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## Does Beyoncé's Lemonade Really Teach Us How to Turn Lemons into Lemonade?: Exploring the Limits and Possibilities Through Black Feminism

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## Does Beyoncé's *Lemonade* Really Teach Us How to Turn Lemons into *Lemonade*? Exploring the Limits and Possibilities Through Black Feminism

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### Introduction

Beyoncé's most recent visual album, *Lemonade*, presents itself as a Black feminist text exploring the impact of infidelity on Black women. Through the explicit use of diasporic African cosmology, iconography, and aesthetics, Beyoncé and her team of creatives masterfully craft a narrative upholding a central thesis taken from a 1962 Malcolm X speech:

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. (X, 1962)

*Lemonade* upholds this argument by exploring infidelity as a by-product of the persistent denigration of the Black family through systemic racism. It then offers an afro-futurist response through a distinct focus on the complex inter-play between Black history, culture, and human emotion. Beyoncé's position, however, as a hyper-capitalist sexualized pop star has rightly opened this work to critique. In as much as *Lemonade* makes a compelling intellectual statement worth exploring, some of its central arguments are underpinned by significant short-comings that mark it as inherently problematic. Still, we assert that the contemporary post-

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modern era in which the text is situated denies *Lemonade*, and really any text, the ability to be “pure” and because of this, Beyoncé’s visual album can be both and at once an important statement by and for Black women even if its arguments are limited/limiting.

### Theoretical Framework

To illustrate this point, we draw upon Black Feminist and Post-modern theory. Black Feminist Theory centers the following primary tenets: (1) Black women concurrently experience a “triple jeopardy” of race, class and gender and that their lives cannot be understood by these constructs in singular form (Guy-Sheftall, 1995); (2) that Black women’s experiences are often subsumed in discourses on race or gender alone and thus, are marginalized by notions of Blackness defined by maleness or gender defined by white femininity; and that (3) Black women’s lived experiences offer a legitimate site of knowledge as Black women’s perspectives and theories have historically been over-looked on matters of social and political import (Hill-Collins, 2000). On these terms, *Lemonade* seems to stand as a Black Feminist masterpiece by exploring our historical subjugation. Beyoncé and her team foreground Black womanhood in all of its complexity—styling their bodies in ways that celebrate and merge ancient, past and contemporary diasporic African hair, body adornment and dress; by centering Black women’s self-expression in song, dance, poetry, wisdom, and most centrally, pain; and by displaying the beauty and diversity in hue and hair texture that has historically been used as a marker to divide, conquer and instill self-hatred within us. *Lemonade* does all that Black women have long been calling for in popular culture. It provides a representation of Black womanhood that celebrates us and gives voice to our complex and over-looked pain. In particular, it destroys the archetype of the Strong Black Woman who is independent, resilient, and over-extending in work and nurturance while remaining immune to the psychological toll of abuse, neglect, and abandonment (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Randolph, 1997). *Lemonade* argues that healing is a process as it walks us through its chapters on intuition, denial, anger, apathy, emptiness, accountability, forgiveness, resurrection and hope.

Still, it is because of the Black Feminist perspective that bell hooks has been able to expose some of Beyoncé’s shortcomings. In her critique of *Lemonade* she asserts that:

It is the broad scope of *Lemonade*’s visual landscape that makes it so distinctive—the construction of a powerfully symbolic black female sisterhood that resists invisibility, that refuses to be silent. This in and of itself is no small feat—it shifts the gaze of white mainstream culture. It challenges us all to look anew, to radically revision how we see the black female body. However, this radical repositioning of black female images does not truly overshadow or change conventional sexist constructions of black female identity. (hooks, 2016)

We agree with this position because it is fundamental that there be guidelines for what does and does not constitute Black women's empowerment. Black women have to be able to name their oppression and take action toward their liberation. Although *Lemonade* attempts to do this by calling out the culture of violence promulgated under white supremacist heterosexist patriarchy, significant undertones in lyric and process undermine its ability to fully do so (as will be argued in the discussion of this article).

Using a post-modern lens, however, reconciles this tension as we understand that race, class, gender and sexuality operate as taken-for-granted assumptions about people and society. These types of grand metanarratives construct our contemporary reality, creating the illusion that identities are fixed. In reality, however, truth is unstable and identity is only a marker, which helps us name the complexity of social, political, and economic experience (Hogue, 2013). When we apply these ideas to *Lemonade*, we see it for what it is – a beautiful, resonating interpretation of diasporic melancholia (Kaplan, 2007) that is at the same time, highly problematic.

Discussion:  
The Visual Feast of *Lemonade*  
or How We Can Call It a Black Feminist Text

Using lush cinematography and a keen directorial eye for highly emotive and precise choreography and acting, Beyoncé and her collaborators succeeded in developing a tome that clearly expresses the feminist insistence that “the personal is political.” The visual album opens with a plain-faced Beyoncé wearing a black hoodie that reminds us of the unjust death of Trayvon Martin. When she begins to sing, she is alone, kneeling at center stage wearing a hoodie and black head wrap. This paired down introduction, which orients the watcher to the film's first chapter on “intuition” signals the decidedly African aesthetic that continues throughout the film. Beyoncé reminds us of the ways in which indigenous African culture has persisted throughout history though its forms, languages, and styles may have changed. She is alone throughout this chapter, singing about her suspicions of infidelity, telling her lover “I pray you catch me whispering. I pray you catch me listening” (Blake, J., Beyoncé, & Garrett, K., 2016). She, Beyoncé as every Black woman, communicates that women know when we have been betrayed, even before we do. Spirit answers her prayer and we know that Beyoncé has been devastated. We watch her surrender herself to suicide—falling off a skyscraper and landing on a city street that gives way to her body and becomes water. Beyoncé is submerged—signaling that we will embark on a journey to understand how the pain of betrayal kills whatever naivety we may have had about love and gives birth to a cycle of emotion that re-makes us.

We are then taken through chapters reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno* (Alighieri, 1996) as the visual album unfolds a deepening sense of despair and frustration. We

reach the nadir in the chapter on anger. Malcolm X's sound bite plays as we meet Beyoncé stylized with a hard edge. She is wearing her hair in corn rows and dressed in gray jersey—sports clothing—seemingly prepared for a fight. Her friends, all women, stand behind her, their faces glaring as if they, too, are ready. Around her neck, Beyoncé wears a diamond encrusted ankh on a gold chain—a khemetic symbol of eternal life made in the shape of a cross with a handle on top. The ankh is said to symbolize the continuing cycle of life created through the sexual union of men (symbolized by the vertical rod at bottom) and women (symbolized by the loop at top) which creates children (symbolized by the horizontal rod in between the rod and loop) (Inman, 1875). Beyoncé allows her chain to swing as she and her girls pose with bravado and sing to her lover “When you lie to me, you lie to yourself” (Bonham, J., Jones, J. P., Plant, R., Page, J., Gordon, W., Beyoncé, & White, J., 2016). It is as if she calls up the Black feminist insistence that human beings are deeply connected to one another—that we are one in the same. Whatever harm is done to another person, is also done to the perpetrator. Her anger is directed communally and between her use of the decidedly political stance expressed through Malcolm X's words and ancient African symbolism, we begin to notice a commentary on patriarchal domination.

Infidelity is a central idea in American popular culture. It undergirds notions of hegemonic masculinity and upholds patriarchy. A man is not a man unless he has many sexual conquests with many different women. This notion of masculinity is a central construct in Western culture—even permeating the expressions of gender non-conforming people (Connell, 2005; Halberstam, 1998). In popular culture, for example, the rapper Young M.A., who is lesbian, regularly uses misogyny to express her dominance and credibility in hip hop. Beyoncé uses this notion to demonstrate infidelity's harmful effects. This is not to say that same-sex relationships are wrong. Beyoncé celebrates love in all of its forms throughout *Lemonade*. Instead, she reveals that there is a root cause for undermining the trust and expectations between lovers and that these actions, born out of the harmful ideology about what constitutes masculinity, inflicts emotional wounds as deep as physical ones.

After her anger is expressed, the next two chapters walk us across the valley of emotion called apathy and emptiness. Here, she calls upon the support of other women and sings about letting go of her need to be a kept woman. Beyoncé is going to the club—a place that might be considered socially unacceptable for a woman in a relationship. Serena Williams enacts the role of a best friend and the two women dress scantily and dance freely—celebrating their sexuality and owning their position as beings worthy of desire. The album begins to draw more heavily from the dress of ancient Africa as the chapters go on and we see women, positioned as her friends or her community, dancing in and on a school bus wearing tribal paint in the Yoruba tradition. At another point, Beyoncé is seated in regal fashion with her hair plaited in the shape of Queen Nefertiti's crown. The use of Warsan Shire's (Shire, 2012)<sup>1</sup> poetry to transition between chapters allows us to hear the wisdom

learned from our foremothers' experiences with romantic violence. The images seem to theorize in the tradition of Sankofa (Karenga, 2011; Temple, 2009). We are invited to be inspired back to ourselves. After her intuition, denial, and anger, Beyoncé comes to a place where there is nothing left to do but heal and move forward. The cinematographer shows a light at the end of a long hallway and when we finally arrive at it, we see Beyoncé wearing red and twirling a light high above her head. She seems to say, "This is mine. I have this" and she reminds women to heal by getting their finances in order. She says, "she's too smart to crave material things" suggesting a rejection of the empty practice in healing through consumerism. She has learned that she will not give herself or what she has earned away. The valley after her descent into anger, however, ends with another simple, yet profound prayer. "Come back...come back...come back" she chants, with the precision and simple rhythm of a clock—as if even through the pain, her lover remains at the center of her heart.

*Lemonade* then begins to take us on the ascent to hope. The first step, Beyoncé suggests, is through accountability. In this chapter, Beyoncé ironically uses a country song to remind us to protect what is ours.<sup>2</sup> She sings, "When trouble comes to town and men like me come around. Oh, my daddy said shoot. Oh, my daddy said shoot." Such a simple lyric also connects to the women's wisdom expressed throughout the film in Warsan Shire's poetry. Her father's wisdom acknowledges that the cycle of heartbreak and infidelity is nothing new. Our mothers and grandmothers and their mothers and grandmothers before them have born the brunt of a society that encourages people—particularly men—to find their self-worth by deceiving others. As the film transitions to climb through forgiveness, resurrection and ultimately, hope, Beyoncé begins a conversation with her betrayer in which she calls out his misdeeds as a sin against himself. She acknowledges his humanity by reminding him that he is as great as she. She says, "You and me could stop this love drought" (Dean, M., Burley, I., & Beyoncé, 2016) and "9 times out of 10 I know you're lying, but 10 times out of 9 I know you're trying" (Dean, M., Burley, I., & Beyoncé, 2016). Her lover, she suggests, is not a bad person—just a misguided one.<sup>3</sup> When she has done her work and is ready to forgive, she implores her lover to acknowledge his duality—the femininity within him that calls him to balance - by asking, "Do you remember your birth?" (Knowles, 2016) and sings the intensely raw song, "Sandcastles," (Berry II, V. L., Beyoncé, Yusef, M., Mathers, M. 2016) where she sings:

I made you cry  
When I walked away  
And although I promised  
That I couldn't stay  
Every promise don't work out that way  
Every promise don't work out that way

This lyric speaks to the myth of the perfect, untainted relationship that is carried as an ideal in Western culture. There is no right way to handle betrayal. The

betrayed may leave or the betrayed may stay, but in either respect – promises are unstable and subject to our humanity. We cannot judge our foremothers who endured an abusive relationship or those who defied the standards imploring her to stay. Beyoncé’s chapter on resurrection—which focuses on wholeness—serves as the pinnacle through which this point is made. We are reminded of her swinging diamond ankh—a symbol worn by the ancient Pharaohs of Khemet to remind us of the responsibility to restore ourselves, our families, and ultimately our society to balance through wading the waters of human emotion so that we can learn the wisdom that life’s challenges have to teach us.

*Lemonade* ends with a chapter on hope. Here, Beyoncé demonstrates the universal nature of the wisdom gained through the experience of emotional pain. Women who have endured the worst abuses contemporary society promulgates against Black people are foregrounded and we see the stoic faces of Sybrina Fulton, Lezley McSpadden and Gwen Carr<sup>4</sup> holding pictures of their dead sons; communicating the depth of terror Black men continue to endure and the emotional weight the women around them carry. While on surface level, the pain of infidelity seems insignificant in comparison to the reality of state sanctioned racialized violence, the tenor of *Lemonade* makes clear that the historical denigration of Black people has interpersonal effects. A person damaged by violence against them at the systemic level does not easily shed those wounds when they come home to their lover. This pain rears its ugly head in various forms, infidelity chief among them. Hurt people, hurt people. But *Lemonade* ends with a reminder that Black people and their culture have always been and will always be resilient, beautiful, and joyful—no matter the circumstance. The film closes with imagery reminiscent of Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust*. Viewers are invited through curtains into retreat with Black women of all ages, hues, and hair textures. They are gathered in the lush Louisiana Bayou walking barefoot, tending the land, playing, and relaxing together. In several scenes Black women and girls who are leading cultural producers in the United States are shown. If the album’s thesis was that Black women are the most disrespected people on earth, its implications are embodied in the very definition of womanism. The entire visual album, through its argument, aesthetic, and performance is grown up, in charge, serious, loving on other women, emotionally flexible, committed to the survival of a people, universalist, full of love for music, dance, the moon, food, roundness, spirit, struggle, folk and of course, centered on a woman who “loves herself. *Regardless*” (Walker, 1983 author’s emphasis). She has shown us how to turn lemons into *Lemonade*.

### The Short-comings of *Lemonade* as a Black Feminist Text

*Lemonade* is a distinctly important Black feminist text because it names a site of Black women’s oppression and makes a statement that supports them in claiming their power. However, when taken in context, it still falls short of the demand for

justice that Black feminism calls for. Black women in the United States experience higher rates of unemployment than the national average and than white women. Educated Black women earn less than any other group (most notably being that Black women with Bachelor's degrees earn about \$10,000 less than white men with Associate's degrees). Black women continue to be over-represented among the nation's poor, experience higher rates of mortality and inadequate health coverage, and are at greater risk for exposure to violence than white women (The National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2015). Black girls are most likely among girls of any racial group and several groups of boys to be suspended from school (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014) and are the fastest growing population in the juvenile justice system (Sherman, 2012). Considering that *Lemonade* is a cultural work and that Beyoncé herself is a hyper-capitalist, it is right to say that the album does not fully nor explicitly work to alleviate the injustices Black women and girls face.

When we analyze the content of *Lemonade*, there remains a persistent theme throughout the work (and also in many other works in Beyoncé's catalog) that money is a woman's best source of empowerment. Beyoncé has long stood as a symbol of material glamour with songs and music videos that celebrate wealth, access to "high culture" and a luxurious lifestyle. Considering that most of the world's poor are Black women (United Nations, 2015), we have to consider the social implications of this idea and her behavior. The song "Formation" (Lee, S. & Beyoncé, 2016) which was included on the audio album, but not featured on the visual one best illustrates the tension between justice, race and capitalism that Beyoncé's most recent work carries. In the song, Beyoncé celebrates her Creole heritage, professes an appreciation for an African phenotype, and conveys an individualistic and meritocratic narrative. For example, the refrain and chorus says:

My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana  
You mix that Negro with that Creole make a Texas bama  
I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros  
I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils  
Earned all this money but they never take the country out me  
I got hot sauce in my bag, swag  
I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it  
I dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it.

In historical context, these lyrics are deeply problematic. The racial label "Creole" for example, is a term that has historically been used by people of African and European descent to set themselves apart from other African people. Beyoncé has been known to celebrate her Creole ancestry (Rowley, 2016) and the suggestion that she makes use of her status as a "yellow-bone"<sup>5</sup> to support her in attaining her goals alludes to an awareness of the privileges associated with her light skin. Despite claiming a preference for an African phenotype, she does not seem to challenge the colorist notions that have persisted throughout history.



Secondly, we notice a meritocratic undertone in “Formation.” She suggests that she earned her wealth, even as she acknowledges that her appearance adheres to notions of acceptable femininity. At the song’s bridge she says:

Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation, I slay  
 Okay, ladies, now let’s get in formation  
 You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation  
 Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper. (Lee, S. & Beyoncé , 2016)

These lyrics suggest that getting in formation—or getting your affairs in order—lays the foundation for success. She goes on to say that the marker of success is having people talk about you. Still, a woman should remain graceful and let her money talk back. To be sure, such bravado is alluring. However, considering the millions of Black women around the world who constitute the poor—who have little or no access to systems or opportunities to create, and grow wealth, such an argument amounts more to fantasy than reality.

We cannot, however, be blind to the fact that Beyoncé’s position as a mega-pop star makes her a cultural producer. Whether or not the context surrounding her modes of production are just, she is creating a new generation of feminists. That she uses an African aesthetic to convey her understanding of women’s power is very important. It adheres to and establishes the legitimacy of the practice and promise of centering Black women’s folk wisdom. Such an undertaking is central to the Black feminist position. Beyoncé has, at least from an aesthetic point of view, brought feminist theory from margin to center. That she is, however, an international super-star, entrepreneur, and hyper-capitalist, however, has done so at a cost. Bringing Black women’s culture to the mainstream opens it to co-optation and could even cause the marginalization of Black women on a global scale at an even deeper level. That is, people may come to love and celebrate Black women’s culture through Beyoncé, but not Black women themselves. We already see this at work in mainstream magazines as Beyoncé earns credit for starting a trend in wearing “boxer braids” because she wore her hair in corn-rows and other African braid styles throughout the visual album. In reality, Black women have been wearing their hair in these ways to protect and keep their hair neat for thousands of years (Banks, 2000; Byrd & Tharps, 2001; Mercer, 1994; Rooks, 1996). There is nothing new or trendy about the ways in which Beyoncé does her hair. Still, Black women who wear their hair in natural and traditional African styles continue to incur social costs. Black girls have been suspended from school and Black women are often perceived as “unprofessional” for doing so (Sini, 2016; Lutkin, 2016; Dossou, 2013; Mahr, 2016; King, 2016). Beyoncé herself has experienced this type of scrutiny as people have scrutinized her for allowing her daughter, Blue Ivy, to wear her hair naturally (Brown, 2014). In as beautiful, poignant, and inspiring her visual album may be, particularly through its commentary on white supremacist patriarchy, *Lemonade* has not and will not challenge the global conditions under late capitalism that perpetuate the material effects of Black women’s subjugation.

## Conclusion

Beyoncé and her team have succeeded in producing an afro-futurist text in *Lemonade*. That is, a work drawing from the spiritual and cultural practices of ancient Africa situated in the contemporary moment and theorizing new possibilities for Blackness in the future (Nelson, 2000). She argues that our experiences with betrayal is not disconnected from the history of subjugation Black people continue to reckon with. Rather than producing a pain narrative (Tuck & Yang, 2014), however, through a penchant for the melodramatic, *Lemonade* adds complexity to the experience by claiming that healing, reconciliation, and self-discovery are available to both the aggrieved and the perpetrator. *Lemonade* offers a new re-presentation of Black womanhood in the 21st century without sacrificing or marginalizing the social and historical realities Black people face.

Still, we must see her most recent thesis for what it is—a cultural artifact, not a pure text. Postmodern theory teaches us that the idea of an untainted discourse is inherently problematic. Jacques Lacan (1991), for example, elaborates that we are born into a circuit of discourse marking us before our birth and after our death. Black girls are born into a world that has preconceived notions of who they are and what they will become and these discourses shape the perceptions, policies, and practices that mediate their lives. Even as *Lemonade* works in resistance by celebrating Black women's resilience, beauty, traditions, and wisdom, it is not a panacea. We believe that teachers and cultural critics can become key mediators in bridging the gap between *Lemonade* and real Black women and girls.

Given the popularity of Beyoncé as well as the power of popular culture as an educative site (Esposito & Love, 2008; Kellner, 1995), we must continually critique her work and image(s) as they provide lessons for our youth about Blackness, womanhood, and feminism. Recognizing that no one text, including *Lemonade*, can do all things, we assert that it is more important to teach youth to read texts critically so they can be resistant to problematic messages. Critical media literacy (CML) is one place to begin to teach youth ways of consuming media texts with a critical eye as its focus is less on protecting youth from “bad” or negative media messages and more about empowering them to sort through messages and reflect on the impact such messages have on his/her identity (Kellner & Share, 2009). We cannot deny the power of the media, especially someone as well known as Beyoncé, in shaping lives and in teaching us about ourselves and others.

Educators could encourage students to problematize what being a feminist is and how the text/images of *Lemonade* encourage or discourage particular representations of feminism and Black womanhood. Beyoncé's fame spans generations and racial/ethnic groups. She is a revered performer and, thus, the power of her texts are increased by the large numbers of people who consume them. It certainly is not fair for Beyoncé to be asked to take particular positions about social issues as the art she creates should be what she wants. Yet, we cannot help but wonder if

all artists, including Beyoncé, were to be more cognizant of the power of their messages what a difference they could make in the world. If a Black feminist critique highlighting the tension between Beyoncé's positionality as a socially aware pop star and hyper-capitalist were made explicit, she (and her team) may come to see the contradictions in her arguments and her actions. It is deeply problematic for Black women and girls to internalize her position that consumerism and money are equated with power. As Monique Morris (2016) has demonstrated, doing so has deleterious effects in Black girls' lives—driving some into sex work and other positions of deep vulnerability. Still, the ways in which *Lemonade* celebrates Black womanhood and the community of Black mothers, daughters, sisters, and friends who rally around, care for, and nurture one another offers a critically important visual representation for Black women and girls to understand. It offers a counter-narrative to the hegemonic representations that are widely available in contemporary popular culture and offers the building blocks for rich and intellectually stimulating learning experiences about diasporic African women's history, culture, traditions, and wisdom.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Garis (2016) observed that excerpts from four of Shire's poems were used in the film: "Grief has its blue hands in her hair," "The unbearable weight of staying (the end of the relationship)," "Nail technician as palm reader," and "For women who are difficult to love." Shire has not yet published an anthology of her works, so finding citations for these titles is difficult. The citation here references two of the poems, "The unbearable weight of staying (the end of the relationship)" and "For women who are difficult to love." They are currently published on Shire's bandcamp webpage.

<sup>2</sup> The irony being that country music is also part of the Black cultural tradition, but has been co-opted within the music industry as a genre by and for white people only.

<sup>3</sup> This, too, is a clear indicator of Womanist/Black feminist theory in play, as the full humanity of the perpetrator is not dismissed nor cast aside as inherently wrong/evil (Maparyan, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> These women are the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, respectively. These men were each unjustly slain because their Black bodies were mistaken as threats. In each case, their perpetrators were found innocent of any wrong doing, although evidence to the contrary is plentiful.

<sup>5</sup> That is, slang for a light-skinned person of African descent.

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