step down, they don't love you like I love you.¹⁸

According to Collins, "U.S. Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers, a consequence of expectations that men and women both participate in Black civil society."¹⁹ The phrase, "hold up," is a Black colloquialism used to demand someone's attention or command that someone stop what they are doing immediately and bring their attention to who is speaking. In this song, the phrase signifies the beginning of Beyoncé putting Jay-Z, her husband, in check, by reminding him of the reality of the situation in which they are in. When she explicitly tells him to "step down," she is speaking the Black Feminist language of the pedestal, bringing him back to reality as her partner, rather than someone who is above her.²⁰

The repetition in the course of "Hold Up" continues to show the "trouble" in the "love and trouble tradition," reminding us of the old request Black women have made of Black men to do better by them. The will to repeatedly attempt to address and rectify the mistreatment and neglect of Black men follows the aspect of Black Feminism, and Womanism, that is anti-separatist. As a result of the separatist notions that were prominent in the Women's Movement of the 1970's, and racism that white women still spewed towards Black men, many Black women,

¹⁸ Beyoncé, "Hold up," *Lemonade*. [visual album]. United States. Parkwood Entertainment. 2016.

¹⁹ Patricia Hill Collins. "The Power of Self-Definition." in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment 2nd ed.* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 97-122.

²⁰ Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier. "A black feminist statement." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 42, no. 3 (2014): 271-280, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24365010>.

including those who watch *Lemonade* do not identify with feminism as they understand it to be separatist. However, viewers with a background in Black feminist thought will recognize that Black women have historically wished to include Black men in their feminism.

As early as 1833 Black female activists such as Maria Stewart have called out Black men for their lack of action toward issues that affected both Black men and women, such as racism. Stewart declares, “Talk, without effort, is nothing; you are abundantly capable, gentlemen, of making yourselves men of distinction; and this gross neglect, on your part, causes my blood to boil within me.”²¹ This way of addressing Black men is similar to that of “Hold Up,” in that there is a blunt report made of the troublesome behavior of Black men, while, at the same time, reminding them of their great potential. Although Stewart was addressing an unreciprocated amount of action put forth between Black men and women on issues of racism, Black men and women exhibit this same sentiment of frustration in their interpersonal relationships. The chorus of “Hold Up” continues by asking:

Can't you see there's no other man above you? / What a wicked way to treat the girl that
loves you / Hold up, they don't love you like I love you / Oh, down, they don't love you
like I love you.

Rather than continuing to begin each phrase with a command as before, she explains that he is not seeing how important he is to her and that the way he is treating her is not right. The ability of Black women to confront their partners without stepping out of the boundaries of their expected gender role is different from their white counterparts. The sexual politics that are pervasive in Black men and women's lives makes this difference. Similar to how Stewart addresses the Black men in the Black community, Beyoncé addresses her husband by both

²¹ Patricia Hill Collins, “Black Women and Motherhood,” in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment 2nd ed.*, (New York: Routledge, 2000): 173-199.

reminding him of the care that she has for him as well as bringing up the “wicked way” he has treated her.

“Forward” & Motherhood: #BlackGirlMagic

Of the themes that appear in *Lemonade*, Motherhood is supportably the most explicitly articulated. Motherhood often emerges in Beyoncé’s reading of Warsan Shire’s poetry. During the chapter “Accountability,” Beyoncé recites a poem about a daughter seeking to emulate her mother’s behavior and appearance, and about the ambiguity of a mother’s relationships between her and her husband, or father. Another, during the chapter “Hope,” is a voice over of an adapted version of the poem “Nail Tech as Fortune Teller,” by Warsan Shire, which describes the prophetic hand reading of a woman giving birth to two daughters in her future. Shire’s poetry is a way for Beyoncé to express the significance of mothers and to mother in Black women’s lives.

The song, “Forward,” is preceded by the chapter, “Resurrection,” where a woman speaks over visual clips of Black women, known and unknown, in Southern Gothic and urban settings. She begins her monologue asking about who will raise and teach the children. Given that the voice plays over images of Black women, viewers can assume that she is speaking of Black children, to which the answer will be Black women, like the ones seen. She asks, “How are we supposed to lead our children into the future? What do we do? How do we lead them?” She continues with, “love. L-o-v-e, love,” to say that love is the what will best allow Black women to lead their children into the future.

She then gives thanks and praise to God, which ends by suggesting that “you gotta call him, you gotta call him cause you ain’t got no other hope!”²² This monologue sheds light on the reality that U.S. Black women have to raise their children under racial, gender, class, and even

²² Beyoncé “Resurrection,” *Lemonade*. [visual album]. United States. Parkwood Entertainment. 2016.

heterosexual oppression, hoping to alleviate their children of these factors, and have leaned on religion, their church community, and their faith in God as a source of comfort and strength.

“Forward” features celebrities like Winnie Harlow and Quvenzhané Wallis, and a Mardi Gras Indian girl,²³ holding photos of Black men who are mostly unknown to the viewers.²⁴ More recognizable, we see Sybrina Fulton, Gwen Carr, and Lesley McSpadden; mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Gamer, and Michael Brown respectively. The women are each shown sitting in throne-like chairs, holding pictures of their deceased sons, who lost their lives to police violence.²⁵ Fulton and Carr, both have a sharp look of composure to the point where they are almost coming off as expressionless. After this, there is a brief moment of vulnerability and pain — Lesley McSpadden, Michael Brown’s mother’s shot. The moment the shot switches to her she is seen shaking her head, as though she is still in disbelief. We watch as her mouth slightly twitches and her nostrils flare, almost like she is trying to stay as composed as the women that we see before her. A second later, she sheds a single tear as her face breaks, and she begins to cry. The scene ends with a Mardi Gras Indian girl as she finishes walking through an empty dining room in traditional garb, rattling a tambourine.

The scene transitions to the next by responding to the questions that may be going through the viewers’ minds while the images remind them of the losses these mothers, like others, have endured: “how are they so strong? How can they do it? I can only imagine.” The next shot appears in a revisited scene where we find Beyoncé, with some of her dance troupe

²³ Although their origins are debated, Mardi Gras Indians are Black people who separate themselves by neighborhoods, and dress and parade during Mardi Gras. Some claim that they have direct lineage to Native Americans, and others, claim that they are a product of the blending of Creoles and Native Americans. Beyoncé featuring a Mardi Gras Indian *girl* in traditional garb, continues her celebration of women and girls, as men typically dress in this style.

²⁴ Leah Donnell. "The Mardi Gras Indian Of 'Lemonade'" last modified April 27, 2016.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/04/27/475588107/the-mardi-gras-indian-of-lemonade>.

²⁵ Trayvon Martin was murdered by George Zimmerman, a self appointed neighborhood watchman in a Florida neighborhood. Although his murderer was not a police officer, his story, like Eric Gamer and Michael Brown’s, made national news and was pushed for justice by the Black Lives Matter movement.

wearing Yoruban body paint, on a bus featured in an earlier video, “Sorry” marked with the words “BOY BYE.” Beyoncé simply responds, “magic,” a reference to the hashtag²⁶ #BlackGirlMagic.

“Black girl magic” often refers to the beauty and energy of Black women, and it is as often related to their perceived strength. Because this strength seems to be so sturdy and long-lasting, witnesses to it treat it as a wonder, and how it works or where it comes from is also explored. Melissa V. Harris-Perry, the author of *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black women in America*, suggests that to combat the racial and sexual stereotypes cast upon them, many U.S. Black women protect themselves with a “mythic strength,” which is what they and others refer to as “Black girl magic.”²⁷ The superhuman strength of Black women, or Black girl magic,” is especially looked to as an explanation for how Black women can walk through the fires of adversity, typically influenced by racial, gender, and class oppression, and police violence.

Although “Black girl magic” shines in a positive light, its superhumanization can have as damaging of an effect on Black women as dehumanizing stereotypes do. Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, and Demita Frazier, writers of “A Black Feminist Statement,” report, “[w]e reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.”²⁸ The contrast between the interpretation of “Black girl magic” in contemporary Black, popular culture, and the impact it has on Black women overall places it at a close juxtaposition between helpful and harmful. Black women as superhumans allow for the

²⁶ A hashtag, most commonly used on Twitter, is a way to allow users to find specific content in one place. Once a hashtag is searched, every tweet that features this hashtag will show up. Hashtags are one way that Black Twitter is able to stay connected, even when not every Black Twitter user follows another.

²⁷ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, “Disaster,” in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011): 134-179.

²⁸ Smith et al. “A black feminist statement.”

exploitation of Black women's physical, mental, and emotional labor by their places of employment, their partners, and their families and friends, including their children.

To revere Black women as “queens” perpetuates the notion that Black women must be royalty for them to be seen positively and appreciated, neglecting the fact that realistically, Black women are treated vastly far from royalty in the United States. Similarly, placing Black women on a pedestal for their strength and endurance insinuates that Black women must be unbreakable to be appreciated, and frequently, to have their womanhood validated. This stereotype, and the pressures to fulfill it, leave Black women more exploitable by their loved ones without recognizing it for exploitation over their duties as Black women. Because of the many negative stereotypes that society projects onto Black women, the title of “queen” is appealing to many as it is a change in what is perceived as the positive direction. However, with knowledge of how queendom relates to Afrocentrism, and the dehumanizing effects of the “strong” Black woman narrative, Black Feminist thinkers are likely to recognize how they are problematic, where viewers without this way of thinking may embrace the representation of their strength in *Lemonade*. Additionally, this perception of Black mothers, sisters, and grandmothers' strength and superhuman ability to push through anything, making a way out of no way, leaves Black men a damaging amount of room not to be responsible for themselves, their families, and for heterosexual men, their duties to their female partners.

Strength as a defining character of Black womanhood is so omnipresent in the Black community and the United States altogether that it is one of the most common descriptive words used by U.S. Black women to describe themselves. In a study conducted by students at the University of Chicago, they found that when Black women were asked for three words to describe Black women, the most common answers that came up were: “strong, beautiful, smart, independent,

[and] kind, loving." The most commonly used descriptor was "strong." Strength was reported by 21% of participants, with the second most common descriptor following with 14%.²⁹ Black women's understandings of strength being a significant part of Black womanhood may be attributed to the lessons learned from their Black mothers, "othermothers", or "women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities," and community mothers.³⁰

Black mothers face the challenge of teaching their daughters the importance of navigating the racial and sexual politics around them while building their senses of self-reliance and encouraging them to push back against these intersecting forces of oppression.³¹ A significant part of this comes from teaching their daughters ways to be strong, often through example. For instance, Black mothers may take on the position of mother, tutor, and doctor, all the while keeping food on the table in their home. Or, by working throughout the week, and making it to church every weekend, contributing to events planning and preparation in the church as it is requested of her, doing so only "by the grace of God." This circumstance is so much the case, especially for working-class Black mothers that lessons of keeping their emotions intact, and self-preservation become lost along the way.³² As these thoughts and memories of similar experiences with having strong mothers, or being strong mothers cross the minds of Black women watching the mothers in "Forward," an opportunity for exposure to a different and vital narrative is presented with the imagery of Lesley McSpadden, Michael Brown's mother.

This image combats the image of the suprahuman strength of Black women that makes them more easily exploitable and treated more harshly. By reminding us that not all Black women can withstand the amount of trauma and agony that gender and racial oppression places

²⁹ Melissa V. Harris-Perry, "Appendix: Survey Data," in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011): 300-313.

³⁰ Collins, "Black Women and Motherhood," in *Fighting words*, P. 178.

³¹ *Ibid*, P. 183-185.

³² *Ibid*, P. 183.

on their shoulders and that they too are valid as Black women and mothers. Harris-Perry eloquently states that “[f]or every black woman who remains an independent moral agent in the face of crushing oppression, there are many who are, in fact, crushed.”³³ Black women do grieve, and while bearing the burdens of the world, in a way that is deemed either successful or unsuccessful, they are still human — even with their magic. When the masses, including Black women, who are not versed in Black feminist thought but do in fact contribute to it through experience, watch this scene they are likely to sympathize with McSpadden, as she is grieving over a death that any Black woman could have to face. While doing so, they still may be in awe of her strength for having endured the pain that she has. When those who *have* studied Black Feminism view this scene, they may feel the same sentiment. In addition, however, they are presumably appreciative of her shown vulnerability, recognizing that this image is essential for *all* people to see.

Although women of many racial and ethnic backgrounds can relate in some way to being mothers, and losing their children, this scene that shows Sybrina Fulton, Gwen Carr, and Lesley McSpadden highlight an experience that is particular to Black women as mothers. Because of the intersecting effects of racism, classism, and sexism, Black women’s struggles as women vary significantly from that of white women, including some of the anxieties for their children that come with being a mother. The threat of police brutality, for instance, is one that Black and white women face differently because it poses little to no threat to white youth. This anxiety affects how Black women may be involved in knowing their children’s whereabouts, the way that they dress, aiming not to allow them to look like more of a threat than they are already perceived to be because of their skin color. These seemingly small differences are significant in the added stress and fear that Black women face every day. For example, when they receive a phone call from an

³³Harris-Perry, Melissa V. “Disaster,” in *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, P. 230.

unknown number, have not heard from their child by the time they have expected to, or hear of a police shooting in or near their area and immediately begin to worry that it was *their* child that police have killed.

The challenges of being Black women, and Black mothers, has required Black women to come up with strategies to cope. Patricia Hill Collins explains that,

U.S. Black working mothers' needs for child care, the chronically poor education offered to Black children in underfunded, inner-city public schools, the disproportionate numbers of young Black men who have arrest records or are incarcerated, and the large numbers of African-American children currently in government-run foster care all constitute new versions of some old problems of special concern to African-American women.³⁴

Losing children to police brutality is an experience that Black mothers, like the three, featured in the video, are likely more familiar with given the disproportionate rates of Black people killed by police compared to that of other races. This experience goes beyond Black women raising their sons, as the same experience is higher among Black women losing their daughters, who are also killed by police at a disproportionate rate. Beyoncé sheds light to this experience by centering the mothers of the young men featured, whose faces have been made the front of the Black Lives Matter movement, with little concern given to the mothers who lost them.

Beyoncé uses her platform to remind us of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, an effort as worthy of scrutiny as it is praise. Although Beyoncé spotlights BLM and seems to make the scene mostly about the women holding the photographs of the slain Black men, she misses a chance to recognize the Black women whom police brutality has taken the lives of. The erasure of Black transgender and cisgender women, and transgender men in the movement has been so detrimental, and such a slap in the face considering that queer Black women started the Black

³⁴Collins, "Black Women and Motherhood," In *Fighting words*, P. 177.

Lives Matter hashtag, and the official organization.³⁵ The silence around Black women's experiences with police brutality led to the creation of "#SayHerName" in 2015 by the African American Policy Forum, "[in] an effort to continue to call attention to violence against Black women in the U.S."³⁶ For *Lemonade* to be a pro-Black woman and Black woman-centered piece, it is especially disappointing that Beyoncé did not center a matter of life and death around Black women.

"Freedom," Black Feminism, & Consciousness-Raising: "I Need Freedom, Too"

The song "Freedom" is a bold move for Beyoncé due to its more explicit political content. "Freedom" takes place in the nighttime woods on the stage that has repeatedly appeared at this point, where Beyoncé stands vulnerable, front and center in a long white dress. Her vulnerability and physical positioning concerning the rest of the women give the scene a feeling of a confessional, as though she is admitting to her wrongs as someone whose beginning in activist work and art was overdue. An initial step into this work was honoring Sybrina Fulton, Lesley McSpadden, Gwen Carr, their slain sons, and the Black Lives Matter Movement in "Forward." Because of their social status as the mothers whose sons sparked a movement, Fulton, McSpadden, and Carr, can be understood as those with authority to accept her into this group of woke, Black, activist women as they sit in the front row. The lyrics that Beyoncé begins with also contribute to the energy of the confessional. Without music to support her, also providing to the intensity and vulnerability of the scene, she sings,

Tryna rain, tryna rain on the thunder. Tell the storm I'm new. I'ma walk, I'ma march on the regular. Painting white flags blue. Lord forgive me, I've been running. Running blind

³⁵ "Herstory," Black Lives Matter, accessed April 18th, 2018. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/>

³⁶ "Say her name," The African American Policy Forum, accessed April 18th, 2018. <http://www.aapf.org/sayhername/>

in truth. I'ma rain, I'ma rain on this bitter love. Tell the sweet I'm new. I'm telling these tears, "Go and fall away, fall away" oh, may the last one burn into flames.

By asking the Lord to forgive her for running "blind in truth," the confessional mood of this scene continues into the lyrics of the song so that it goes beyond the visuals and in the song itself. Her request to "tell the storm" that she is new is interpretable as making the oppressor aware that she is new to the fight, and her declaration of her plans to march "on the regular" means that she is prepared to be active in social justice efforts on a regular basis. In addition to the feel of a confessional, the visuals of this chapter are reminiscent of a consciousness-raising group. Because the women who are featured, like Zendaya and Amandla Stenberg, are principally active in using their fame as a platform to speak on social justice issues, and this is marking Beyonce's initiation into publicly incorporating Black Feminism into her work.

As of May 2017, Beyoncé's net worth reached 350 million dollars, placing her in a position of class privilege over the majority of the world.³⁷ Unlike the mass majority of U.S. and global Black women, Beyoncé has the class privilege that can protect her from much of the sources of stress and hardship that Black women face. However, despite her class and skin tone privilege, Beyoncé is still a Black woman, meaning she is still affected by racial and gender oppression. "Forward" shows that she recognizes this reality. The continuation of the chorus includes lyrics that indicate her recognition of privilege, and that despite the privileges she has, her silence will not protect her.³⁸ Beyonce's fame and money separates her from the majority of Black women in the United States and around the world, as it affords her a significant amount of privilege. However, although her money and fame can alleviate class oppression, it cannot

³⁷ "Beyoncé Knowles: Musician," *Forbes*, accessed April 17th, 2018. <https://www.forbes.com/profile/beyonce-knowles/>

³⁸ Taken from the title of Audre Lorde, radical, lesbian Black Feminist, book title, "Your Silence Will Not Protect You."

protect her from the deteriorating work of racism and sexism, primarily when working in the music industry which is dominated by men. She shows recognition of this when she calls out, "Freedom! Freedom! I can't move / Freedom, cut me loose! /Freedom! Freedom! Where are you? / Cause I need freedom too!"³⁹ The title, "Freedom," or liberation, is the ultimate goal of Black Feminism, recognizing that the liberation of U.S. Black women is the key to the liberation of all in the U.S. because it requires dismantling all systems of oppression.⁴⁰

While the visuals regress in time with the progression of the album, contrarily, the notions of Black Feminism and Womanism emerge with it. As Beyoncé travels through her journey in *Lemonade*, her surroundings become less urban and more Southern Gothic, implying that she is returning to her roots as she heals. In correlation with the shifting of the physical settings in the album, Beyoncé also begins to surround herself with an increasing number of Black women, portraying it as a part of her healing process and self-grounding. In "Black Feminist Thought", Collins discusses the importance of Black women to the nourishment and comfort of Black women. She indicates the importance of Black women's relationships with one another in affirming one another's experiences. She proposes,

as mothers, daughters, sis-ters, and friends to one another, many African-American women affirm one another ... In the comfort of daily conversations, through serious conversation and humor, African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist.⁴¹

Beyoncé includes many mothers in this scene and the whole visual album, including *her* mother who, appears in clips from her wedding. Not to mention, she proudly embraces her position as a mother by including her daughter in the film showing her with the large group of women in the

³⁹ Beyoncé, "Freedom," *Lemonade*. [visual album]. United States. Parkwood Entertainment. 2016.

⁴⁰ Smith et al., "A black feminist statement."

⁴¹ Collins, "Black feminist thought," P. 102

woods, and placing her front and center when she sings “I like my baby’ hair with baby hair and afros,” during the chorus of “Formation.”

There are shots of the large group of women preparing a meal together, and laughing and talking with one another across a large table outside in the woods. In the informal relationships that Black women have with one another, there is ample room for counseling and listening to one another. The room to unload and shed the expectations of the “strong Black woman” stereotype among Black women who are familiar with the pressures of these expectations is important to Black women’s ability to take care of themselves. Smith et al. admit, “[w]e realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us.”⁴² Regardless of their academic background, Black women who view this undoubtedly have encountered this idea because of their lived experiences, including exposure to lack of action taken to protect Black women by most. Black women’s relationships with one another are an important indicator that this accurate understanding among them is still relevant.

Lemonade shows the importance of Black women’s relationships with one another and uses a strong sentiment of Womanism to support this message. In 1979, Alice Walker, queer literary writer, civil rights worker, and social activist, introduced the term “Womanism” in a short story called *Coming Apart* as an alternative to white feminism.⁴³ Walker defines Womanism as:

Womanist 1. From womanish. (Opp. Of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. ... Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. ... Responsible. In charge. Serious. 2. Also: A woman

⁴² Smith et. al, “A Black Feminist statement.”

⁴³ Melanie L. Harris, *Gifts of virtue. alice walker, and womanist ethics*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

*who loves other women, sexually and/or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health.*⁴⁴

Part two of this definition is most apparent in *Lemonade* in correspondence with the celebration of women and their roles as supporters, inspirations, and nurturers as Beyoncé moves through her journey of growth. The chapter titles of the album, like “Anger,” “Apathy,” and “Hope” also display an appreciation for “women’s emotional flexibility.” Beyoncé shows a preference for Black women’s culture especially as she makes use of Black women’s hairstyles, dances, and language.

“Don’t Hurt Yourself,” Black Feminism, & Afrocentrism: “Fucking With the Grays”

The third song on the album, “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” is set in a parking structure where the foci alternate between Beyoncé by herself, a group of women bound together by their sleeves, and Beyoncé with a group of three women in the background. When Beyoncé is by herself, she wears a beautiful long gown that is fit for a gala, a large necklace that covers her chest, a spiked headpiece which covers parts of her face and ears, and her voluminous, textured hair is worn down. In this costume, Beyoncé and her surroundings are viewed through a night vision filter, making her skin and hair look incredibly pale, her eyes darkened, emulating the eery effects used in a horror movie. While in this costume, Beyoncé is occasionally surrounded by fire, serving as borders around her. The women who are bound together are in long, loose, white

⁴⁴ Alice Walker, *In search of our mothers' garden: Womanist prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) P.xi-xii.

dresses, the end of their sleeves tied together in knots. These women are positioned in a circle moving back and forth, and in and out together gracefully, their arms leading their movement.

The dominant setting in the video is where Beyoncé is accompanied by three other women who are perch themselves on and around an SUV with missing tires. The SUV featured is very much like the one that she keys in the “Me, Myself, & I” video, where she is also confronting her partner about his infidelity. In continuation of her usage of repetition, Beyoncé now uses visuals to exemplify the “love and trouble tradition” in this piece, as she did in “Hold Up.” The performance in this space is an intensified, direct expression of rage toward her cheating husband, Jay-Z, where Beyoncé dramatically corresponds her bodily movements with the lyrics she chants. She is wearing a grey two-piece Yeezy⁴⁵ outfit, with a cold-shoulder style fur coat and grey boots to match.

Her hair is in long cornrows going straight back with her edges laid,⁴⁶ and she accessorizes her neck with an ankh, the Egyptian symbol for life, as a pendant. As Beyoncé swaggers about the parking structure, she is repeatedly flipping off the camera, pointing into it accusingly, and simultaneously headbanging and rolling her neck to the rock music. Here she expresses her anger more freely than she does in the gown, where there is less usage of her whole body, as though the Beyoncé in the gown, more formally dressed and less associated with the “angry Black woman” stereotype, has less room to show her actual rage than the Beyoncé in the two-piece outfit does. There is a brief visual interlude between the alternating scenes, where we see Black women in various spaces that look like a neighborhood in the South. These women

⁴⁵ Yeezy is rapper Kanye West’s fashion line.

⁴⁶ A significant part of Black women’s culture is Black hair. For one’s edges to be “laid,” is to have their baby hair styled in a way that they are lying down flat around the edges of their hairline. Laid edges can be styled so that they are in small curls or waves. Laid edges are becoming increasingly appropriate among white and non-Black women’s fashion, despite the historical stereotypes that are attached to Black women with this style of hair as “hood” and “ghetto.”

naturally exist during this time where a voiceover plays from a speech that Malcolm X, Black Nationalist and Civil Rights Leader, called "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" Malcolm X states: "The most disrespected woman 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 is a testament to Black Feminist theory, which operates out of the understanding that because of racial, gender, and class oppression, Black women are among the most marginalized people in the United States.⁴⁷

The lack of value that society places on Black women makes it so that they are vulnerable to labor exploitation, physical and sexual violence, and unfair treatment in their places of work, their homes and communities, and in the hands of public entities such as the police and the prison system. Controlling images of Black women created during and after American slavery have disenfranchised them and left them in a position of inferiority socially, economically, and politically.⁴⁸ Despite their subordinate status which spans across the board of systems that command American society, Black women have been treated as the essential pieces to fill in the need for labor to maintain the ruling products of these systems, like capitalism, and thus, are treated like "the mules of the world."⁴⁹

In continuation of her directive body language, the lyrics in "Don't Hurt Yourself" are also explicit, and vulgar. The opening line alone, "who the fuck do you think I is?" embraces the African American Vernacular English that white supremacist ideology denounces, and rejects the respectability politics that American society projects onto Black women. The nature of the song, as it is one that is inspired by anger and is confrontational, inherently defies the expectations of

⁴⁷ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, p. 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

the Black-male-pleasing Black woman by Afrocentric standards. Beyoncé continues the first verse claiming:

You ain't married to no average bitch, boy. / You can watch my fat ass twist, boy. / As I bounce to the next dick, boy. / And keep your money, I got my own. / Keep a bigger smile on my face, being alone. / Bad motherfucker, God complex. / Motivate your ass-call me Malcolm X.

Like themes seen throughout the album, this verse is densely packed: notions of self-definition, pushback against respectability politics, including an expression of her sexuality, and a hint of Afrocentrism. Beyoncé's self-definition as a woman who is above average, financially independent, and is capable of offering *herself* happiness, despite the Afrocentric notion of complementarity, is a critical feature in Black feminist thought. Equally important, Beyoncé not only reminds her husband that he is replaceable by informing him of her plans to "bounce to the next dick" if his behavior does not change, but she also acknowledges the fact that she is a sexual being, and is okay with sleeping with a man who is not her husband. Regardless of whom she insinuates that she is to sleep with, referencing her body in a confident and alluring way is self-empowering.

Because she is a mother, Beyoncé has faced criticism from both ends of the liberal-conservative spectrum over the ways that she expresses her sexuality. A year after giving birth to her first daughter, Blue Ivy Carter, she performed at the 2013 Super Bowl. Her performance was met with considerable talk about her leather leotard and the way she danced, claiming that it was inappropriate for kids at home to watch and for her, *as* a mother, to perform this way at all.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Amanda Marcotte, "Prudes Complain that Beyoncé Is Sexy, Wish She Would Perform in Mom Jeans," last modified February 7, 2013, http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/02/07/beyonce_isSexy_her_halftime_show_wasSexy_and_your_point_is.html

Three years later, Beyoncé's lyrics become even more explicit, as this album is the first where she uses "dick," and "nigga" in some of her lyrics on *Lemonade*. According to Roach, "the politics of respectability perpetuates the purported ontological, physical, and intellectual supremacy of whiteness."⁵¹ Rather than conforming to the world, including the Black community's desire for Black women to carry themselves in a "respectable way" Beyoncé chooses not to allow respectability politics control her sexuality as it aims to do.⁵² Instead, she puts her sexuality on display and leaves the workaround respectability politics to be about dismantling white supremacy rather than Black women suppressing their sexualities.⁵³

However, the threatening nature of the line, "you can watch my fat ass twist, boy," can be argued as Beyoncé leveraging her body as a motivating factor to make her husband rectify his infidelity that stems from an internalized desire for the male gaze and that this is inherently negative. However, this is a common practice for women, who, after running out of logical or even "respectable" approaches to addressing their partner's mistreatment of them, do in fact use their bodies to grab their attention. Black women specifically, whom in addition to Eurocentric beauty standards, society subjects them to their specific beauty standards, which include having a "fat ass." To have this desired body is a source of pride for many Black women, and also a point of desirability for a considerable number of Black men who are also socialized to seek out a particular body type in Black women. Men often value women for their appearance and the sexual pleasure they get from them as much if not more than they do for their companionship and love. In response, women learn to hit them where it hurts when they feel they do not have other options: their sex lives, and their sense of ownership over their female partners, connected to

⁵¹ Roach, "Fucking with the grays," P. 9

⁵² Ibid P. 8

⁵³ Ibid P. 10

their sexual attachment to them. Therefore, this sentiment is another strong testament to the reality of Black women's challenges with Black men.

According to Collins, "[m]uch of the best of Black feminist thought reflects this effort to find a collective, self-defined voice and express a fully articulated womanist standpoint."⁵⁴ Black women do not have the privilege of being treated as individuals due to racist beliefs that Black people are a homogenous group of people. For this reason, the controlling images of Black women and the effects that these images have on Black women as a group, force many of them to be hyper-aware of how they are perceived. As a result, some Black women carefully police their outward appearance and behavior so as not to harm the beliefs about other Black women.

The consequence of this is an internalized battle for Black women who aware of their connectedness to other Black women by societal beliefs, to be able to be their authentic selves without harming other Black women. For Beyoncé to practice self-definition, while bringing life to a stereotype of Black women that is shamed by white society and Black men, however, is a sign. By doing this she pushes back against (1) the notion that Black women are not complicated, or worthy of individualized treatment and understanding, and (2) contemporary Black Feminist notions that Black women must strive to defy the controlling images of them.⁵⁵ This seemingly contradictory behavior is what Hip Hop Feminists refer to as "fucking with the grays," or acknowledging the reality that many Black feminists, in fact, engage in behavior or beliefs that would be deemed problematic by Black Feminist standards.

Karla Holloway, a Black female American academic, insists that "the reality of racism and sexism means that we must configure our private realities to include an awareness of what our public image might mean to others. This is not paranoia. It is preparedness." Although

⁵⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, P. 100

⁵⁵ Roach, *Fucking with the grays*. p. 14

Beyoncé's performance in "Don't Hurt Yourself" is interpretable as perpetuating the "angry Black woman" stereotype, and respectability politics insist that this could affect the perception of other Black women, she has chosen to speak truth to her experience with anger rather than hiding it. Consequently, she has unapologetically given voice and face to experience with anger that Black women can relate to — anger, an emotion that Audre Lorde, Black lesbian feminist and writer, proposes is "loaded with information and energy," and Black Feminist Theory's "love and trouble tradition".⁵⁶ However, Beyoncé's performance of a duality between her formal and informal self represents an understanding of being viewed in the public eye as one "kind of Black woman," and another in her private reality.

Beyoncé chooses to show an authentic part of Black womanhood during the Malcolm X voiceover. She shows one Black woman in a headscarf, one wearing a hair weave, which is not flawless like that of someone with as much money as Beyoncé, one in a hoodie, and another wearing large hoop earrings and her 4C⁵⁷ hair in a natural style. Black women in headscarves are denigrated and frequently depicted in media as poor, uneducated, and worthy of whatever oppression, especially violence, that they face. Hence their status as the "most unprotected person in America." This perception is pervasive in white society, but also in Black society, where Black men use this image for comedic purpose without significant pushback, leaving them as "the most disrespected person in America." Instances like this, are common throughout *Lemonade* where there's mixing of Black community identity, referencing the vastness of

⁵⁶ Lorde, Audre. "The uses of anger." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 25, No. 1/2 (1997), *Looking Back, Moving Forward: 25 Years of Women's Studies History*. pp. 278-285. 1997. P. 278.

⁵⁷ By using a method that combines letter and number places, from 1-4, and A-D, hair texture is described by its straightness, curliness, and curl tightness. In the natural hair movement that has become popular among Black women, curly hair like that of biracial (usually Black and white) Black women are deemed as the most beautiful and desirable. Hair textures like 4C hair are most opposite of eurocentric beauty standards for hair, and have such tight curls and coils, that they are not as visible, and when worn out, resemble an afro more than it does curls. This hair texture, even in the natural hair movement, is called "ugly," and "nappy," and Black women who have this hair face the most pressure to straighten or relax their hair.

blackness, Black Feminism, and Black Nationalism. In those instances, these opposing entities are displayed so tightly together, without separation, that the messiness of it all may be hard for Black Feminists to see as the inextricable themes cloud moving Black feminist understandings.

Afrocentrism

Afrocentrism, a derivative of Black cultural nationalism, is one of several Black nationalist projects to come out of the 1980s that “simultaneously represents and shapes Black political aspirations for freedom and justice.”⁵⁸ Black cultural nationalism was popularized across the United States during the Black Power Movement, and came in response to the realization that despite the gains of the civil rights movement, the liberation of Black folks through significant political and economic power was not likely to come out of the racist and capitalist system in which they were operating. According to Collins, Black cultural nationalism “aims to reconstruct Black consciousness by replacing prevailing ideas about race with analyses that place the interests and needs of Africa at the center of any discussion.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, Black cultural nationalism is believed to have been designed to act as a philosophy that was accessible to, and also targeted, Black people outside of academia. For many, this included learning the languages, apparel, history, and religions from various African ethnicities and cultures, *especially* Egypt. Lemonade features Egyptian symbols like the ankh, and Beyoncé emulates the Egyptian queen, Nefertiti, in the video for “Sorry.” In many cases throughout the album, including these, Black nationalism is what people want to enjoy and love about *Lemonade*. However, but Black nationalism and Black feminism are so sufficiently different that it complicates viewing lemonade as Black Feminist text.

⁵⁸ Patricia Hill Collins. “When Fighting Words Are Not Enough: The Gendered Content of Afrocentrism.” in *Fighting Words: Black Women & the Search for Justice*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 155-83.

⁵⁹ Collins, “Fighting Words,” P. 160

The strategy of centralizing Black Americans' understanding of themselves as Africans, rather than U.S. Black Americans came to fruition with intentions of empowering themselves. However, this practice perpetuated the white supremacist belief that Black Americans do not have their own culture by idolizing and looking to emulate a culture that was not only someone else's, but that did not even *influence* the creation of U.S. Black culture. Furthermore, Afrocentrists ultimately created systems of domination similar to those in the higher American society that they sought to escape. Because replacing notions of race, and not gender, was the focus of centralizing discussions around Black people, Black men placed themselves at the top of the hierarchical structure that they created. This strategy allowed them to set their *own* sexist standards for Black women, disguised as “complementarity,” rather than just perpetuating those created by white men. This is why the feature of Malcolm X, a Black Nationalist, is so complex in a song and video where Beyoncé is deliberately disregarding Afrocentric gender roles. Whereas the average viewer may hear this and be appreciative of and even excited by this statement from Malcolm X, Black Feminist thinkers' ears may poke up here, noticing the contradiction that is unfolding before them. However, because this is such a Black Feminist statement, the complexity in which it presents itself may cause the contradiction to pass over Black Feminist thinkers' heads.

Imamu Amiri Baraka, a Black cultural nationalist in the United States, wrote the following excerpt in a 1970 article, “Black Woman,” which elaborates on how Afrocentrists approached gender and gender roles:

We do not believe in ‘equality’ of men and women.... We could never be equals.... Nature has not provided thus.... But this means that we will complement each other, that you, who I call my house, because there is no house without a man and his wife, are the

single element in the universe that perfectly completes my essence. You are essential, to the development of any life in the house... When we say complement, completes, we mean that we have certain functions which are more natural to us, and you have graces that are yours alone. We say that a Black woman must first be able to inspire her man, then she must be able to teach our children, and contribute to the social development of the nation... You inspire Black Man by being Black Woman.

For a Black woman to fit these standards, she must first be a heterosexual woman who commits to Black men. She must be willing and able to bear children “for the nation,” and be prepared to raise and care for them without complaint as her man is to be busy fighting for the nation. Faith Williams, author of “Afrocentrism, Hip-Hop, and the ‘Black Queen’: Utilizing Hip-Hop Feminist Methods to Challenge Controlling Images of Black Women,” describes the ideal Black woman by Afrocentric standards as the “Black-male-pleasing Black woman ... [whose] role remains that of a submissive, heterosexual giver to the Black race.”⁶⁰ She must also be prepared to care for her Black male partner, which includes taking on docility and doing what her husband tells her. Black women who: are queer, do not want to or are incapable of having children, or date outside of their race disqualify from being the Black-male-pleasing Black woman. As a result, she diminishes her worth, Afrocentrists criticize her, and she is pushed even further to the margins.

Years later, during the eighties and nineties, Black cultural nationalism was “resurrected” under the name “Afrocentrism” in response to a political and social climate that was becoming more conservative. Although the intended audience of Afrocentrism is those outside of academia, Afrocentrism was and still is a highly focused subject in Black studies, attracting as

⁶⁰Faith Williams. “Afrocentrism, Hip-Hop, and the “Black Queen”: Utilizing Hip-Hop Feminist Methods to Challenge Controlling Images of Black Women.” *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 10, no.1 (2017): <http://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1125&context=mcnair>

much praise as it has criticism from Black academics. Some common objections coming from Black scholars who find Afrocentrism troublesome is that Afrocentrism is not only male-centered but sexist, it focuses too much on the African past rather than the contemporary Black experiences and opposes heterogeneity among Black people and Black culture to forge a monolithic racial identity.⁶¹ Black Feminist thinkers watching *Lemonade* may not make this critique of *Lemonade*'s Afrocentric themes that align with those of academics, however, because of how inextricably close they are to the way that Beyoncé represents the vastness of Black identities in *Lemonade*.

Afrocentrism places Black women in a severe and considerably unrealistic dichotomous bind between the roles that they can fulfill, both of which are concerning Black men, and how they ought to be treated based on into which character they fall. Afrocentric gender roles hold Black women of all kind to this expectation, including activists and artists in addition to Black women in unrecognized positions. Two examples of this, as provided by Collins, and Williams, are Angela Y. Davis and Alice Walker. Angela Y. Davis, scholar-activist, was a member of the Black Panther Party and is most remembered for her afro and work for Black liberation with the Party. Her commitment to LGBTQ+ rights, radical Black feminism, and her lesbian identity, however, are far less discussed. Alice Walker, who coined the term "Womanism," and wrote the famous novel turned film, "The Color Purple," was highly scrutinized for her work; especially that of the way that Black men appeared in the film. Black women who are activists and artists, when given the proper platform, are given a unique opportunity to disrupt Afrocentric gender ideologies. *Lemonade* shows that the power to disrupt problematic gender ideologies and exposing the truth to them is still relevant.

Conclusion: Getting In-Formation

⁶¹ Collins, "Fighting Words," P. 155

Beyoncé is considered the most popular and influential artist of her time. With a career lasting twenty years and counting, she has been able to create a fan base across generations and nations. In 2016 she released *Lemonade*, a visual album that has inspired me to study its content, and meaning to me, my peers, and other academics for the last two years. Because Beyoncé has been my idol since I was five years old, upon questioning of her talent, my initial response is typical to defend, defend, defend! Similarly, when my research led me to begin to criticize her older work as well as *Lemonade*, it was incredibly challenging to adjust and be more honest as a scholar about what I found.

At the beginning of my studies, I saw the album precisely as Terrell described it: “that much needed Black feminist tonic.”⁶² Upon completion of my study, however, I have found that *Lemonade* is an album that “fucks with the grays.” and as it turns out, I do as well, Realizing this initially disturbed my cut and dry understanding and practice of Black Feminism, and what a Black feminist could be. Beyoncé’s work has led me to inquire further into Black women’s experiences in the U.S. with each other, themselves, and Black men. Most importantly, If taken seriously, Beyoncé’s visual album, *Lemonade*, can be used as an innovative tool to assist in conducting consciousness-raising for those who have an interest in the liberation of Black women, and by default, of themselves.

As we are in an era where there are increasingly intersectional public discussions on race, gender, sexuality, and class, the slogan “trust Black women” has become more commonly seen on social media and posters at “feminist” events. If people are to begin to trust Black women, they must be seen and heard, first. Although *Lemonade* is not the “say all end all” representation of Black women, considering that it leaves some Black women, like trans women, disabled

⁶² Terrell, “Commentary: ‘Lemonade’ isn’t anti-black man, it’s pro-black woman,” 2016.

Black women, and “visibly” queer⁶³ Black women out, it is a starting place to discuss Black women’s lives. If viewers use the deep and complex meanings of *Lemonade* as politicized pop art, they can implement the liberatory ideas within to their daily lives, learning and unlearning Black Feminist and problematic beliefs about Black women.

⁶³ One way to be queer, is to be someone who does not fit into society’s expected gender and or sexuality binary. A person’s queerness is not something that can be detected on site. However, there are some folks, who, express their queerness through their choice in gender expression such as their clothing, hair, makeup, and or body. Another way to be visibly queer, is to visibly be in a non-straight relationship.

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