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I GOT HOT SAUCE IN MY BAG: UNDERSTANDING BLACK FEMINISM THROUGH
THE LENS OF BEYONCÉ'S POP CULTURE PREFORMANCE

by

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that Beyoncé's visual album, *Lemonade*, functions as a textual hybrid between poetry, surrealist aesthetics and popular culture—challenging the accepted understanding of cultural production within academia. Furthermore, *Lemonade* centers black life while presenting mainstream audiences with poetry and avant-garde imagery that challenge dominant views of black womanhood. Using theorists bell hooks, Stuart Hall, Patricia Hill-Collins and Audre Lorde, among others, I argue that Beyoncé's work challenges the understanding of artistic production while simultaneously fitting within a long tradition of black feminist cultural production.

Introduction

Beyoncé sitting on top of a police car, in a flooded post-hurricane Katrina neighborhood wearing work boots and a makeup-less face. Images of the South at twilight. A child dancing in front of a line of riot police. Beyoncé in black, surrounded by men in front of a plantation home, braids to her knees, a wide brimmed hat covering her face, her middle fingers up. These are all images from Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*. Directed by Kahil Joseph, and Beyoncé herself, the album was released on April 23rd 2016, featuring music that transverses genre—including reggae, pop, blues, hip-hop, soul, gospel, country, and rock. In addition to transcending the boundaries of musical genres, *Lemonade* alternates between the poetry of British-Somali author Warsan Shire and Beyoncé's own music, pushing the boundaries of what one expects from the music industry. Historically, music videos have been a visual accompaniment to the music, not a commentary on the music itself. Thus, *Lemonade* is atypical for a mainstream studio album; not only because it is presented as a visual album, but also because it utilizes avant-garde, surrealist aesthetics and features poetry by black feminist author Warsan Shire. *Lemonade* is presented in twelve chapters, each of them a stage of grief about Beyoncé's husband, Jay Z's infidelity and each corresponding with a song. The chapters are entitled, "Denial", "Anger", "Apathy", "Emptiness", "Accountability", "Reformation", "Forgiveness", "Resurrection", "Hope", "Redemption" and "Formation". Each chapter a stage of reconciliation and grief between Jay Z and Beyoncé, functioning as a larger metaphor for the systemic injustice of racism. Using black feminist theory, I argue that *Lemonade* challenges conventional understandings of cultural production by creating a textual hybrid between popular culture, surrealist aesthetics, and poetry. Moreover, Beyoncé uses this textual hybrid to present mainstream audiences with a

commentary on black life and womanhood that ultimately challenges dominant views of black womanhood.

In order to fully understand the significance of *Lemonade*, both as an innovative piece of cultural production and an example of Beyoncé's progressing feminism, it is necessary to review the artist's history as a pop music icon. Beyoncé has been training as a performer from a very young age. At eight, she started in her first music group called Girls Tyme—later known as Destiny's Child. She gained popularity when Destiny's Child rose to fame in the late 1990's. They produced chart topping hits that held feminist themes; such as "Survivor", a song expressing the speaker's determination and certainty of her independence with lyrics like "I'm a survivor, I'm not gon' give up...I will survive, keep on surviving." Similarly, their song "Independent Woman", which boasts of female economic independence, has lyrics that declare proudly "I depend on me" and "all the woman, who independent, throw your hands up at me". After Destiny's Child broke up in 2006 Beyoncé embarked upon a solo career. Her career has spanned over ten years and produced chart-topping single after chart-topping single. Beyoncé's early music still included feminist themes, such as "Irreplaceable," a song that called out a romantic partner for thinking they were irreplaceable. Yet despite these clearly feminist themes, Beyoncé did not identify as a feminist publicly until 2013, over ten years into her career in the public image.

Beyoncé's work holds deep cultural significance; she is undeniably influential. Over the course of her career Beyoncé has been a 20-time, Grammy award winner and a 23-time nominee. As a 24-time winner, she is the most awarded musician at the MTV music video awards. She is a friend of President Barack Obama and sang the national anthem at his 2013 inauguration. Beyoncé is more than a pop star; her influence extends beyond the realm of popular music. She

has become a predominant figure in 21st century popular feminism and was nominated as one of *Time* magazine's 2016 Person of the Year – a nomination that she lost to Donald Trump. *Time* magazine speaks of her activism stating Beyoncé “chose blackness even as many Americans rejected it, taking sides and never wavering” (Harris-Perry). Through this background of understanding Beyoncé's history we come to understand the context that *Lemonade* was produced within. Unlike Beyoncé's previous work, *Lemonade* functions in brand new ways, doing important work. One cannot understand the cultural significance of *Lemonade* and the progress Beyoncé has made if they don't understand the body of her previous work.

Beyoncé has been repeatedly recognized for her work as a black feminist pop figure, even so her relationship with feminism continues to be a contentious one. Many feminists take issue with her presentation, her lyrics, and her lack of intersectionality. Although her earlier songs featured strong feminist themes, she never fully “came out” as a feminist until later in her career. She did not explicitly and openly identify as a feminist until her appearance on the 2013 cover of *Ms. Magazine*, a magazine co-founded by Gloria Steinem, a prominent figure in second wave feminism. Second wave feminism is largely centered around white womanhood; thus it is worth noting that because she was part of this movement, Steinem's brand of feminism was also centered around white womanhood. *Ms. Magazine*'s inclusion of Beyoncé broadened their scope of feminism and added weight to the significance of her appearance. This cover was accompanied by an article entitled “Beyoncé's Fierce Feminism” signifying her acceptance, by some standards, into the feminist community. Even after this cover, Beyoncé's brand of feminism has been widely debated in the feminist community. Hobson, the author of the *Ms. Magazine* article, talks about the reception of this article in her paper “Feminists Debate Beyoncé”. She explains that women wrote into *Ms. Magazine* after Beyoncé was on the cover,

making “harsh, derogatory comments: from calling the pop star ‘a fur-wearing stripper’ and a ‘whore’ to discrediting her feminism for ‘calling women bitches’” (Hobson 17). Featuring Beyoncé on this cover started an important ongoing conversation of Beyoncé’s feminism. Although it is important to look at everything presented to us as consumers before simply digesting information, calling other women strippers does not promote the agenda of feminism. Yet Beyoncé’s choice to label herself as a feminist makes space for a larger discussion of feminism as a whole, whether in positive or negative ways she is still doing important work.

Although Beyoncé very publicly declared herself to be a feminist during the 2014 Music Video Awards, she received much criticism for her performance. She performed the eleventh track on her self-titled album, “***Flawless” (arguably a feminist anthem), which includes a sample from the Nigerian feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TED talk entitled “We Should All Be Feminists.” When Beyoncé performed this song she projected the word “Feminist” behind her silhouette in large block letters while the sample from Adichie’s TED talk played in the background, offering a definition of feminism. In this performance she sings about her husband and dances in a leotard, which directly challenges the widely popular stereotype that feminism is equated with man-hating and the desexualization of women. Jessica Bennett discusses this in her article for *Time* magazine, “How to Reclaim the F-Word? Just Call Beyoncé.” Bennett explains, “No, you don’t have to like the way Beyoncé writhes around in that leotard.... whether you like it or not she’s accomplished what feminists have long struggled to do. She’s reached the masses. She has, literally, brought feminism into the living rooms of 12.4 million Americans”(Bennett). Beyoncé now holds an unprecedented platform, which earns respect in of itself. There are flaws in Beyoncé’s feminism yet she still has an important voice.

The criticisms of Beyoncé's feminism are valid, yet these issues need to come to popular culture in some way. In no way should we put Beyoncé on a pedestal as a feminist, yet it is essential that the media and the feminist community give her room to grow as an artist; *Lemonade* is evidence of this growth. Beyoncé's feminism is by no means perfect, yet she holds an incredible amount of power, even more so she has the ability to grow as a feminist and give voice to flaws in her own feminism, something I argue that she does with *Lemonade*. Beyoncé has the power to generate discussion about feminism—this is positive, even if her feminism is imperfect.

Beyoncé's history as a pop icon means that she has the power and influence to reach the average viewer. Her increasing influence as a feminist figure is evidence that *Lemonade* has the capacity to reach mainstream America in a way that no other text has before. Beyoncé's *Lemonade* gives voice to the experience of marginalized individuals. She centers black womanhood through Southern aesthetics; through this she retells the history of an antebellum past from a feminist point of view as an act of reclamation. This forces the viewer to consider the historical legacy of the antebellum south. If one studies the trajectory of Beyoncé's career it is clear that she is growing as a feminist, *Lemonade* is evidence of this. Feminist film critic Ciara Barrett explains, that "if *Beyoncé* [the album] is a master's thesis, then *Lemonade* is Beyoncé's doctoral dissertation" (Barrett 50). This visual album is a departure from her past work, a space where she speaks about issues facing the African American community, such as police brutality. It would be impossible, I argue, in our modern climate to break onto the scene speaking of these things so openly.

In addition to reaching a mainstream audience with contentious themes about black life, *Lemonade* does a number of things. It establishes the speaker (Beyoncé) as an author; although

she did not create the entirety of the music video she claims authorship over it in a way that no other major pop star has done before. Beyoncé creates a text that exists within mainstream media yet makes an important contribution to the artistic production of African American women. The significance of this work may be easy to discount because it does not look like the theorizing of a white educated male, the standard for the academy. However, using the work of Barbara Christianson and Audre Lorde as a point of departure, I argue that *Lemonade* fits within a long tradition of black feminist cultural production that exists both within and outside of the academy. As such, her work challenges the mainstream understanding of artistic production, and offers a new context in which to consume poetry.

The Personal is Political

Many dismiss *Lemonade* because of its personal subject matter, as one could argue that this text focuses on Beyoncé's personal life rather than political issues. However, as many feminist theorists have suggested, to share one's personal life is a form of protest. It is difficult to pinpoint the origin of the phrase "the personal is political" as it is a feminist principle shared throughout the second wave and continues on today. The Combahee River Collective, a black, feminist organization, states that they desire to expand upon the "feminist principle that the personal is political....Even our Black women's style of talking, testifying in Black language about what we have experienced, has a resonance that is both cultural and political" (Combahee River Collective 265). The Collective argues that speaking out about one's personal experiences *is* a form of protest.

Oftentimes women were silenced when speaking out against the patriarchy and told that their issues were “personal matters”, such as domestic abuse and infidelity, not suitable to be talked about in public. Megan Behrent, a scholar of second wave feminism writes:

It became clear that what had been deemed ‘personal’ was, in fact, profoundly political. And, this, a movement was born—one in which making the personal public was crucial to politicizing the domestic entrapment of women and challenging the notion of separate ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres. (Behrent 1)

This was the case in the 1960’s at the dawn of the second wave and it is still true today in light of Beyoncé speaking out about her husband’s infidelity. One could dismiss *Lemonade* as a narrative about infidelity rather than politics, but I would argue that even this aspect of the text is a political aspect of the text. The personal is political. The production of women has been categorized as “less than” when it is centered around romance and relationships. To dismiss *Lemonade* as a narrative simply about irrelevant and apolitical personal matters would be a form of oppression. Beyoncé uses her husband’s infidelity as a platform to center greater injustices faced by the African American community. Further, her personal story in itself is inherently political, as it serves as a greater metaphor for larger injustices.

The song “Sand Castles” —the penultimate track on the album—is a perfect example of the intersection of the personal and political. It resembles more closely what is expected from a mainstream music video. We see Beyoncé sitting in front of a fireplace on the floor as she plays a keyboard, singing solemnly into a microphone. This video functions as a return to the familiar after the Avant-Garde imagery the viewer has been experiencing. On first viewing this song seems to function as a break from the surrealist visuals and political commentaries, yet upon closer reading it functions as a far deeper and more powerful metaphor. The relationship between

Jay Z and Beyoncé functions as a larger metaphor for racial reconciliation. Beyoncé holds the back of her husband Jay Z's head, she does this with her left hand yet she is not wearing a wedding ring. Often in popular narratives we see when lovers come back together there is a happy ending with implicit forgiveness. "Sandcastles" does something different—It leaves room for the difficulty of this reconciliation. Yet "Sandcastles" functions as a metaphor for something far larger. The section starts with the poetry

Baptize me. Now that reconciliation is possible,
 if we're going to heal let it be glorious
 One thousand girls raise their arms.
 Do you remember being born?
 Are you thankful for the hips that cracked,
 the deep velvet of your mother
 and her mother and her mother?
 There is a curse that will be broken.

Shire's poetry contextualizes the reconciliation between Beyoncé and Jay Z and explicitly positions it to function as a metaphor for racial reconciliation. The metaphor of hips cracking functions to talk about the injustices and pain African American women suffer, alluding to the inequalities in infant mortality rates between black women and white women. *The New York Times* recently reported on the disparity of infant and maternal mortality rates between white and black mothers. Linda Villarosa reports:

Black infants in America are now more than twice as likely to die as white infants—11.3 per 1,000 black babies, compared with 4.9 per 1,000 white babies, according to the most recent government data—a racial disparity that is actually wider than in 1850, 15 years before the end of slavery, when most black women were considered chattel. (Villarosa)

These facts are horrific and despicable. This disparity has been happening for a very long time and it is not widely discussed. Beyoncé and Shire use poetry and pop performance to make a

loud public commentary. By centering a personal narrative, Beyoncé uses it as a greater metaphor for the greater injustices black women suffer. This is done do so not only in an individual sense but in a generational scope with the lines: “the deep velvet of your mother/and her mother and her mother”(Shire). These lines explore the repercussions of generational trauma. Sociologist Ron Eyerman explains, that slavery acts as a collective trauma “not as an institution or even experience, but as a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity formation of a people” (Eyerman 1). Shire writes and Beyoncé speaks about how generational trauma is passed down from mother to mother, whether that be the generational trauma of slavery, or institutionalized racism—a curse that the speaker desires to break.

Framing *Lemonade* As a Cultural Text

Although produced for a mainstream audience, *Lemonade* is a thought provoking text that functions as a cultural hybrid between popular culture and poetry. This text specifically centers the cultural production of African American Women. The visual album challenges the conventional understandings of poetry and cultural production. *Lemonade* subverts this understanding by presenting the viewer with poetry alongside avant-garde aesthetics, this combination is unique and creates unexpected hybridity. Poetry itself is an incredibly flexible medium, and Shire’s poetry is progressive and unconventional. This breaks from the pretensions history of white male poetry that is often elevated in academia.

Black feminist theorists, Audre Lorde, Barbra Christian and Patricia Hill Collins, theorize about the importance of black female artistic production. Barbra Christian posits that people of color “have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph and written figure which is both sensual and abstract, but beautiful and communicative” (Christian

52). *Lemonade* is a text that creates a hybrid form of artistic production that comments on the life of African American Women. Because of this, poets like Audre Lorde and Warsan Shire break the narrow definition of poetic and artistic production defined by academia and make room for unique, Avant-Garde, hybrid texts such as *Lemonade* to exist. Audre Lorde argues that Poetry is not a luxury, in an essay of the same name. She explains:

I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight. For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change...”(Lorde 37).

Although the entirety of *Lemonade* is not poetry—the images accompanied by Shire’s poetry serves as a text of “survival and change”. Shire’s poetry breaks from the word play that Lorde references. When combined with surrealist visuals *Lemonade* is a text of significant cultural production.

To understand *Lemonade* one must also understand the voice of poet Warsan Shire, who gave the album its distinct voice. Shire was born in Kenya to Somali parents in August of 1988. When she was one, her family migrated to London. Shire’s poetry is unapologetic, speaking out as a black woman, as she tackles subjects of womanhood and self-acceptance. She is the author of three poetry collections: *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, *Her Blue Body*, and *Our Men Do Not Belong To Us*. Her poetry has been featured in many journals and magazines, such as *Poetry Magazine*, *Wasafiri*, and *Poetry Review*, to. Her poetry is often focused on the voices of others, rather than her own. In an article in *The New Yorker* entitled “The Writing Life of Warsan Shire, A Young, Prolific Poet” Alexis Okeowo states: “Her poetry evokes longing for

home, a place to call home, and is often nostalgic for memories not her own, but for those of her parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, people who forged her idea of her ancestral homeland through their own stories”. This interweaving of stories that exists within Shire’s work offers a breadth of voices to *Lemonade*. Later on, in the same article Okeowo explains that:

Shire has said that she is most interested in writing about people whose stories are either not told or told inaccurately, especially immigrants and refugees, and so she brings out her Dictaphone when relatives come to her with tales from their experiences so that she can record them faithfully before turning them into her poetry.

Shire’s poetry represents a multitude of voices, not all represented in *Lemonade*. Much of Shire’s poetry is centered on refugees. Her poem “Home” famously opens: “one leaves home unless/home is the mouth of a shark”. She also writes of the Muslim experience in her poem “Birds”, a poem about a woman on her wedding night who fools her husband into thinking she’s a virgin by using pigeon blood. These topics are entirely untouched by *Lemonade*, yet Shire’s voice adds complexity and intersectionality.

Patricia Hill Collins in her essay “Defining Black Feminist Thought” posits an answer to the question “What is Black feminism?”. She concludes, the “definition of Black feminism as a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women and men to actualize a humanist vision of community” (Hill Collins 394). Perhaps *Lemonade* serves as a text that empowers to achieve this “humanist version of community” Hill Collins writes of. Through the theorizing of these women we come to understand the importance of *Lemonade* and its place within mainstream media. In addition to being discussed as a textual hybrid, *Lemonade* can be better understood through the analytical framework of cultural studies.

Stuart Hall, one of the founding figures of Cultural Studies writes “the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is these days waged as much in popular cultural as anywhere else” (Hall 468). I argue that *Lemonade* is a text that pushes back against hegemony through using poetry and avant-garde imagery in unconventional ways. In Stuart Hall’s essay, “Race, Culture, and Communications: Looking Backward and Forward at Cultural studies”, he discusses the development of cultural studies, from its conception to its current practice. He defines cultural studies as “the rapidly shifting ground of thought and knowledge, argument and debate about a society and about its own culture. It is an activity of intellectual self-reflection. It operates both inside and outside the academy”(Hall 11). Traditionally, popular culture is rejected as “low culture” and is not accepted in the academy, yet this erases a rich contribution. Within our rapidly changing society popular culture can serve as a place in which to discuss issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class and many other points of intersection. *Lemonade* exists within this scope—it is a text within mainstream popular culture that serves as commentary on American culture. Hall claims that Cultural studies exists in the place of tension between the academy and real life, “insisting that academics sometimes attend to the practical life, where everyday social change exists out there, cultural studies tries in its small way to insist on what I want to call the vocation of the intellectual life” (Hall 11). Academics are often criticized for not understanding reality; Cultural Studies is a direct rebuttal of this critique.

Yet Hall’s argument is far bigger than this. He posits that television and the narratives of popular culture around race relations in the US function as “myths that represent in narrative form the resolution of things that cannot be resolved in real life” (Hall 15). Most television shows attempt to give the viewer resolution, making one believe that there is resolution outside of the television show. Yet, the narrative that most Americans are feed does not line up with the

reality of what is happening in real life. Hall argues that the other is constructed through these prevalent television narratives.

Even the dominant, colonizing, imperializing power only knows who and what it is and can only experience the pleasure of its own power of domination in and through the construction of the Other. The two are the two sides of the same coin. And the Other is not *out there* but *in here*. It is not outside, but inside. (Hall 16)

Through witnessing their narratives, the other is constructed inside one's self. Hall argues that this is an incredibly toxic form of colonizing. This article was written in 1992, twenty-six years later there still is an incredible lack of television representation of people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. Hall's essay takes on an incredibly hopeful tone regarding resolutions of these problems, stating "My conviction now is that we are only at the beginning of a proper understanding of its structures and mechanisms" (Hall 16). In twenty-six years how much has this understanding grown? How much more authentic are the narratives that surround it in 2018? There is still so much more room for progress. Despite its problems, *Lemonade* serves as a text that is representative of this growth. Hall's essential argument is this-

The double syntax of racism—never one thing without the other—is something that we can associate with old images in the mass media; but the problem about the mass media is that old movies keep being made. And so, the old types and the doubleness and the old ambivalence keep turning up on tomorrow's television screen. (Hall 17)

I argue that *Lemonade* is a text that counters this ideology that represents black womanhood in a dynamic and complex way, presented through the poetry of Shire and avant-garde and surrealist imagery. Rather than reinforcing stereotypes of black womanhood, *Lemonade* pushes back against them. As established earlier through hooks and many other critics, there are problems

with *Lemonade*, no representation is all encompassing of an experience. Yet despite this, we must turn to texts within the mainstream that counter the racist force of media that continues to perpetuate racist stereotypes.

Female Authorship

Through adaptation theory I posit that Beyoncé claims a new kind of pop star authorship and creates a unique text with *Lemonade*. Although Beyoncé is not the only author of *Lemonade*, she can be referenced as such through collaboration and adaptation theory. Through framing Beyoncé as the author, the viewer can see *Lemonade* as a political commentary headed by the pop star, through this the viewer can fully understand its impact. *Lemonade* is drastically different than the artistic production of Beyoncé's peers within the mainstream music industry. *Lemonade* is an extremely collaborative visual album. Although Beyoncé is not the express creator and author of *Lemonade*, the way she presents herself and her brand make the viewer see her as sole speaker of what is said and sung. This creates a new kind of authorship never seen before in the production of a mainstream pop star. The music videos of Beyoncé's peers focus more on the glamour and image of the musician rather than a larger narrative they are telling. Beyoncé presents herself as the sole author of the text but is open to collaboration with other black feminist artists, creating a collective yet single authorship. In her previous album *Beyoncé*, she featured Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, sampling her well known TED talk "We Should All Be Feminists" in her song "Flawless***". Though this collaborations and Shire's poetry in *Lemonade*, she creates a new kind of pop star authorship that is both generous and gracious. For the purposes of this paper I will refer to Beyoncé as the sole author of this text,

even though she is not. According to adaptation theory when a text is used within a different context of its origin, such as Shire's poetry in *Lemonade*, it becomes a new text and idea.

Through Adaptation theory we can come to see *Lemonade* as a new text. According to Adaptation theory, when a text is used in a different way—such as a book becoming a movie or a poem being used as the text for a song, it becomes a new thing. This theory originated in critical theory around film, but can be adapted by a number of different mediums of production. In her book *A Theory of Adaptation* Linda Hutcheon explains adaptation as three things:

First, seen as a *formal entity or product*, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works....Second, as a *process of creation*, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation...Third, seen from the perspective of its *process of reception*, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (*as adaptations*) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation (Hutcheon 7-8).

When one creates a movie adaptation of a book, they are essentially commenting upon it. It is impossible to adapt anything without making a commentary. Additionally, when one adapts they create a new work. This is the case of the poetry in *Lemonade*. Warsan Shire did not specifically write the poems for the film itself, rather they were adapted for *Lemonade*, edited and used differently than they were published. Through adaptation theory *Lemonade* becomes a hybrid text that makes commentary on Shire's poetry and essentially becomes a new creation.

Lemonade also relies heavily on cultural allusions, through these allusions it becomes contextualized within our memory, as Hutcheon explains.

Lemonade relies heavily on religious imagery, centering Christian and Yoruba imagery and turning traditional ideologies and interpretations on their head, through this we can see how

adaptation theory is used. One song that is particularly heavy with religious imagery is “Love Drought”, in which we see Beyoncé wade out into the ocean at sunset, wearing a long white dress followed by a line of women in the same dress. This references the Christian idea of baptism while also thick with Yoruba imagery, we see this when Beyoncé sits in a chair lying completely flat on the ground. This song mixes Christianity and Yoruba to create a powerful text that is inclusive and centers black womanhood—as one of the most powerful images of this video are the women in the water holding hands in a line.

Film scholar Ciara Barrett explains how Beyoncé uses adaptation theory particularly well in her essay “ ‘Formation’ of the female author in the hip hop visual album: Beyoncé and FKA twigs”. Barrett argues that “*Lemonade* hybridizes new media aesthetics associated with popular music video production with classical film narrative techniques” (Barrett 52). What Barrett is claiming falls at the core of what I am arguing: when a text like *Lemonade* enters the mainstream it challenges the average viewer’s expectations of authorship. The poetry in *Lemonade* acts as a force that pushes back against the voices that narrowly define poetry as, essentially, white male production. Rather, through Beyoncé’s collective authorship popularizing black feminist poetry she is pushing back against the strict canonization of white male poetic production. Barrett argues that Beyoncé moves “towards a subversive upending of active/male passive/female dynamics-licenses herself as author of the text”(Barrett 51). Through adaptation theory, Beyoncé takes power over *Lemonade* pushing back against the male saturated film industry and carves out a new space for women of color.

Reading *Lemonade* as a Feminist Text

Many feminists discount Beyoncé's work because it perpetuates many problematic ideologies such as eurocentrism, homophobia and objectification. They argue that Beyoncé is working within the racist, heteronormative, capitalist patriarchy – rather than fighting against it. While these things may be true, I argue that Beyoncé's feminism is still growing and evolving. *Lemonade* is a step away from her feminism in the past, she is making strides towards a stronger, more intersectional feminism. Although her feminism may be a different kind of feminism than the feminism of hooks and others it still attempts to move things in a positive way. To understand Beyoncé's feminism one must understand the context she exists within. One of the main critiques that she receives is her proclivity to align to second wave ideals rather than ideals of the third wave—namely her intersectionality and her failure reject capitalism.

To understand Beyoncé's feminism one must understand the origins of intersectionality. With the third wave, we see the concept of intersectionality came to the forefront. Kimberlé Crenshaw coins this term in her essay “Mapping the Margins”, she argues that the issue of violence against women of color is ignored by both the feminist and anti-racist movements, Women of Color are torn between to different minority groups that often hold conflicting ideologies. Essentially Crenshaw argues that because feminism fails to interrogate race, it will enforce the systems that oppress people of color, and the inverse is true about anti-racist movements—their failure to interrogate patriarchy will further the oppression of women. Crenshaw uses domestic abuse as an example of the way that women of color are doubly oppressed. In domestic violence and rape racism and sexism intersect in inextricable ways. She explains that often women in poverty with less education don't have the means to leave an abusive relationship. This is even more so with immigrant women, who often don't have the resources to be able to leave abusive relationships such as access to private telephones and an

understanding of the American legal system. Women of color often are shorted through both racism and sexism. The feminist movement often does not center the voices of women of color and the antiracist movement often perpetuates components of the patriarchy. This means that women of color are torn between two groups, requiring an incredible amount of emotional energy and labor. Crenshaw is a legal scholar on issues of domestic violence, and through her essay she gives voice to many different minorities when she writes about the systemic ways that immigrant women are suppressed. With intersectionality understood to its fullest reach she writes: “Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in construction group politics” (Crenshaw 1299).

Intersectionality is a fundamental part of black feminism. The Combahee River Collective writes in their statement “The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions”(The Combahee River Collective). Intersectionality has always been a core tenant of black radical feminism.

To best understand the discourse Beyoncé is entering into one must understand the dialogue around black feminism. The Combahee River Collective was a black feminist organization, started with a desire for a politics more radical than the National Black Feminist Organization. They desired to be markedly separate from white feminism. They lay out their ideologies in their statement, written in 1980 they outline the way that black women have been oppressed and the actions necessary to overcome this oppression. Their ideology strives towards a “nonhierarchical distribution of power within out won group and in our vision of a revolutionary society” by eliminating racism from within the feminist movement, fighting

against the capitalist powers that be and rejecting a society centered around the white male. The Combahee River Collective could be loosely categorized as a second wave feminist movement, Beyoncé enters the discussion during the third wave. Most scholars agree that third wave feminism started in the early 1990's and goes on to the present (although some argue that we are in the fourth wave). Third wave feminism is characterized by a paradigm of diversity and intersectionality, moved forward by the punk scene and 'zines' of the early 1990's. Many third wave feminists embraced the idea of using one's sexuality for empowerment in a way that many second wave feminists rejected, although this is a complex issue that cannot simply be reduced to tensions between the second and third wave. We see a microchasm of this discussion happening in a discussion at the New School between bell hooks, Janet Mock, Marci Blackman and Shola Lynch entitled "Are you still a slave?" in which they discuss the implications of Beyoncé's sexual image. They specifically discuss Beyoncé's cover for *Time* magazine in which Beyoncé wore a white bra, white high-waisted panties and a sheer top tied at the waist.

hooks argues that this portrayal of the black female body reinforces the stereotype of the hypersexualized and objectified body and therefore enslaved black female body while Mock and Blackman argue that Beyoncé's image is a reclamation of the hypersexualized black female body. hooks counters "you are not going to destroy this imperialist, capitalist white supremacist patriarchy by creating your own version of it" (hooks 39:00-39:13). This is the central claim of radical black feminism that lies in tension with black liberal feminism—Beyoncé's feminism.

Although bell hooks has historically disagreed with Beyoncé's feminism, in her essay "Moving Beyond Pain" she offers a compelling and dynamic interpretation of *Lemonade* that brings many important issues to light. hooks acknowledges the positive things that *Lemonade* accomplishes, while also speaking of how much of the ideology in *Lemonade* can be toxic.

hooks argues that *Lemonade* “positively exploits images of black female bodies—placing them at the center, making them the norm”(hooks), it presents the black body with the “purpose to seduce, celebrate, and delight—to challenge the ongoing present day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body” (hooks). Yet in spite of this hooks claims that these images are not only unoriginal, first seen in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*, but through unclothing the black female body one perpetuates its slavery. hooks argues that *Lemonade* still exists “within a conventional stereotypical framework, where the black woman is always a victim” (hooks). Black women are not only portrayed as a victim, they perpetuate violence, as seen in “Hold Up” when Beyoncé walks around a neighborhood smashing things with a baseball bat. hooks argues “women do not and will not seize power and create self-love and self-esteem through violent acts....Even though Beyoncé and her creative collaborators make use of the powerful voice and words of Malcolm X to emphasize the lack of respect for black womanhood, simply showcasing beautiful black bodies does not create a just culture of optimal well being where black females can become fully self actualized and truly respected”(hooks). hooks ultimately concludes that *Lemonade* inadequately addresses the trauma of betrayal that the speaker went through and therefore lacks nuance, that life is “a mixture of the bitter and the sweet not a measure of our capacity to endure pain, but rather a celebration of our moving beyond pain” (hooks). Although Beyoncé’s feminism may not live up to hooks’ standards, Beyoncé is still doing important work. Even though she operates within the framework of the capitalist patriarchy she draws attention to issues that radical feminists are equally as invested in, such as police brutality. *Lemonade* is not subtle when protesting police brutality. One music video that does this most provocatively and powerfully is “Forward” titled “Resurrection”. This song does so by centering black women who have lost family to police brutality. The video

slowly pans to images of women holding images of men lost to police brutality. This section makes a strong and heartbreaking yet beautiful political commentary. It forces the viewer to confront not only the lives lost through police brutality but the individuals affected most, often women who have lost their brothers, husbands and sons. Beyoncé uses her voice and her platform to center the women who have lost loved ones to police brutality as well as centering those lost. She features Sybrina Fulton, Trayvon Martin's mother, Lesley McSpadden, Mike Brown's mother, and Gwen Carr, Eric Garner's mother, among others. This is both a song of mourning and centering of black womanhood. The voices of many of these women have been silenced by the media, some of these pictures are unknown individuals, their stories not popularized through mainstream media. Beyoncé is quite literally giving space for the silenced. This is a dramatic step from Beyoncé's past production. Although many of her politics may not line up with that of radical feminism the way she uses her fame in this moment is so significant.

In "Radicalizing Feminism" by Joy James she frames the discussion between the discourse around liberal feminism and black feminism. She argues that black feminists take issue with the hetero normative, capitalist patriarchy but instead of finding fault in all men, as black liberal feminism does, it finds fault in the state. James explains:

Black feminist liberation ideology challenges state power by addressing class exploitation, racism, nationalism and sexual violence with critiques of, and activist confrontations with, cooperate state policies. The "radicalism" of feminism recognizes racism, sexism, homophobia, and patriarchy, but refuses to make "men" or "whites" or "heterosexuals" the problem in lieu of confronting corporate state authority and policing (James 248).

In our current culture it is very easy to blame a people group for an action rather than talking about the systems in place behind this. As James explains, liberal feminism is far more mainstream (essentially what Beyoncé is) and therefore has a louder voice and a more widespread understanding. The blaming of a people group and not the capitalist institution and state authority simply leads to more hatred and there is little room for productive discussion and forward movement. It is good to have a piece of writing that not only looks at Beyoncé's feminism critically but the contemporary institution of feminism as a whole, because one could argue that Beyoncé is a leader of the contemporary liberal feminist movement. When Beyoncé's feminism is contextualized within the lens of liberal feminism we can better understand the tension between these theorists.

Black feminist scholar Yelena Bailey argues that Beyoncé's feminism falls into the category of black liberal feminism, falling short in intersectionality and essentially does not represent black womanhood in a full and dynamic way. She argues this in her doctoral dissertation *In Search of the Fullest Freedom: Contemporary Black Internationalist Feminist Writing*. She argues: "symbols of black women's self-empowerment an affirmation have been co-opted and divorced from their political histories." Such as the appropriation of by millennials of words like "gurl" and the white appropriation of afros and Senegalese twists. Bailey goes on to argue that Beyoncé feminism is doing a similar thing,

Beyoncé feminism has emerged as the dominant twenty first century representation of black women's empowerment. However, I argue that rather than representing a radical step forward for black women, this form of black feminism is little more than a popular affirmation of black liberalism, which fails to adequately address black women's, let alone the black community's, collective needs. (Bailey 161)

Beyoncé is a modern representation of the conflict between black liberal feminism and black radical feminism. Through Beyoncé's Eurocentric beauty standards and lack of intersectionality she furthers the ideology of second wave feminism, an ideology that rejects black female empowerment.

Bailey also points out that the tenants of black female empowerment may not look like white feminism, she explains "black women have been hypersexualized since we first crossed the Atlantic. Thus, what is publically praised as progressive actually reifies age-old primitivist ideologies." What may look like sexual liberation for white women may be another form of enslavement for African American women. This is what bell hooks refers to in her New School conversation, she alludes to Beyoncé feminism as another form of slavery, as she pushes an overt sexualization of the female body. Both hooks and Bailey are right, the black female body is overtly sexualized in *Lemonade*. Even though *Lemonade* is a departure from Beyoncé's previous work in which she presents herself as far more of a sexual object lacking a framework of feminism, *Lemonade* does have its downfalls. One of the biggest faults of Beyoncé feminism that Bailey points out is:

As an icon, Beyoncé is the product of twenty-first century black liberal ideologies. Rather than using her cultural influence to address issues like police brutality or unequal access to education, Beyoncé's version of black feminism promotes the respectability of the black middle and upper-middle classes, especially in contrast to their working-class counterparts. Ironically, this is largely accomplished through the reproduction and commodification of black stereotypes for public consumption. (Bailey 165)

Bailey clearly explains the gaps in Beyoncé's feminism and how they align with black liberal ideologies. This criticism is similar to what hooks's criticism of *Lemonade* as she took issue with

how stereotypical the visual album was. These stereotypes presented could encourage a further commodification of black culture.

Lemonade does things that Beyoncé's previous work failed to do. Even though it does take large strides there are still large gaps in Beyoncé's feminism. One of most personally impactful aspects of Bailey's criticism was her pointing out the lack of intersectionality within Beyoncé feminism. She calls Beyoncé feminism the "softer, more heteronormative cousin of radical feminism" (164). As a queer woman I had never noticed the lack of space for other queer women within Beyoncé's feminism until it was pointed out to me. Yes, *Lemonade* does offer more representation than Beyoncé's previous work. The first single and most popular song "Formation" features a sample of Big Freedia, a New Orleans drag queen who uses both masculine and feminine pronouns. This short sample features a queer woman of color, doing work to queer the central track of the album. Although this is forward progress there is still room for criticism—it could very easily be read as a fetishization of queerness by a straight woman. This brief representation offers only a singular representation of queerness that is more readily accepted in media, there is no representation of queer women. The representation of queer women of color is so incredibly important because they are incredibly underrepresented. Part of Beyoncé's brand is that she is a feminist. This pro woman attitude is what launched her into the respect she has now—her fans dubbing her "Queen B". Yet to fully stand behind Beyoncé one must understand the complexities of her feminism. Feminism is not true feminism if it is not intersectional. It is important to take all of these factors into account when standing behind, or speaking out against Beyoncé's feminism.

Avant-Garde Aesthetics & Surrealism

In *Lemonade* the surreal is defined through practical impossibilities, through these avant-garde aesthetics the relationship with the viewer is challenged, they are asked to examine what they are watching in a way that wouldn't be there in a traditional music video. Many other artists employ elements of the avant-garde, yet they do not walk the fine line between reality and surrealism as *Lemonade* does. There are many elements in *Lemonade* that ask the viewer to suspend their reality. In spite of this *Lemonade* is not a surrealist film, it is both grounded in the images of the everyday while bringing in elements of the surreal, to the point that the viewer often does not know what is surrealism and what is reality, blurring that line and making one question everything they see.

To better understand the use of Surrealism one must understand the context that it exists within. Surrealism began in the 1920's and was started as a "literary or artistic school. It is an unrelenting revolt against a civilization that reduces all human aspirations to market values" (Rosemont 1). Although started with positive ideologies, in practice the beginnings of surrealism were often centered around the white male. Many famous surrealist artists were horribly racist and sexist, most notably Salvador Dali who was a fascist. Although Surrealism has changed immensely over the last hundred years, Beyoncé's use of Surrealism in *Lemonade* pushes back against the roots of surrealism itself. Rosemont explains that "surrealism aims to reduce, and ultimately to resolve, the contradictions between sleeping and waking, dream and action, reason and madness, the conscious and unconscious, the individual and society, the subjective and the objective" (Rosemont 1). Many of the aesthetics in *Lemonade* do this work, they push the boundaries of what the typical viewer consumes and in this forces them to question racist formations in American Society.

The song “Hold Up” is the first time we see surrealism in *Lemonade*, the song itself and the poetry preceding it blur the surreal with the everyday. This poetry is some of the most provocative and profound of the entire visual album. Beyoncé falls into deep blue water, we find her in a Victorian style bedroom underwater. She swims down to a bed where there are two images of her, she is both sleeping in the bed and floating next to herself. This implies a dissociation with one’s self. As this is happening there is a voice over of Beyoncé reciting Shire’s poetry:

I fasted for sixty days,
wore white, abstained from mirrors,
abstained from sex,
Slowly did not speak another word,
at that time, my hair, I grew past my ankles,
I slept on a mat on the floor,
I swallowed a sword, I levitated
I went to the basement, confessed my sins and was baptized in a river....
I crossed myself and thought I saw the devil.
I grew thickened skin on my feet,
I bathed in bleached and plugged my menses with pages from the holy book,
but still inside me, coiled deep was the need to know....are you cheating on me?

This text establishes that the visual album’s intention is not to coddle its reader but push them to think beyond themselves and their way of knowing the world, as one does not typically talk about menstruation in main stream music videos, let alone juxtapose it with Christianity.

Typically, *Lemonade* uses Christian imagery such as baptism and the Eucharist as a metaphor to make a personal and political commentary about the speaker’s strength in light of her husband’s infidelity and by extension collective African American female strength. This section also sets up this portion of the text as existing in between reality and surrealism. Many of the actions Beyoncé performs underwater are impossible such as inhaling bubbles and contorting her body. This sets the parameters of the surrealist aesthetic used in *Lemonade*, it gives the viewer a set of parameters in which *Lemonade* exists within—a surrealist space that is blurred with the

everyday. This chapter also presents black womanhood in a way not common in mainstream media, Beyoncé is a complex and dynamic sexual being, her sexuality is not reduced for the male gaze but rather a personal strength.

The transition from the underwater section into the song itself is a shift that highlights the blurring of the surreal and the real. With its reggae beat “Hold up” is one of the most joyful parts of the entire visual album, after spending time underwater, shot in cool colors, the colors snap into vibrancy. Beyoncé emerges as the two doors of the room open and the floodgates open. Water pours from the doors and down a set of stairs as she walks into an urban neighborhood. She is wearing a yellow dress that flows behind her as she walks, commanding the space around her. One of the most notable characters in this video is young boy, as she walks by him Beyoncé takes his bat. She proceeds to walk through the neighborhood and smashes a car window with the bat. She goes on to smash the top off of a fire hydrant, having it spray water all over the street. Water is an important motif throughout *Lemonade*, as an allusion to baptism, children of the neighborhood come to play in the water, most notably the young boy she took the bat from initially. He dances proudly without a shirt under the water of the fire hydrant.

hooks is critical of this chapter for condoning violence as a reaction to infidelity, yet I argue that because it borders the surreal, the violence occurring is an element of the surreal. One of the most notable things about this particular music video is how we very rarely see her singing, as we do in most of the other videos. As I mentioned previously, this particular song is criticized by Hooks for being overly violent, I argue that hooks is right, violence is never a way to solve anything, yet the world Beyoncé is entering into is an extension of the fantasy we saw in the previous scene. This surrealism is heightened by the fire behind her as the music video goes on. Fire is undeniably violent, yet it is equally unrealistic. This song ends when she smashes the

camera with a baseball bat, the frame falls to the ground and the boy we see in the beginning looks confusedly into the camera, highlighting this childlike innocence and

One of bell hook's criticisms of *Lemonade* is that this scene condones violence in women to gain power over men. She writes:

Beyoncé's character responds to her man's betrayal with rage. She wreaks violence. She dons a magnificently designed golden yellow gown, boldly struts through the street with baseball bat in hand, randomly smashing cars. In this scene the goddess-like character of Beyoncé is sexualized along with her acts of emotional violence, like Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries" she destroys with no shame. Among the many mixed messages embedded in *Lemonade* is this celebration of rage. Smug and smiling in her golden garb, Beyoncé is the embodiment of a fantastical female power, which is just that—pure fantasy. Images of female violence undercut a central message embedded in *Lemonade* that violence in all its forms, especially the violence of lies and betrayal, hurts. (hooks)

Yes, I cannot and will not dismiss hooks's criticism. She is right, violence never creates positive change and good never comes out of it. It should not be condoned within any context, even within a fictive music video, as it could lead a viewer to thinking that violence is okay. I do not attempt to defend this choice made in the visual album, as violence is never okay. I simply attempt to offer an alternate reading to perhaps contextualize the actions of Beyoncé's character in this scene. As talked about previously the scene set underwater before "Hold Up", the viewer is brought into a world of surrealism. I argue that Beyoncé's violence in "Hold Up" is a further extension of that surrealism. Beyoncé is channeling Oshun, the Yoruba deity that is known for her wrath when angered. Although violence is never permissible it makes more sense within this framework. Beyoncé's reference to this goddess gives this scene an element of the divine. She

further references Oshun Beyoncé walks by a fire hydrant and breaks the top off, sending water in the air as children gather around it and dance and play in the water. This act of destruction brings about an act of love, the actions of the children are filled with such joy that it changes the act of destruction and turns it into something positive. Yes, the violence that is portrayed in “Hold Up is impermissible, yet more exists in this scene than violence for violence’s sake. There are problems with *Lemonade*, it is not a perfect feminist text, but this does not discount the importance of its reach.

We see similar images in the poetic section before “6 inch”. While this poetry is recited the viewer sees Beyoncé sitting in a billowing red dress surrounded by a square of fire, this pushes the typical viewer, it looks both surreal—as if Beyoncé is performing some sort of ritual through this fire. A line about menstrual blood is recited as the camera pans over her dress, equating a ball gown to the menses, again something that is rarely if ever touched upon in mainstream pop culture. Beyoncé speaks the poetry “grief sedated by orgasm, orgasm heightened by grief”(Shire), yet another topic that is rarely brushed upon in popular culture—female orgasm discussed. Male sexuality the topic of much of popular culture, and female sexuality in turn is seen only within the context of male sexuality, which is essentially objectification. This is a vast step away from the objectification women’s sexuality is typically portrayed as. Although hooks and Mock debate if Beyoncé enslaves herself through her sexuality, I argue that the poetry used in *Lemonade* is liberating. Shire’s poetry pushes the boundaries of what is expected from women’s poetic production. As the song starts the colors shift to be even more red-saturated. The next song “6 Inch” echoes themes of economic empowerment through sexuality. Beyoncé sings of a woman who is presumably a stripper, “She stacking money, money everywhere she go....She don’t gotta give it up, she professional”. The title of the song, 6 Inch, is in reference to

how tall her heels are. This song reclaims female sexuality, it is about how a woman can use their sexuality for emotional and financial empowerment. This is a perfect example of the crux of hook's argument, this is a clear example of Beyoncé using her body for economic gain. The red filter the video is seen from could be indicative of her anger and sensuality through that anger. It also emphasizes the motif of fire, seen at both the beginning and end of this song. Economic empowerment is one of the main themes throughout Beyoncé's feminism, starting when she was a member of Destiny's Child. When Beyoncé wrote a piece for *The Shiver Report* entitled "Gender Equality is a Myth!" it focused mainly on the pay gap between men and women and took no note of the pay gap between white women and women of color. When criticizing *Lemonade* "6 inch" stands out. Beyoncé is admitting that she does exist within these systems of oppression and that she uses them to her advantage. Yet through the images employed she uses this as a greater metaphor for the destruction of white society, as the red imagery of empowerment and anger leads to the destruction of a plantation home. hooks, Beyoncé and Bailey have similar goals but come from them through radically different actions. "6 inch" is a perfect example of this.

Centering Blackness in Popular Discourse

In *Lemonade* Beyoncé centers blackness in a world centered around whiteness. Rarely do we see a music video in the form of a surrealist film that is so rich with symbolism or strong political themes. Through the images Beyoncé uses, she uplifts black womanhood. *Lemonade* is rich with images of empowerment and reclamation using historical imagery to challenge the legacy of slavery and images confront police brutality. Beyoncé engages black experiences by featuring images of everyday life in the south such as a high school marching

band, centering the female color guard and New Orleans funerals with dancing. She engages and works to dismantle the legacies slavery by using images of living in and destroying plantations. Most notably Beyoncé centers the black fem body, challenging dominant perceptions of black womanhood.

Beyoncé works to reclaim the image of the plantation in her song “6 Inch”. It merges the power and anger of fire, linked to the color red, and antebellum aesthetics as a reclamation. At the end of the song the camera shows a long shot of a doorframe catching fire, we then see Beyoncé walking down a hallway, wearing a white lace Victorian, antebellum, style dress. This outfit turns the script on what is expected because the front is open to a leotard; embracing sexuality in a way that period notably did not. The camera then pans out and the viewer learns that the entirety of the plantation home we saw earlier has caught on fire. Beyoncé is in an ornate suit standing outside this home on fire and surrounded by woman also dressed in a similar way. Their costuming bends gendered expectation and their stance is powerful—they are all standing in wide stances looking directly out in confrontational stance, insinuating that they are the cause of this fire. This image is a protest and a reclamation. It is symbolic of the destruction of the 19th century slave holding Antebellum South and the representation of powerful black womanhood, an ideology so oppressed by the nineteenth century South. Beyoncé is using images from the past to reclaim them and empower women in the present.

In “Sorry” Beyoncé leans into Egyptian imagery as a reclamation of the past. She sits against a grey background naked aside from a metallic brassier. The way she is sitting and the way her hair is done is clearly allusive to Queen Nefertiti of Ancient Egypt, an icon of female empowerment as Nefertiti was believed to rule Egypt alone after her husband’s death. Through presenting herself as Nefertiti Beyoncé is reclaiming imagery of the past, proudly centering her

African roots. This image challenges the criticism of Beyoncé for her Eurocentric image. This song ends with one of the most famous lines in *Lemonade* “He better call Becky with the good hair”. Because of this single line, “Sorry” is often seen as the most controversial song on the album, as “good hair”. These two words engage with a history of colorism and the oppressive Eurocentric beauty standards imposed on African American women. Beyoncé is known to wear a straight blonde weave, affirming white standards of beauty. These two words could be perceived as an admission of the pressure of Eurocentric beauty standards and an acknowledgement of colorism.

“Freedom” is the culmination of the celebration of black womanhood. It is also one of the most politically defiant songs on *Lemonade*, with lyrics like “Freedom, freedom I cant move, freedom cut me loose!” and “I break chains all by myself, won’t let my freedom rot in hell” (*Lemonade*). The beat of the song is defiant, characterizing marching and protest. With a song like this one would expect to see visual protest, instead Beyoncé simply centers women who have been oppressed—women who have lost family to police brutality and who have been oppressed for their activism. Beyoncé walks into an nineteenth century southern kitchen¹, followed by women in antebellum era clothing they are joyously cooking, reclaiming the actions that enslaved women were forced to do. The reoccurring motif of black women in white dresses is repeated, the camera pans over an old southern live oak tree, women sit on its branches and stand underneath it. They all stare defiantly yet peacefully into the distance. This depiction of anger and defiance not only challenges mainstream narratives of anger, but by centering these women Beyoncé argues that being a black woman is a form of protest. They then sit at a long

¹ On plantations the kitchens were often a different structure, separated from the house, this further enforced lines of race and gender.

table and share a meal together. This is symbolic of the community of womanhood rather than competition, saying essentially that sisterhood is a form of protest as well.

Formation serves as the culmination of the entirety of *Lemonade*, it is the height of the celebration of black womanhood. It is a celebration of black life in the South it makes overt political commentaries. The music video starts with the image of Beyoncé sitting on a police car that is slowly sinking into a post hurricane Katrina flooded neighborhood, making a commentary on police brutality. She sits in a confrontational stance, a stance that says that black womanhood is stronger than the forces of violence perpetuated by the police. She reclaims the plantation by putting black women in white civil war era dresses sitting in an old antebellum style parlor. She dances in the hallways of a said home, wearing a deep red long sleeved leotard with mutton sleeves but with a plunging neckline, black thigh high stockings and pearls. This is the visual version of Christian's theorizing, the idea that "people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic". Beyoncé is a hybrid text of cultural production, similar to what Lorde talks about, she is pushing against the "Western form of abstract logic" through the act of dancing in the hallway in thigh high stockings and pearls. This does not look like the production of white academics and authors. Instead Beyoncé is taking culture and ideology of the historically racist white south and shattering it by reclaiming black female sexuality, and existing powerfully in the space of the plantation homes that enslaved African Americans. Even more explicitly, the lyrics of "Formation" are a celebration of blackness and personal identity:

My Daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana,
 You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma
 I like my baby hair, 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 a hot sauce in my bag, swag

These lyrics are protest, as they are reclaiming black beauty and personal identity. Beyoncé is reclaiming many of the things that society has told black women are undesirable, such as her natural hair and a wide nose. These lyrics directly address her previous criticisms of presenting a Eurocentric image. In “Formation” Beyoncé owns her whole identity.

Conclusion

Beyoncé standing in front of a plantation as it burns to the ground, women holding pictures of their brothers and sons who have been aimlessly killed by police, women joined together over a common table, a mother brushing her daughter’s natural hair. The images in *Lemonade* do work that Beyoncé’s previous music did not. She uses her platform center herself in images that directly push back against hegemony. If Beyoncé simply worked for economic gain—as hooks suggested, she would not choose to make a political commentary. Many African American artists are making poignant political commentaries, such as Janelle Monáe in her music video “Pynk” and the rapper Childish Gambino in his music video “This is America”. Janelle Monáe did not come out to sell more records, they clearly do not make these difficult commentaries for economic gain. The “Black Lives Matter” movement is not a trend but rather a political movement, unfortunately when one makes a political commentary there are individuals who disagree. In the same way, *Lemonade* is a political commentary, which means that there are individuals who disagree with what Beyoncé is saying. If Beyoncé was purely economically driven she would churn out shallow pop hits like her peers in the industry. Although there are flaws to her feminism Beyoncé chooses to center African American womanhood and she does so through unique channels such as the poetry of Warsan Shire and surrealist aesthetics. One does

not taken this risk when wanting to produce an economically driven hit—they do so when they have something important to say. Beyoncé provides both academia and the mainstream with a significant text of cultural production, blurring the line between “high” and “low” culture.

Lemonade changed the topography of popular culture by existing as a text of hybridity through poetry and surrealist aesthetics. These things push the boundaries of the average mainstream consumer, forcing them to question racist systems and ideologies in American society.

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Appendix

When I started this project I was shocked to encounter individuals that questioned if Beyoncé's work was worth studying within academia. The very fact that I encountered this question is evidence of the work that needs to be done—work that I choose to do as a Christian. It is my belief that the work of gospel is social justice. Theologian Brian Bantum writes “Our world is indelibly marked by race, by violent differentiations of ethnicity, culture, and gender. I have no use for a Christianity that does not account for the ways our bodies are named and shaped”(Bantum 8). Although I do not explicitly talk about Christianity within the body of my project it is an underlying current that shapes my thought.

I am not an African American woman, but as a queer woman of color I believe it is my job to educate myself in the history of the oppression of my people and the systematic oppression of all minority groups. Feminism is not feminism if it is not intersectional; Christianity is not Christianity if it does not actively fight for the liberation of oppressed peoples.