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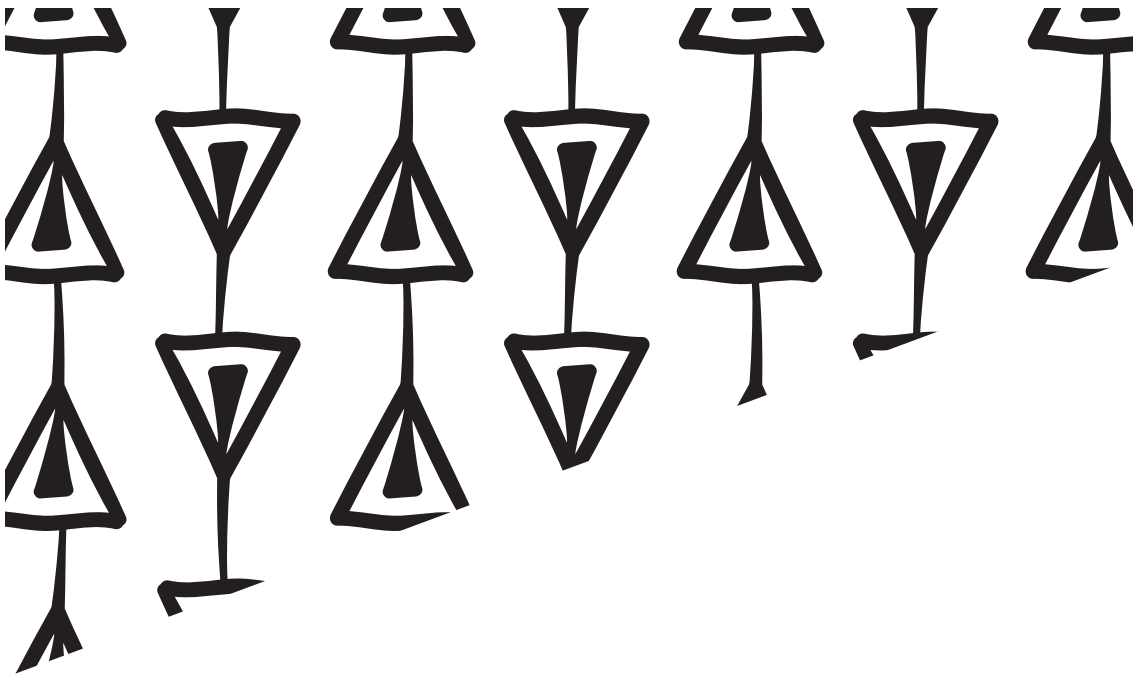
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Author Bio

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Abstract

With the release of singer-song writer Beyoncé Knowles's self-titled album in 2013 and her subsequent branding of herself as a feminist, many feminist critics questioned the validity of Beyoncé's sex positive feminism in the context of the longstanding sexualization and objectification of black women. This article seeks to reconcile Beyoncé's brand of sex positive feminism with black feminist theorists and re-appropriating the erotic for black women. Analyzing the 2013 album *Beyoncé* and examining the history of black female entertainment, this article argues that Beyoncé's brand of sex positive feminism is a necessary step in reclaiming and redefining black women's expression of erotic subjectivity in the music industry.

Redefining Representations of Black Female Subjectivity through the Erotic

Sylvia Cutler

On August 24, 2014, the word *feminist* glared across the television screens of millions of unsuspecting Americans. At the helm of the battle cry: Beyoncé. The previous year, without any prior promotion or announcement, singer-songwriter Beyoncé Knowles released her fifth studio album, *Beyoncé*—an album exploring sex positivity, motherhood, and, yes, feminism. Indeed, in her song “***Flawless,” Beyoncé quotes Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s 2012 TEDxEuston speech, “We Should All Be Feminists,” branding herself, her album, and her message as feminist.

As defined by Adichie’s speech, a feminist is “a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.”¹ Beyoncé’s branding of herself as a feminist sent shockwaves through the feminist community with reactions spanning from those of full-fledged support to deep concern about a highly sexualized, body-commoditized message becoming tied to the concept of feminism. Though Beyoncé certainly has the same right as any other individual to advocate for feminism on her own terms, such feminist advocacy becomes complicated when attached to her commoditized identity as an artist. Beyoncé’s association of her sexually explicit album with Adichie’s talk ushers in an important question for conversations about black feminist thought: Does Beyoncé’s brand of sex positive feminism create a space that promotes black female subjectivity, or is her message one that becomes flawed or non-committal by its association with her own identity as a black female artist in a capitalist music industry?

To understand many theorist’s problematic perception of Beyoncé’s sex positive approach to feminism, her artwork, and by extension the perpetuation of the image of the sexually wanton black woman, we must begin by identifying and understanding the historical representations of black women as female sex objects and how such representations have

1 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “We Should All Be Feminists” (presentation at TEDxEuston, London, December 1, 2012).

evolved over time. Acknowledging the history of black female objectification and sexuality from slavery to colonialism to the present day, my greater project is to use Beyoncé's artwork as a case study demonstrating the evolution of black female subjectivity against this complicated historical backdrop. I will particularly use her 2013 album to argue that her work endorses contemporary feminist advocacy through a framework defined by Adichie and other black feminist theorists. It is in this light that Beyoncé demonstrates an evolving awareness of black sexual subjectivity, indeed a subjectivity that both defies and subverts a history of black female sexualization.

A brief examination of the history of black female sexuality is necessary to determine how Beyoncé both subverts and, at times, skirts the delicate line between black female sexual liberation and the problematic history of black women's sexual exploitation. In her book *Black Sexual Politics*, Patricia Collins suggests that institutionalized rape during slavery created an image of black female subjects as "wanton black women" or "Jezebels." She writes:

This representation redefined Black women's bodies as sites of wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued. The image of the breeder woman emerged to defend the reproductive policies of slavery that encouraged enslaved Black women to have many children. Sexuality and fertility were neither designed for Black women's pleasure nor subject to their control. The system was designed to stamp out agency and annex Black women's bodies to a system for profit.²

Given the history as described by Collins above, questions like agency become important when addressing the evolution of representations of black female sexuality over time. Furthermore, what does the question of sexual autonomy in the context of such a corrupt system and history mean for black female *entertainers* who experience their sexuality within a system that inherently exploits their bodies for profit?

An early example of the sexual history of black female entertainment occurred during England's colonial period. Images of black women as the Hottentot—a derogatory term for Khoisans—or Black Venus became popular forms of entertainment for the masses. One example of a black female entertainer from the early nineteenth century is Sarah Baartman, a South African Khoi woman who was exhibited in Paris and London as feral and caged. Because of her large buttocks, spectators were encouraged to poke and prod her body, and critics like Yvette Abrahams argue that

2 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 56.

after the exhibition of Sarah Baartman, sexual analyses of black people increased, and “ideas about the essentially deviant sexual nature of the Khoisan spread to include all Africans.”³ In *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender*, Robyn Wiegman suggests that the Hottentot also stood as an object of examination in questions regarding the inter-species sexuality between African and ape. He explains that in Edward Long’s *History of Jamaica*, Long “affirmed the sexual primitivity of the Hottentot, linking such physical features as the eyes, lips, and nipples to low intelligence, immorality, and laziness.”⁴ Wiegman also suggests that Long’s unscientific comparisons succeeded in establishing the “bestial” nature of black women, “the ideological means for defining the African as the intermediary creature between man and beast.”⁵ To make matters worse, Europeans took scientifically unfounded beliefs presented by Long about the Hottentot’s speculated “interspecies sexuality” one step further. In an attempt to cover up their own responsibility for interracial sexual exploitation of African women, Long’s analysis allowed them to place the blame on black woman’s “degenerate desires” for their perceived “wanton sexuality.”⁶

General perceptions of black women that spring from a history of animalization and figures such as the Hottentot Venus or wanton Jezebel contribute to a hyper-sexualized representation of black women today, one which continues to play off as exploitation and commodification rather than an empowering representation of sexual agency, subjectivity, or autonomy. According to Collins,

Seemingly unaware of this history, or perhaps exploiting it, some African American artists capitalize on a situation in which everyone knows on some level what gives ideas about Black sexuality their meaning but no one is ultimately responsible. It’s one thing if Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé Knowles from Destiny’s Child profit from their own images and present themselves in performances as “bootylicious.” It’s entirely another if adolescent girls tap into this message of female power and head off to their eighth grade classrooms decked in the same “bootylicious” apparel. . . . The theme here is not censorship of Black girls, but rather to question

3 Yvette Abrahams, “Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, edited by Ruth Roach Pierson and Nupur Chaudhuri (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998): 224.

4 Robyn Wiegman, “Sexing the Difference,” in *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 57.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

whether they can “handle it” if they are woefully uninformed about the legacy of Sarah Bartmann.⁷

Though all women, regardless of race, experience the threat of sexual objectification on some level, expressions of sexuality are much more fraught for black women, given, of course, the historical context behind the violent exploitation of their bodies. When Collins offers a critique such as the one above, it is perhaps difficult to see how any black female artist might achieve a more positive and autonomous representation of their own individual sexuality. There is also a looming threat that black young women might interpret overt expressions of sexuality in harmful ways, regardless of the sexual autonomy of the black woman representing the erotic in her artwork. This is perhaps why feminists find representations of Beyoncé’s sexual liberation and proclaimed feminism problematic. For example, critic Sika Dagbovie-Mullins points out in “Pigtails, Ponytails, and Getting Tail: The Infantilization and Hyper-Sexualization of African American Females in Popular Culture” that representations of black womanhood in the media place young women at risk of blame when it comes to sexuality, perpetuating the notion that black young women are somehow more sexually responsible or sexually avaricious. She writes:

Representations of black girlhood in the media and popular culture suggest that black girls face a different set of rules when it comes to sex, innocence, and blame. . . . The explanation for the sexual exploitation of black girls is always, already at hand: that they are “whores” who want it, repeating a familiar—from slavery times to the present—damaging narrative in the American consciousness.⁸

Dagbovie-Mullins points out a valid concern among feminist scholars about the downside of sex positive feminism, particularly when embraced by artists and role models, such as Beyoncé, to young women. How might young black women read sexuality as presented by black female artists? And does the capitalist and patriarchal gaze really discriminate between sexual autonomy versus sexual objectification in representations of the erotic? Questions like these are never easily answered, but in the crux of arguments surrounding the objectification and sexualization of women, one paradoxical question seems to stand out quite clearly:

7 Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 50.

8 Sika A. Dagbovie-Mullins, “Pigtails, Ponytails, and Getting Tail: The Infantilization and Hyper-Sexualization of African American Female in Popular Culture,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 46, no. 4 (2013): 764.

Should black female entertainers like Beyoncé forego the expression of sexual subjectivity altogether simply because of objectification and the existence of this perilous history of black female sexuality? It could also be said that to forego the expression of the erotic altogether because of the presence of a violent history of the black female body and the continued presence of the male gaze is in many ways equally oppressive to black women.

In this context, Beyoncé's evolution as an artist serves as a compelling example and even possible antidote to negative perceptions of black female sexuality and the disempowerment of black women through negative sexual stereotypes. Although Beyoncé herself has played off of negative representations of the black female body and perhaps perpetuated a lack of sexual autonomy in her earlier albums, her recent 2013 album *Beyoncé* and her activism in the Black Lives Matter movement suggest an evolution that arises from her own formation in embracing the empowering aspects of erotic expression.

Beyoncé's album may seem non-committal when it comes down to a more general definition of feminism posited by Adichie—one that aims to promote the universal social, political, and economic equality of the sexes—and her evolution as an artist has exhibited a dependency on harmful representations of the fraught sexual past and present situation of black women. However, it could be argued that the album has the potential to be used as a tool to redefine socially prescribed representations of black femininity and female sexual autonomy. Beyoncé is sometimes perceived as a problematic figure for black and white feminists alike because her earlier work in many ways *did* exploit her sexuality in ways that were more reflective of this lack of sexual autonomy.

Beyoncé's earlier work with Destiny's Child exhibits this exploitative attitude toward sexuality. In their 2004 hit "Cater 2 U," Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland, and Michelle Williams are featured in a naked, submissive huddle at the onset of the song's music video, and the lyrics are no less problematic in terms of female sexual autonomy and sexual subjectivity. The artists sing of catering to their men, lyrics including refrains such as, "My life would be purposeless without you," and "What do you want to eat, boo? Let me feed you. Let me run your bathwater."⁹ In this early expression of Beyoncé's sexual experience, her autonomy seems to be usurped by a cultural imperative to serve the needs of her man,

9 Destiny's Child, "Cater 2 U," *A-Z Lyrics*, accessed April 13, 2016, <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/destinyschild/cater2u.html>.

whether by giving him his dessert, his slippers, or “so much more.”¹⁰ The camera pans back and forth between the exposed bodies of Beyoncé, Rowland, and Williams to three fully clothed men sitting and watching with pleasure; it is clear their performance of the erotic is catered to these men. One of the most troubling lyrics, however, relates their recognition of what will happen if they cannot live up to the sexual expectations of their men: “I know whatever I’m not fulfilling / Another woman is willing / . . . When you come home late / Tap me on my shoulder, I’ll roll over.”¹¹ It appears that there is a desire to express sexuality and to be desired erotically in this video. Although this may not seem inherently wrong or shameful, the work becomes problematic because it appears to lack sexual autonomy: Beyoncé and her fellow singers are not expressing the erotic for their own delight but rather to fulfill the expectations of the male gaze and the capitalist music industry.

And yet it is important to account for a concept regarding female sexuality that Adichie addresses in “We Should All Be Feminists,” which suggests that one of the issues women face in the battle of sexual equality is a lack of recognition of the so-called “appropriateness” of their own sexual experiences. Adichie says:

We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way boys are. . . . We teach girls shame. *Close your legs. Cover yourself.* We make them feel as though by being born female, they are already guilty of something. And so girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. Who silence themselves. Who cannot say what they truly think.¹²

The concept behind Adichie’s speech is to challenge ideas about gender that are *taught* in order to further equality, and often what is taught is fear and policing of the sexual self. Adichie says that women are admonished to police their own bodies, and perhaps Beyoncé’s response seeks to *challenge* the monitoring of female sexual experience with erotic dance moves performed in her famous leg-bearing leotards. Adichie also says girls grow up to be women who are objects of desire but cannot *have* desire, and thus, must self silence in order to be accepted by society. In a promotional video for the music videos produced in conjunction with the 2013 album *Beyoncé*, Beyoncé admitted her reservations about being so open about her sexual experiences in her album, saying that originally she would have been “too afraid of what people thought,” yet with

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Adichie, “We Should All Be Feminists.”

pride concludes, “I . . . dropped that fourth wall, and I did it.”¹³ In this context, Beyoncé’s evolution as an artist to the production of her 2013 album *Beyoncé*—a representation of the erotic that glorifies her sexual autonomy and experiences as a woman—works in its own right to teach women to accept their sexual desires through a sex positive feminist message, a message of female empowerment that cannot go unnoticed.

It could easily be argued that an artist’s exploration of sexuality in a visual album like Beyoncé’s is degrading or shameful, shame being a concept that Adichie says society uses to teach that women are inherently guilty of something by virtue of being female. Beyoncé’s display of sexuality is also complicated because she bears more scrutiny than the average woman as an icon of popular culture. She is thus inevitably more subject to the male gaze as a black female artist in the music industry, undeniably putting her at risk of becoming a sexual object in the eyes of the public. In “Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” black feminist theorist and social activist bell hooks addresses problematic representations of black women in popular culture, suggesting that such representations usually do little work to critique images of a black female sexuality that made up the cultural framework of nineteenth-century racism—an image that said black females were animalistic or promiscuous.¹⁴ Arguing that the black female body has served as an icon for black sexuality in general, hooks calls for new representations of black female sexuality that posit sexual autonomy and personal recognition of erotic desire and beauty. Citing the example of a film produced by the British black film collective entitled *Passion of Remembrance*, hooks praises the film’s ability to produce a representation of black females “exulting in their black female bodies.”¹⁵ She writes:

They shake to a song that repeats the refrain “let’s get loose” without conjuring images of a rotgut colonized sexuality on display for the racist/sexist imagination. Their pleasure, the film suggests, emerges in a decolonized erotic context rooted in commitments to feminist and anti-racist

13 *Self-Titled, Part 4. Liberation*, directed by Beyoncé Knowles, Ed Burke, and Bill Kirstein, performed by Beyoncé Knowles (New York: Columbia Records, 2013), film.

14 bell hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy: Representations of Black Female Sexuality in the Cultural Marketplace,” in *The Politics of Women’s Bodies: Sexuality, Appearance, and Behavior*, edited by Rose Weitz and Samantha Kwan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 123.

15 *Ibid.*, 131.

politics. When they look in the mirror . . . the gaze is one of recognition. We see their pleasure and delight in themselves.”¹⁶

Here hooks posits an image of black female subjectivity and sexual experience that refuses to conjure what she says are images that have emerged from a colonized subversion of black female sexuality. In relation to Beyoncé’s own representations of sexuality in her music, music videos, and public performances, it could be argued that such sexual representations are iterations of what a capitalist music industry would use to objectify black female bodies, similar to the way a “rotgut colonized sexuality” would sexually objectify black women, as hooks argues.

Yet how Beyoncé is redefining representations of her sexual experiences under the spotlight and pressure of artist commodification in a capitalist music industry is worth noting—especially in comparison with some of her contemporary female artists. The fact that Beyoncé defines herself as a feminist alone suggests that her erotic recognition might stem from feminist and anti-racist politics, as noted by hooks. Though perhaps Beyoncé’s past albums have not always appeared as committing to black female sexual autonomy, the very battle cry of the 2013 album is in large part an exploration of the individuality of her sexual experience and growth as an artist, indeed an autonomy that she defines in terms that are often nonexistent in the work of contemporary black female artists such as Rihanna or Nicki Minaj. Comparing Beyoncé’s 2013 hit “Rocket,” for example, to the commoditized and arguably objectified sexuality displayed in Minaj’s 2014 hit “Anaconda” is indicative of Beyoncé’s redefinition of identity. Though Minaj and Beyoncé are undoubtedly both aware of their inherent subjection to the male gaze as female artists, “Anaconda” seems to embrace female objectification, whereas “Rocket” subverts it. A large portion of the lyrics in “Anaconda” express awareness of the gaze quite clearly. The lyric “Oh my gosh, look at her butt”—a lyric sampling from Sir Mix-a-Lot’s highly objectifying song, “Baby Got Back”—is repeated eighteen times, along with the famous line, “My anaconda don’t want none unless you got buns, hun.”¹⁷ The music video features rapper Drake sitting in a chair, looking at and touching Minaj’s body at whim, almost in boredom, even as she goes to great lengths to get his attention. In a telling MTV article, Minaj says that after the video shoot Drake told

16 Ibid.

17 Nicki Minaj, “Anaconda,” in *The Pinkprint*, written by Onika Maraj, Jamal Jones, Jonathan Solone-Myvett, Ernest Clark, Marcos Palacios, and Sir Mix-a-Lot (Burbank, CA: Glenwood Recording Studios, 2014).

her, “Yo, do you understand like I’m the man after this video come out?”¹⁸ therein cementing that a black female artist’s performance and representation of her sexual experience is to play to the machismo of the man, not her own sexual empowerment.

Beyoncé’s album hit “Rocket,” however, offers a different image of black female sexuality altogether—one that is much more closely related to a self-defined and actualized female sexuality as posited by hooks. Lyrically, “Rocket” depicts a scene of sexual intercourse taking place between Beyoncé and her husband, rapper Jay-Z. Yet it is not Beyoncé who is the sexual object in this scene. On the contrary, Beyoncé is a sexual subject in control of her own self, *demanding* to be looked at and touched. It is worth noting that the majority of the lyrics are written in the form of commands, like “Let me show you how *I* feel,” and “You can touch *me*.”¹⁹ Beyoncé’s use of the command form rejects the male gaze in that *she* is the one instructing her man what she wants. She is talking about her body, yes, and her audience is given their own objective description of her body, yet here *she* establishes the terms. Instead of being an object defined, she is a subject and the definer.

The music video for “Rocket” also serves to redefine sexual autonomy in a unique way: the song becomes a means for taking back the gaze. Though subjection to the gaze is inevitable for Beyoncé as a black female entertainer, she does not permit it to either delimit or denigrate her expression of sexual autonomy and female desire. Although lyrics for “Rocket” might describe a scene in which two sexual partners are present, the music video is near void of the presence of anyone but Beyoncé. In the privacy of her own home, Beyoncé undresses herself, skims her fingers erotically across her own skin, and glorifies her body on her own terms. She turns lyrics that suggest reliance on her male sexual partner to a video in which she, in her solitude, looks back at the camera with confidence and resolve. She is ultimately alone in this experience, creating a message that a woman does not need to be defined sexually by the gaze of another. In this way Beyoncé creates the image of a black female artist who does not let the dictates of a capitalist music industry define her sexual image. Like the women in the film bell hooks describes, when

18 Gil Kaufman, “Nicki Minaj Confirms Drake Was ‘Excited Like Hell’ After Vigorous ‘Anaconda’ Chair Session,” *News*, August 25, 2014.

19 Beyoncé Knowles, “Rocket,” in *Beyoncé*, written by Miguel Jontel Pimentel, Beyoncé Knowles, Justin Timberlake, Timothy Mosley, and Jerome Harmon (New York: Jungle City Studio, 2013).

Beyoncé looks at or touches her body, her gaze is also “one of recognition,” one in which she pleasures and delights in *herself*.²⁰

Looking at Beyoncé’s sexual empowerment of women and subversion of the male gaze through the framework of black feminist theory shows that her reclamation of voice and autonomy are in fact committed to feminist ideals and do not complicate them. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” black feminist theorist Audre Lorde argues that the healthy recognition of the erotic as an integral part of experience forces women to scrutinize the meaning of existence in empowering ways. This contrasts well with statements made by Beyoncé on the topic of sexuality. In her promotional video for the music videos accompanying the album *Beyoncé*, she reflects this view of her female experience, saying, “I don’t . . . have any shame about being sexual, and I’m not embarrassed about it and I don’t feel like I have to protect that side of me because I do believe that sexuality is a power that we all have.”²¹ Beyoncé’s refusal to feel shame about being sexual in large part reflects what Adichie posits is necessary for women to combat gender inequality. That Beyoncé would declare this unapologetically about her videos also reveals that her relationship to the erotic is personally valuable to her sense of identity. Her ownership of this essential part of her subjectivity shows that her interpretation of the erotic comes from a place of self-actualization and empowerment rather than a need to conform to simply “selling sex” for the music industry.

Lorde also argues that such sexual empowerment and erotic identity provides black women with both meaning and purpose to commit to social change. She writes that “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama. For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.”²² This self-affirmation encompassed in the creative power of the erotic is critical to breaking down barriers formed by socially inflicted stereotypes of gender and race. Whether or not a woman is an artist or pop culture icon becomes

20 hooks, “Selling Hot Pussy,” 131.

21 *Self-Titled, Part 5. Honesty*, directed by Beyoncé Knowles, Ed Burke, and Bill Kierstein, performed by Beyoncé Knowles (New York: Columbia Records, 2013), film.

22 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outside: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Corssing, 1984): 59.

irrelevant; instead, a woman's choice to be erotic for self-actualization and empowerment should not bear censorship and relentless scrutiny but rather be valued for its ability to allow women to transcend cultural barriers.

In her promotional video for the album, Beyoncé says she shares her own experiences with the erotic in part to enable women to recognize the energy and self-definition of sensuality within themselves, as well as the power that comes from reclaiming one's own body. For example, when sharing her personal experience with working to feel comfortable in her body again after having her baby, she says, "I know finding my sensuality, getting back into my body, being proud of growing up was important. It was important to me that I expressed that in this music because I know that there are so many women that feel the same thing after they give birth."²³ Beyoncé recognizes the problems many women face in discovering subjectivity, in feeling whole in relation to being in bodies that often bear scrutiny from a societal demand for female perfection. In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, Patricia Collins insists on the collective need for black women's self-definition to reject institutionalized oppression and racism: "When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. . . . The act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects."²⁴ This is perhaps why the act of self-definition through embracing the personal nature of the erotic for the experience of subjectivity is crucial, and Beyoncé's brand of sex positive feminism offers a perfect example of this action. Beyoncé shows that when she defines her sexual experience (e.g., in her subversion of the male gaze in the music video "Rocket"), she is demonstrating her own rejection of institutionalized racism and societal prescription of black femininity. In owning her body in an industry that some could argue owns her, she is validating a greater need and recognition of black woman's power gained through self-definition to become human subjects.

The most striking moment in Beyoncé's evolution as an artist aware of her sexual autonomy and empowered identity is reflected in her controversial Half Time performance at the 2016 Super Bowl. So much larger

23 *Self-Titled, Part 4. Liberation*, film.

24 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (London: Routledge, 2000): 112.

than the bold, bright letters spelling out “Feminist” in her 2014 performance at the VMAs, “Formation” became her new battle cry. It was in her performance of “Formation” and the release of the music video the night before that Beyoncé used her empowered, influential presence as an artist to commit to social change. There is no overt expression of the erotic in this music video, but it could be argued that her commitment to celebrate black identity and speak out against police brutality for the Black Lives Matter movement in “Formation” ultimately evolves from what Lorde and Collins argue the power of the erotic enables: the creation of a necessary, female self-affirmation in “the face of a racist, patriarchal . . . society.”²⁵

In conclusion, though Beyoncé’s position as a female artist in a capitalist music industry does threaten to distort the interpretation of her use of the erotic in her artwork, her self-actualized sense of female subjectivity in relation to her sexual experience ultimately works to enable her to redefine rather than to be defined. Beyoncé shows through sex positivity that there is female empowerment that comes through embracing the sexual self, and, perhaps, her unapologetic willingness to share her personal experiences with this erotic self in the album *Beyoncé* gives her the power to create and celebrate this identity, even under the watchful eye of a capitalist music industry. She blends political advocacy and art to further her cause and to reject the violent and objectified representations of black womanhood that arise from a fraught history of violence toward the black female body. Just as Adichie posits that we should all be feminists, Beyoncé’s own brand of feminism shows how vital it is to understand that empowerment is a personal matter, and it is ultimately in this recognition of unfettered autonomy and difference within feminist perspectives and experiences that women and men will come together to break the bonds of institutionalized sexism. ♦

25 Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic as Power,” 59.

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