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

Cienna Davis

Abstract

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

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Introduction

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

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

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

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

Black Feminist Theory

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

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

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

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

Lemonade and Daughters of the Dust

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Color Names and Color Notions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beyoncé's Color Controversy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

verifiable global pop superstar with immeasurable mainstream appeal. Given this, it is interesting that in the earlier parts of her career while still under the management of her father and before openly embracing her feminism, Beyoncé adopted methods of compartmentalization to separate her respectable, conservative side from her more sexually adventurous alter ego Sasha Fierce suggesting that regardless of the hue of her skin, “black women have yet to be granted the full privilege of expressing their sexual agency without paying the price” (Griffith, 2011, p. 138; Weidhase, 2015, p. 129). The same cannot be said of numerous white and non-black female performing artists like Kylie Minogue, Christina Aguilera, and Jennifer Lopez whose displays of sexuality have not defined their music careers, limited their success, or discredited their ability to be viewed as role models (Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 51; Hobson, 2003, p. 97-98). But even as famous feminists’ condescension towards Beyoncé’s burgeoning feminism¹ and reference her as a “terrorist”² whose embodied sexuality is disempowering for girls and women (as though Black femme representation isn’t valuable for Black female empowerment against the historical masculinization of Black women), works to deny Beyoncé’s ability to be read beyond her racialized and sexualized flesh, Beyoncé has managed to maintain a multifaceted and respected music and acting career (hooks, 1982, p. 22; Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 62). Unable to navigate as freely in the broader society and entertainment industry, many darker-skinned African-American women maintain justifiable hostility toward lighter-skinned sisters like Beyoncé, despite a shared history of racialized sexualization that makes them both susceptible to sexual stereotyping. Though there is clear inequity within the color hierarchy that may garner lighter-hued Black women continued commercial appeal alongside critiques of their supposed “hyper-sexuality,” it remains evident that Black female sexuality is always embodied and fixed to the flesh of Black women regardless of hue in a way that is not expected of white female performers.

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

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

Lemonade as a Practice of Diasporic Melancholia

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

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

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

The diasporic ceremonies within *Daughters* demonstrates the significance

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

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