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Zeffie Gaines

Miami University of Ohio, Oxford, Ohio, zeffiegaines@gmail.com

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

Zeffie Gaines

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

Zeffie Gaines is an associate professor in the Department of English at Miami University of Ohio, Oxford, Ohio. Her e-mail address is zeffiegaines@gmail.com

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elaborating on this point, Brittany Cooper argues that,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'm Just Too Much For You:" Reading *Lemonade*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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