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## A Rhetorical Analysis of Beyoncé's "Freedom": An Examination of Black College Women's Experiences at Predominately White Institutions

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# A Rhetorical Analysis of Beyoncé's "Freedom"

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

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

### Abstract

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

Keywords: Black, women, freedom, higher education

### Introduction

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

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

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

### Responses to “Freedom”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Unfulfilled Promises to Black Women

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

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

### Black College Women’s Experiences

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Conceptual Framework

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

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

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

### Methods

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Findings

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

#### The Unity of the Black Female Experience

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

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

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

### Frustration with Lack of Progress

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### The Struggle of Women Shadowed by Black Men

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

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

### The Disposability of Black Bodies in Higher Education

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

### Conclusion: A Path to Freedom

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

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

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

### Note

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

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