

“BOW DOWN, BITCHES”

HOW BEYONCÉ’S ART REFLECTS AND CONTRIBUTES TO THE NOTIONS OF  
SISTERHOOD, FEMALE EMPOWERMENT, AND INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN  
THE FRAMEWORK OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT.

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies in Partial Fulfillment of the  
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## ABSTRACT

### “BOW DOWN, BITCHES”

#### HOW BEYONCÉ’S ART REFLECTS AND CONTRIBUTES TO THE NOTIONS OF SISTERHOOD, FEMALE EMPOWERMENT, AND INTERSECTIONALITY WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT.

Alana Vinseta Angel Never

This thesis examines Beyoncé’s art within the context of Black feminist thought, specifically focusing on how her work reflects and contributes to the themes of sisterhood, female empowerment, and intersectionality. A comprehensive analysis of her songs and performances will demonstrate how Beyoncé’s art advocates for unity, female empowerment, particularly for Black women, and encourages sisterhood and support. The results reveal that Beyoncé’s art serves as a powerful tool to challenge societal norms, address racial and gender inequalities, and advocate for justice, especially in the lives of Black women. Through her music and performances, Beyoncé has become a powerful example of using popular music as a medium for social change and cultural empowerment. This research highlights the significance of her contributions to the ongoing conversations surrounding race, gender, and socioeconomic factors, underlining the powerful influence of her art in encouraging a more inclusive society.

Keywords: Beyoncé, Black feminist thought, Sisterhood, Female empowerment, Intersectionality, Advocacy, Racial inequalities, Gender inequalities, Black feminism.

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## PROLOGUE

The moment of silence seemingly lasted forever. Silence is typically accompanied by uncertainty and mystery, but the expression on my parents' faces screamed a thousand words, suffocating the silence and the unknown in the room. What followed was a 10-month drama generated by a clash of generations, cultures, and societal influences, finally leading to the peaceful birth of my beautiful daughter [REDACTED].

“Me mum,” [REDACTED], was born in [REDACTED] to a Jamaican father and an English mother in the East Midlands town of Derby. My grandma Mabel was a sweet Derbyshire woman, who experienced abuse in the town for being married to a black man, and abuse at home from her frustrated husband. [REDACTED], the oldest of the only five bi-racial children in town, grew up in a poor, broken, and abusive home, which she finally left at the age of 15. As she grew older, [REDACTED] noticed the lack of opportunities in Derby for young women from her social class, with most of her friends becoming pregnant at an early age to collect government welfare. In pursuit of her dreams, [REDACTED] escaped her traumatic childhood in her early twenties and started a modeling career in Munich, Germany, where she identified as the strong independent black woman she is today.

I, Alana Vinseta Angel Never, was born in 1992 in Munich, Germany. Growing up in this mixed environment enabled me to witness and experience a clash of two very diverse cultures from an early age. Out of her childhood hardships, my mother wanted to make my childhood everything that hers was not. She was this free spirit, rare to find in traditional German society, the type that prioritized dancing and singing lessons over schoolwork, always encouraging me to express myself through my art and performance. She raised me to have a strong, confident presence and be proud of who I am while enjoying the small things in life and not worrying about what the future holds. Bob Marley's song “Three Little Birds”

describes my mother's approach to life accurately. The song's lyrics encourage listeners to stay optimistic and promote positivity despite certain life challenges.

Looking back at the traditional roles performed in my grandparents' marriage, I can also identify an evident influence on my parent's household. My father, a brilliant and loving man, resembled his traditional German father in many ways. He played a central role in our household, taking responsibility for both our financial stability and important decision-making. While he may not have been involved in household chores, he valued my mother's opinion and wanted to ensure her well-being. He took pride in his role as the provider and wished to offer my mother a sense of security through his support. Although he enjoyed and encouraged my singing and dancing, he saw it more as a hobby, always stressing the importance of the classic educational pathway. If it were up to him, I would be working in public services because of the social status, job security, and benefits it provided in his eyes. While these aspects were important to him, he also always prioritized my happiness in whatever path I chose. His main concern was my well-being and contentment with my choices.

As a biracial, bilingual child in the beautiful, rich, and innovative yet conservative Bavarian city of Munich, where most immigrants came from Turkey, the Balkans, and Italy, I was the only identifiably mixed-race child in my class, from kindergarten through high school. Nevertheless, throughout my youth, I never consciously felt out of place. Yet, the more thought I give it, the deeper I dig, the more I can identify specific experiences that may indicate otherwise. It wasn't until my early teenage years that I realized I was different from the typical German girl. Initially, I became aware of the obvious such as my Caribbean skin tone, hair, and body features, but as time progressed, I felt like I had picked a side and started gravitating toward my Jamaican roots.

While my elementary school friends were stereotypical German white girls, my core friend group in my late middle/high school years did not attend my posh high school. My closest teenage friend group was formed after the first social media platforms emerged, which brought together a circle of mixed-race girls from across the city: [REDACTED] (Spanish/Somalian), [REDACTED] (Jamaican/German), [REDACTED] (Togolese/German), and [REDACTED] (Senegalese). This group instantly felt like family, and a strong feeling of belonging and understanding came with it. We looked like sisters and had cultural similarities, which allowed us to identify with one another. This newly found unity gave us an identity; it filled us with confidence, to the point that we walked through town feeling like the next “Destiny’s Child” girl band. Together we felt strong and independent; we felt black and proud. After finding my people and place in Munich’s society, I felt invincible for many years. I starred in my high school’s musical, started a bachelor’s degree in Theatre Studies at the renowned Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität in Munich, and balanced student jobs with a flourishing social life.

Then in October 2015, after turning 23, during a routine week-day family dinner, I laid my fork onto my plate and announced:

Mum, Papi, I’m pregnant...

My mother and her sisters were traumatized by the experience of growing up as women in an unstable environment. My father, the conventional German who had envisioned my life to go by the book, was devastated, which is why they all shared the same plan... abortion. My whole world turned upside down; it was like I had lost my identity, self-belief, and purpose overnight. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had nothing to hold onto, no support system, no answers, and no way to make “it” better. Everyone I spoke to was so judgmental and negative. I guess being 23 and pregnant was so unorthodox, so



unconventional, it didn't fit the posh conservative "Munich narrative" at all. It seemed like even my mother had let the conservative German culture outweigh her positive free Jamaican spirit.

Beyoncé Knowles was my idol growing up, as singing and dancing were my greatest passions. When I initially fell in love with her music, I fell in love with her as an artist, looking up to her for her heavenly voice, looks, and stage presence. As time passed, I started facing my first challenges in life, the classic teenage high school drama, such as my first break up and identity crises, but the moment I realized how much admiration I had for her persona was during my pregnancy, the first time I felt utterly abandoned.

Beyoncé's music, performances, and public appearances created a persona that was so vulnerable and relatable, yet powerful and indestructible, it gave me the hope that a young mixed-race pregnant woman could overcome the biggest challenge of her life and bring a child into the world; a hope that reignited my excitement for the future. The fact that she faced so many moments of adversity in the public eye and always came out on top gave me the belief that I would still live out my wildest dreams, even after having my baby.

Moving to Chicago three months after [REDACTED] birth was the best thing to have ever happened to me. My husband had received a scholarship to play University soccer, and my in-laws supported us throughout his college career. This gave me a chance to focus solely on my daughter for the first three years of her life, a time in which we created a bond so strong it would last for a lifetime. Chicago completely transformed my life. This glorious energetic metropolis, a melting pot of cultures, made me feel like I was starring in the movies I used to watch on TV. Chicagoans were confident, outgoing, and loud, always on the move and hustling. It's like everywhere I looked, I saw Beyoncé around me, confident BIPOC women strutting down Michigan Avenue, with their "go get it" vibes rubbing off on me as they

passed by. It was like seeing my teenage friend group all around the city. It felt so liberating, so refreshing, and I felt like the city was welcoming home a lost child with open arms. From day one, I received nothing but smiles, compliments, and encouraging words from strangers when strolling through the city with my daughter, compared to the degrading looks and sorrowful silence I received in Munich.

Chicago saved, lifted, and made me feel young, black, and proud for the first time in my life. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is quoted saying in Beyoncé's song "Flawless," "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful. Otherwise, you would threaten the man." Just like so many women of their generations, my grandma and mum suffered and sacrificed so much for me to have the opportunities I have today, which is why experiencing this positive culture shock, this extreme contrast, is what drove me to re-embark on my journey as a now, stronger black woman. I aim to be a strong role model for my daughter [REDACTED], who I hope will never experience self-doubt and always aspire to be happy in life. The goal of inspiring young girls struggling with their identity, just like Beyoncé, the artist, the feminist, the philanthropist, the mother, the cultural phenomenon, and the social activist, inspired me.

I was fortunate enough to grow up in an environment that helped me become the confident woman I am today. Nonetheless, the majority of young Black girls and women, including Beyoncé's fans, are not all in such a position due to historical injustices and stereotypes, as well as facing challenges that push Black women into subordinate positions in society. Looking back to the early waves of feminism, where Black women were mainly excluded or marginalized within the movement, Black women had to find their own voices and demand change within the movement, just as Beyoncé is trying to promote through her art today. Beyoncé is serving as a role model, trying to build confidence and pride in Black

women in North America. My inspiration from Beyoncé made me look deeper at her causes and what she is trying to improve and address in society, which is why, through this thesis, I hope to contribute to the ongoing importance of this subject.

Beyoncé as a performer, is music, art, fashion, culture, and so much more all in one. The artist managed to consciously create a persona and use her art as a platform to inspire her fans, particularly through popular music. Furthermore, she utilizes her music, live performances, and public appearances to speak out about issues related to gender, racial equality, and LGBTQ rights and to speak out about racial discrimination within marginalized groups. By using her platform for activism and addressing important social issues through her art, Beyoncé has become an intersectional icon in the fight against inequality in today's society. Through her art, she has challenged traditional gender norms and promoted the idea that women, especially Black women, should be celebrated and respected for their beauty and resilience. For instance, her album *Lemonade* discusses infidelity, betrayal, and female empowerment themes. Additionally, in her song "Formation," she addresses issues of police brutality and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Over the past years and in addition to her artistic contributions, Beyoncé has also used her celebrity status to contribute to important social and political issues. Known to be an advocate for gender equality, Beyoncé has promoted various organizations, for instance, she is the co-founder of "CHIME FOR CHANGE," a platform that supports women and girls through education, health, and justice (The Associated Press). Notably, Beyoncé's art has consistently aligned with her advocacy, supporting marginalized groups and communities. Her songs and visuals often emphasize themes of empowerment, self-love, and resilience. Moreover, Beyoncé highlights the beauty and strength of Black women through her music and performances, and confronts the historically prevailing stereotypes and challenges that have limited the progress for women of color. Through an in-depth analysis of her lyrics,

music video and song analysis, I will explore how Beyoncé uses her platform to advocate for social change, to counter oppressive stereotypes, and to celebrate the resilience of Black women.

The influence of Beyoncé's art on the feminist discourse and its alignment with the principles of Black feminist thought highlight an important research problem. She has reached global attention so far with her artistic contributions and feminist brand; however, more needs to be done to emphasize the specific themes and messages she incorporates into her art and how they resonate with her global audience.

This thesis aims to explore how Beyoncé uses her platform and public image to address issues such as race, gender, and social injustice and how her art contributes to the discourse of Black feminist thought and intersectionality. To gain a deeper understanding of the social and political context in which Beyoncé's work exists, it is essential to highlight the historical foundations of Black feminist thought. By doing so, my thesis will emphasize the empowerment and agency Black feminism delivers and how Beyoncé's art contributes to this meaningful movement. Furthermore, I will be exploring how her art contributes to the themes of sisterhood, female empowerment, and intersectionality within the framework of Black feminist thought. Through the analysis of her music, visuals, and live performances, I aim to uncover how her art sheds light on the collective experience of women, as well as to understand how Beyoncé addresses the issues of race, gender and social injustice through her art.

The purpose of my research is firstly, to provide a comprehensive analysis of Beyoncé's art, and its impact on the feminist discourse, highlighting its contribution to Black women's empowerment and agency. Secondly, to explore the ways her art addresses the principles of intersectionality, acknowledging the various systems of oppression, and portraying the experiences of women of color. I seek to contribute to existing literature on

feminist theory and cultural studies, by highlighting the way an artist such as Beyoncé Knowles, can help to further discussions on the intersection of popular culture, feminism, and Black feminist thought, ultimately celebrating the power and agency of diverse women worldwide.

The structure of my thesis will consist of three main chapters: The first chapter examines the controlling images of Black women's representation, including the Mammy, Jezebel, Sapphire, and Tragic Mulatto. Additionally, I will present Beyoncé's emergence as a cultural icon, the historical foundations of Black feminism and hip-hop feminism to set the groundwork for my analysis. Chapter two will focus on Beyoncé as a feminist, where I will present her journey as an artist and her active way of supporting gender equality. I will highlight the ways her public brand and advocacy contribute to the feminist movement and how she utilizes her platform and artistry to raise awareness and advocate for women's rights. Chapter three will include a comprehensive song analysis, where I will explore how Beyoncé's art incorporates and embodies the themes sisterhood, female empowerment, and intersectionality. I will pay special attention to the key songs "Run the World (Girls)" (2011), "Flawless" (2013), and "Formation" (2016), discussing their lyrics, visuals and live performances to highlight the powerful messages these songs communicate. I chose these three songs because they provide an overview of how her artistry has developed throughout her career, as well as because these themes relate to the ideas of resistance and activism that are presented in Patricia Hill Collin's work *Black Feminist Thought*.

It is my hope that this research sheds light on the great potential that artistry has in challenging stereotypes and advocating for social justice. Through analyzing Beyoncé Knowles' art, I seek to emphasize how popular culture is able to create space within the constantly evolving feminist movement, a space that highlights the resilience and strength of women from a variety of backgrounds, while bringing feminist ideas and issues to a broader

audience. There is no doubt that popular culture has the potential to bring feminist ideas into the mainstream and create a more inclusive movement, and it is about time we fully recognize its role in creating a future where all women are empowered.

## CHAPTER ONE: LITERATURE REVIEW

“Ima keep running cause a winner don’t quit on themselves.”  
Beyoncé-Freedom (AZ Lyrics)

### **Introduction**

Music has always been a voice and embodiment of our society and has been used as a medium to express people's most profound emotions and struggles. Over time, scholars have explored how popular music reflects and shapes social norms and values, including gender and race. Furthermore, music has especially been a way for Black women to express their feelings and experiences within an industry that has often limited them. Despite the challenges, Black female artists have prevailed and forged their own course in the music industry, utilizing their platforms to challenge and subvert stereotypes. One notable example of a Black female artist who uses her platform to express and subvert expectations is Beyoncé. The opening quote from Beyoncé’s song “Freedom” is a powerful statement highlighting the persistence and resilience of Black women, and the song emphasizes which struggles these women had to face in the music industry.

### **Controlling Images**

When looking at the “controlling images” of the Mammy, Sapphire, the Jezebel, and the tragic Mulatto repeatedly appearing in movies, TV shows, and popular culture, we see that they have advanced the ideas of what bell hooks has identified as “a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks 17). It becomes clear that Black women performers cannot thrive or empower other Black women while acting in a world of limitations. According to Carolyn M. West, when viewing this from a social perspective, these stereotypes affect how people of other origins, races, and gender are interpreted by society. Behavior and perceptions are influenced by the “perceiver” as well as the “stereotyped” (West) and lead to

biased opinions that are manifested in societal perspectives. Moreover, stereotypes do not only create power dynamics but, above all, create a society where these stereotypes eventually evolve into the standard normalized representations of Black women in media and popular culture (West). In American culture and pop culture, stereotypes such as Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and Tragic Mulatto continue to be very dominant, so it is important to understand and recognize how they have contributed to the marginalization and misrepresentation of Black women. The emergence of artists such as Beyoncé Knowles has actively challenged those stereotypes through their art, providing empowering narratives that challenge traditional norms while enhancing Black women's representation.

### **1. Mammy**

Firstly, *Mammy*, an attentively serving, heavy-set maid of African origin, was initially the most familiar figure of the three, originating from the southern states during the times of slavery (West). In popular culture and the media, the Mammy was most often represented as a loving Teddy Bear-like Black woman who set aside her own needs and desires to diligently serve white children, mothers, and fathers, as their lives held a higher value in the eyes of society. This stereotype was so ingrained in southern culture that in 1920, the white female members of the group United Daughters of the Confederacy suggested a bronze work-of-art should be built to honor her loyalty. In modern-day society, the classic image of the Mammy still represents many Black women working in pink and blue-collar industries (West). There are people who hold the belief that the existence of the “Mammy” and the persistence of this stereotype are convincing due to the historical circumstances where Black women were heavily pushed into serving as domestic workers for wealthy White individuals during and after the era of slavery. As hooks stated in 2015, “It is not really important that there are black women who resemble the mammy stereotype, it is important that white people created



an image of black womanhood which they could tolerate that in no way resembled the great majority of black women” (West 84).

## 2. Jezebel

Secondly, *Jezebel* was also introduced during the times of slavery, just like her biblical predecessor. Jezebel portrays Black women deemed as sexually attractive by the white-male-dominated society, who are often hypersexualized and whose worth is measured by the appeal of their body and their influence on men (Aljazeera English). This phenomenon dates back to when enslaved Black women were constantly confronted with sexual abuse. Primarily because of the mythical, stereotypical images surrounding Black womanhood, both free and enslaved African American women were blamed for their own victimization. As Deborah Gray White points out, “Jezebel excused miscegenation, the sexual exploitation of Black women,” whereas the “Mammy helped endorse service of black women in Southern households” (White 61). The portrayal of Black female performers and using the Jezebel image, or one of its more modern forms such as “hoochie mama” or “the freak” (Springer) to critique them, is a prominent issue in the history of Black women and their performances. For instance, the myth of the Jezebel, which refers to a sexually aggressive slave, was utilized to justify the rapes and mistreatment of Black female slaves by white men. Moreover, these images were also employed to repress the sexuality of Black women by labeling them as the Jezebel if they expressed any type of sexual agency or liberation. This stereotype characterized the sexuality of Black women as misbehaving, dividing extensively from the idealized sexuality of white heterosexual women and men, and was therefore regarded as irreparable.

### 3. Sapphire

*Sapphire*, who is commonly depicted as a “short-tongued, manipulative woman who emasculates her husband” (Aljazeera English), was developed between the 1940s and 1950s. The Sapphire was characterized as a bossy, high-tempered, angry, and aggressive Black woman with a more firm and robust body type. As West argues, Black women have been and are often still characterized as "pushy" and "hostile" by authoritarian members of society. Thus, when a Black woman stands her ground and tries to stand up for herself, her actions are immediately interpreted as aggressive. This again demonstrates one of the ingrained perceptions that society associates with Black women. These stereotypes of Black women indicate how these rooted and ingrained portrayals created during the slave trade have developed and been carried along into today's society. Although Beyoncé and other artists are working on challenging and dismantling the deeply ingrained stereotypes of *the Mammy*, *the Jezebel*, and *the Sapphire*, it is important to recognize that these are not the only stereotypes present in the music industry and that they continue to be prevalent. In these spaces, Black women are still limited and stereotyped while facing the everlasting battle of “the intersections of race and gender” (Collins).

### 4. Tragic Mulatto

Arthur P. Davis defined the tragic Mulatto as “a commonly used American fiction and drama characterization. It denotes a light colored, mixed blood character (possessing in most cases a white father and a colored mother) who suffers because of difficulties arising from his biracial background” (195). The tragic Mulatto represents an individual of mixed ethnic heritage, and if there are signs of Black in that person's ancestry, the individual will be identified by their African heritage alone. Even though profound racial distinctions are acknowledged, this person of color is still classified as Black. Even so, this individual is not sufficiently Black to be subjected to all of the negative connotations associated with being

exclusively African in society. Additionally, individuals of mixed heritage are not regarded as genuine Europeans, thus denying them access to full White privilege. In the same manner as other stereotypes, the tragic Mulatto tends to overly simplify an individual's character.

There are ways in which these remaining stereotypes have been set up in the past. For example, David Scott Diffrient explores in his *20 Feet from Stardom* documentary the history, powerless status, and segregation of Black female backup singers during the 1960s and 1970s, standing “20 feet” away in the white artist’s shadow. Diffrient describes the positioning of backup singers as a “part of rock’s mythos of privilege and power” (Radius-The Weinstein Company 2013, Diffrient, 26). The Blossoms is an example of an American girl band who made their career in the 1960s, singing backup for predominantly white artists such as Elvis Presley and Paul Anka. Furthermore, Diffrient writes that some “African American women have made their way from the “back of the bus” to the “front of the stage,” (Diffrient, 44) such as Whitney Houston and Beyoncé Knowles. The fact that so many talented African American women are still confined to the role of background singers shows that there is still much work to do to truly change the racial discrimination and segregationist attitudes that have long been present in the music industry. It is important to note that this is only one example of racial discrimination that has been present in the music industry. There are other minority groups, such as Latinx and Asian American performers, who have faced similar challenges in regard to being pushed into specific roles of a genre or being denied equal opportunities for success in society.

Interestingly, Diffrient states that backup singers like the Blossoms were allegedly represented as “the controlling stereotype of black woman as Mammy” (Diffrient, 44). This observation showcases the complex dynamics and representation of Black women in the music industry during that era. By associating backup singers, such as the Blossoms, with the Mammy stereotype, Diffrient highlights how the women were forced into a role that

reinforced racial expectations and limited their artistic expression. The Blossoms are in possession of heavenly vocals yet left without a voice. Musical geniuses forced into exile, are often “consigned to the role of selfless provider,” (Diffrient 44) cast into the shadows of the white stars, “whose identities are assumed to be more psychologically complex and important” (Diffrient, 44). To this day, plenty of artists remain nameless and invisible, struggling to survive in the music industry.

Systemic oppression within the U.S. music industry can be dated back to the 1930s, even seen in the era that predates pop music. Josephine Baker, known as the world’s first Black superstar, faced challenges in reaching her full potential as a stage performer due to the industry’s highly segregated nature. Josephine Baker states, “I ran away from home. I ran away from St. Louis, and then I ran away from the United States of America because of that terror of discrimination, that horrible beast which paralyzes one’s very soul and body” (Turner). Baker was the first of many Black artists to leave the U.S. and seek opportunities for career progression within the arts elsewhere. The singer became an overnight sensation when she first appeared in Paris with her g-string and signature banana skirt. Her predominantly white European audience was intrigued by her unique performances, which were influenced by “African themes and style” (Norwood). After performing for some of Europe’s noblest audiences, she returned home for her U.S. tour in 1951, where she once again faced rejection (Griffith). “I have walked into the palaces of kings and queens and into the houses of presidents. And much more. But I could not walk into a hotel in America and get a cup of coffee, and that made me mad” (Norwood).

When observing Baker’s performances, it becomes clear that her stage appearance reflects certain characteristics of the Jezebel. Through her promiscuous outfits, flirtatious nature, and sexualized performances, but instead, she used her body as an image of power

and self-confidence. Jerkins argues that through these performances, Baker managed to “manipulate the white male imagination,” which destabilized the stereotype of the Jezebel and caused the image's power and ownership to shift back into the hands of the Black performer (Jerkins). Josephine Baker was a prominent Black performer, dancer and activist who challenged stereotypes and advocated for civil rights. While she was seen as a strong woman with agency at the time, she also had to face certain limitations within the music industry. Today's musicians, such as Beyoncé Knowles, continue to face those stereotypes, but similarly to Baker, Beyoncé is dedicated to breaking boundaries and empowering Black women in popular culture. Although both artists are separated by time and context, they utilize their global platforms to advocate for social change and advance the progression of Black women's representation within American culture.

Issues of representation are central to the arguments presented in Laura Mulvey's paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which sheds light on the objectification and sexualization of women in film, and its relevance in contemporary music cannot be ignored. Mulvey's main idea is that Hollywood cinema is structured around the male perspective and objectifies women on screen. Additionally, she argues that this objectification is rooted in patriarchal power structures and reinforces gender stereotypes that maintain the oppression of women in society. Similarly, in contemporary music, women are often portrayed in music videos as objects of male desire, performing for the pleasure of the “male gaze.” This portrayal of women is also present in other forms of performance and the media, such as film, television, and advertising. However, more feminist artists use their music, visuals, and performances to subvert this gaze and offer alternative representations of femininity. For example, in Beyoncé's music video “Formation,” the artist offers a powerful critique of the objectification of Black women in mainstream society. The video features Beyoncé and other Black women dressed in clothing that celebrates Black culture, such as braids and afros. This

image represents and celebrates Black beauty in a way that challenges the dominant cultural norms that often exclude Black people. Additionally, she portrays diverse representations of women in her music videos and performances, including various body types and skin tones, to challenge the exclusionary beauty standards often promoted in the media.

Furthermore, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze highlights the importance of representation in the media and the need for more diverse representation behind the camera. In a time where more women and marginalized groups are given opportunities to shape the media, the male gaze can be challenged and subverted, leading to more empowering representations of women, something more feminist artists are using in their music and visuals to change the way women are portrayed and perceived in society. Beyoncé is a prime example of a feminist artist who uses her music and visuals to subvert the male gaze. The artist focuses on empowerment, diversity, and inclusivity messages and consciously takes action to ensure her voice is heard.

Looking at how the role of women in popular music has evolved over the years, I came across "Rock and Sexuality" by Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie. The authors highlight women's objectification in the music industry and how rock music has exploited women by associating it with masculine ideas and male power. This connection has also contributed to the mistreatment of women in the music industry and reinforced traditional roles that place women in objectified positions of male desire.

Furthermore, Valerie Walkerdine offers an interesting approach in her article "Femininity as Performance," where she argues that the concept of femininity is created through social and cultural practices rather than being bound to gender. She indicates that femininity is a performative act where individuals learn and perform gendered behaviors that are related to their sex. Additionally, she explores how children are socialized into

performing femininity through toys, clothes, and activities supporting gender stereotypes. For instance, girls are often given dolls and play kitchen, while boys are given action figures, dinosaurs, and cars. These toys are often gender-stereotyped, a way of reinforcing the idea that certain interests or behaviors are only appropriate for one gender. Similar to Laura Mulvey's argument that women in film are often portrayed as objects, and their appearance is the focus of the cameras and male's gaze, women in music have also faced objectification and the male gaze. This objectification can often be seen in music videos, where women are often portrayed as sexual objects and their appearance, which is mainly prioritized over their talents. This "to-be-looked-at-ness" also reinforces traditional gender roles and supports the idea that women exist for male pleasure. Both Mulvey's and Walkerdine's articles highlight the constructed nature of femininity and how it has shaped our society's cultural practices and norms. While Mulvey's approach focuses on women in film, Walkerdine extends to areas of social life, such as education and language.

Regarding gender, popular music has been heavily characterized by the objectification and sexualization of women, especially in genres such as hip-hop and R&B. The article "Introduction: Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music" by Janell Hobson and R. Dianne Bartlow start off by exploring the importance of the role women have played in the development of hip-hop, from MC Lyte and Queen Latifah to contemporary artists such as Missy Elliott and Cardi B. Furthermore, the authors argue that women's existence in hip-hop has often been defined by their physical appearance and sexuality. According to Hobson and Bartlow, this hyper sexualization of female artists has become a defining characteristic of hip-hop culture. Female artists are often forced to conform to restricting beauty standards that focus more on their physical appearance than musical talent. In addition, the article states that the prevalent presence of sexist lyrics in hip-hop portrays women as objects to be used for male pleasure.

bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins introduce us to a range of Black feminists and their perspectives on Black Feminism and highlight the need for an intersectional approach, especially regarding the representation of Black women in the music industry. Furthermore, Black Feminism has opened up a platform for agency and empowerment as a result of the challenges encountered by Black women in the music industry. Their work allows us to understand how Black women from diverse backgrounds vigorously participate in Black feminist practices. When examining the representation of Black women in popular music, it is essential to include the historical and cultural context that has shaped their experiences and also the progress they have made toward recognition and visibility in the music industry.

To provide context for the later discussion on Black feminism, it is essential to discuss why Beyoncé is a fitting example of a cultural icon who has used her platform to promote Black feminism.



## **Beyoncé - The cultural Icon**

Beyoncé Knowles is a highly influential cultural icon who has used her platform to address and promote social and political issues, especially those related to Black Feminism. Throughout her career, but especially over the past few years, with the release of her self-titled album *Beyoncé* and the album *Lemonade* in 2016, the artist has shown a deep engagement in empowering Black women through her music, performances, and public performances, as well as addressing issues of race and gender. Additionally, she has used her influence to draw attention to issues such as police brutality, gender equality, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

With 32 Grammys to her name, more than any other artist in the history of the Grammys (*CNN, 2023*), and a Billboard Hot 100 #1 single in four different decades (*Beyoncé's 'Break My Soul' Hits No. 1 on Billboard Hot 100 – Billboard*) - Beyoncé is a musician. Beyoncé is an artist - Shooting the “APESHIT” music video together with her husband Jay-Z in front of historical paintings such as The Mona Lisa at The Louvre (Ruiz), as well as collecting and being inspired by iconic artists ranging from Jean-Michel Basquiat to Laurie Simmons (Lang). Beyoncé is a fashionista - A CFDA fashion icon award winner and owner of the Adidas-backed athleisure brand “Blue Ivy Park” (Andrews). Beyoncé is a cultural phenomenon - Performing at both Obama’s first and second inauguration, delivering a black panther-inspired “Formation” half-time show at the Super Bowl, and being the first black woman to headline the famed Coachella music festival (Grady).

Beyoncé fits into the discourse of Black Feminism as a leading figure in the entertainment industry who uses her platform to promote the ideals and values of Black Feminism. She has been highly known to use her music and public image to address social and political issues affecting Black women, such as gender inequality, sexual empowerment, and body image. This enabled her to be placed alongside other prominent Black feminists

such as bell hooks, Audre Lord, and Angela Davis, who also used their voices to speak out about the experiences of Black women and advocate for social change. What sets Beyoncé apart from other figures is her unique approach to Black Feminism. Unlike traditional Black Feminist thinkers, she uses her music and public image to promote a more celebratory view of Black femininity. She emphasizes the beauty, strength, and power of Black women rather than just focusing on the challenges and obstacles they face. This approach is essential because it allows Black women to see themselves as powerful and capable rather than just victims of oppression.

Furthermore, Beyoncé also uses her influence to push for more inclusive and intersectional approaches to Black Feminism. She often addresses and recognizes that Black women's experiences are shaped by multiple factors such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. This approach recognizes the intersection of different identities and experiences. It allows for a deeper understanding of the experiences of Black women, as well as a more effective strategy for promoting social change. Self-determination and empowerment are additional themes that Beyoncé includes in her music, as well as collective action, where Beyoncé emphasizes the importance of coalition building in the struggle for social justice, as well as decolonization, which expresses the way Black women are viewed and treated as a result of supremacy and lastly, anti-capitalism, which tends to perpetuate the oppression of Black women.

Beyoncé's unique approach to Black Feminism makes her an influential figure in the discourse. By using her vast platform to promote a more celebratory and joyous viewpoint of Black femininity, she inspires and empowers Black women while also pushing for more intersectional approaches to Black Feminism. Her grasp of feminist principles and recognition of Black culture and history have shaped her into a powerful voice for Black feminist thought.

As a Black woman in the music industry, Beyoncé has faced obstacles and discrimination herself. For instance, in an interview with *Harper's Bazaar*, just before her 40th birthday, Beyoncé opens up about her experiences competing in dance and singing competitions when she was only seven. She states, "I was often the only Black girl, and it was then that I started to realize I had to dance and sing twice as hard." The artist also opens up about a time when she was 19 years old, and people criticized her for putting on weight. Subsequently, she wrote the song "Bootylicious," a song that celebrates the beautiful bodies of Black women (*Harper's Bazaar*, 2021). Unfortunately, Beyoncé is not the only Black female artist who faces limitations and oppression within the music industry.

A survey by The Black Lives in Music Association, which was released in 2021 with a focus on the music scene in the United Kingdom, reported on the experiences of Black music producers and industry professionals in the UK market. The survey, which received a total of 1,718 responses, revealed that systemic racism is prevalent within the workplace culture and the industry's structure and remains the largest barrier for Black artists to progress in their careers. "86% of all Black music creators agree that there are barriers to progression. This number rises to 89% for Black women and 91% for Black creators who are disabled" (Black Lives in Music). Most significantly, the data highlights the discrimination and disadvantages Black music professionals and Black females face compared to their white counterparts. "Black women made £1,026 per month compared to white women who earned £1,282 pre-covid - a difference of almost 25%" (Black Lives in Music). The *Black Lives in Music* survey highlights interesting outcomes about the intersection of race, gender, and age. Furthermore, it explores how a person's "characteristics and identities combine to create their unique experiences of discrimination." Reportedly, 80% of Black women in the music industry have faced discrimination based on their race, 34% because of their gender, 24% due to their age, and 22% on the basis of their class or socio-economic background (Black Lives in Music).

The Black Lives in Music report demonstrates the systemic issues of discrimination and inequality in the music industry, particularly among Black women. This strengthens the need for Beyoncé's advocacy and representation and the way she continually utilizes her influence and art to address the intersectionality of race and gender and strengthen the voices and agency of marginalized communities in society.

Furthermore, Beyoncé's performances are often powerful and empowering, representing forms of resistance against a white patriarchal society that seems to restrict Black women. For instance, at Super Bowl 50 in 2016, Beyoncé performed her song "Formation," which was seen as a bold political statement and a form of resistance against a white patriarchal society and a reference to the Black Lives Matter movement (Tinsley and O'Neill). Also, she often includes traditional African and Black culture in her performances, challenging the mainstream representation of Black women. As mentioned earlier, historically, the representation of Black women in popular culture has been largely limited, perpetuating negative and stereotypical images of Black women. By including traditional African and Black culture, Beyoncé is able to present a more complex, diverse and inclusive view of Black women. Beyoncé's performance at the Coachella Festival in 2018, seen as a celebration and tribute to Black culture and the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), was a powerful representation of Black pride and resilience (Grady). Beyoncé's performances not only challenge the mainstream representations of Black women but also highlight the importance of this kind of representation. In a time where Black girls lack self-esteem and confidence and seemingly face limited societal opportunities, it remains a persistent and complicated issue.

Past research has proven that societal pressures such as racial stereotypes, economic disadvantage, and the lack of representation can add to this problem. In "A Threat in the Air: How stereotypes shape intellectual identity and Performance" by Claude M. Steele, the

theory of domain identification highlights the unique challenges female African Americans face due to intersecting factors of economic disadvantage and societal expectations regarding gender roles. According to this theory, these factors can create significant pressure for female African Americans, interfering with their ability to pursue education and careers in respected fields. Furthermore, Steele explains how young black girls may also face additional obstacles of stereotype vulnerability, the fear that their actions or other people's judgments will uphold discriminatory stereotypes, further impacting their self-esteem and confidence. This problem affects individuals negatively and maintains the systemic barriers that prevent young black girls from reaching their full potential.

In addition, the study by Tamara R. Buckley and Robert T. Carter explores the relationship between Black adolescent girls' gender roles, racial identity, and self-esteem. The study suggests that gender role expression and racial identity may explain the higher level of self-esteem among Black girls. In addition, the study found that Black adolescent girls who possess both masculine and feminine characteristics, known as androgynous, reported higher levels of self-esteem and that those individuals have a stronger sense of internalization of their Black racial identity, meaning that their Black identity and culture play a significant role in shaping their self-esteem and self-worth (Buckley and Carter).

Beyoncé matters as a voice for Black Feminist thought because her music and public appearances demonstrate themes of self-love, self-empowerment, and the importance of representation for Black women. For instance, her song "Formation" expresses the importance of Black women's bodies and how they should be celebrated and empowered. In "Formation's" music video, she can be seen wearing statement-making outfits and embracing traditional African American beauty, with voluminous and big hair and colorful, bright colors. This representation states the importance of self-love and acceptance and for black women to celebrate their unique physical characteristics and own beauty.

This thesis aims to explore how Beyoncé uses her platform and public image to address issues such as race, gender, and social injustice and how her art contributes to the discourse of Black feminist thought and intersectionality. To gain a deeper understanding of the social and political context in which Beyoncé's work exists, it is essential to highlight the historical foundations of Black feminist thought. By doing so, my thesis will emphasize the empowerment and agency Black feminism delivers and how Beyoncé's art contributes to this meaningful movement.

### **The Historical Foundations of Black Feminism**

A Feminist: "A person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes" (*Beyoncé – \*\*\*Flawless Lyrics / Genius Lyrics*).

Feminism as a movement has evolved with different waves and perspectives. The first wave of feminism in America emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and focused on securing women's right to vote and political representation. Feminist activism began with the Seneca Falls convention in 1848, a meeting that brought together 300 individuals, including men and women, to advocate for the termination of all forms of discrimination based on gender (Sanders). The women's suffrage movement in the United States was primarily led by white, middle-class women and was limited in scope in terms of addressing the needs and concerns of diverse groups of women. However, it was still a significant part of the larger movement for women's rights and equality. Women began to address and advocate for socially equal rights to white men, including the right to education, to vote, and the right to own property, as well as being legally recognized as autonomous subjects from their husbands rather than being portrayed as simply property. Important figures, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, organized rallies and boycotts to demand suffrage for

women. They advocated for women's rights and other civil liberties, such as repealing slavery (National Union of Healthcare Workers).

While in the 1920s, the 19th Amendment, granting women the right to vote, was accepted, it is essential to note that the first wave of feminism primarily focused on the rights of white, middle-class women (National Archives). Black and working-class women were often excluded from the movement and struggled to find their voice in society. Additionally, many white suffragettes supported racist policies and did not make any efforts to acknowledge the issues and rights of Black women. It was not until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s that Black Feminists began to organize their own movements. This movement marked a significant turning point for Black people in the United States, bringing attention to the discrimination and injustices happening to Black Americans. During this movement, Black feminism emerged and paved the way for the understanding of Black women's experiences (National Park Service).

The second wave of feminism emerged in the 1960s to 1970s and focused on issues such as reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and discrimination in the workplace. While the second wave was led mainly by white, middle-class women, it did mark a significant shift in feminist discourse and activism. The history of Black Feminism has a profound history dating back over a century ago, with notable works by Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells. However, the movement gained formal recognition in the 1970s, when second-wave black feminists broke away from the mainstream second-wave feminist movement (Collins, 1996). This separation was announced in the Combahee River Collective in 1977, which marks a turning point in the history of Black Feminism. This statement provided a detailed summary of their beliefs, which included the challenges in uniting Black Feminists, their concerns, and the origins of contemporary Black Feminism. The Combahee River Collective statement states, "We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of

the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.” This understanding of the interconnection of systems of oppression is fundamental to Black feminist thought. In addition, the authors note that “even our Black women’s style of talking, testifying in Black language about what we have experienced, has a resonance that is both cultural and political” (Anders). This quote emphasizes the importance of using Black women’s experiences to motivate activism as a fundamental part of Black Feminism. The Collective Statement also presents a crucial aspect by calling out white feminists and their incapacity to address sexism and racism in the United States. Their dissatisfaction with their white female counterparts is clearly expressed when they observe how “we are constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires, among other things, that they have more than a superficial comprehension of race, color, and Black history and culture” (Anders). The lack of intersectional approaches within the second wave of feminism was exclusionary towards feminists of color. This motivated them to voice their demands and issues, which were suppressed within the mainstream movement.

Additionally, the statement recognizes the mistreatment of Black women by men of color and their opposition to Black Feminism. The authors express widespread accusations that Black Feminism creates divisions within the Black struggle. However, these accusations should not discourage the advancement of the Black Feminist movement (Anders). The critiques of white women’s unwillingness to acknowledge racism in the mainstream feminist movement and the failure to address sexism have been repeatedly expressed over time within Black Feminism, and they are also evident in the present day in hip-hop feminism (Springer). The ability to recognize and address the complex way Black women face discrimination and oppression demonstrates an intersectional approach that was not yet discovered. The authors state, “We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of



the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy.” The Combahee River Collective’s statement, which emphasized this perspective of intersectionality, was crucial in shaping the beliefs of many Black feminist activists and remains a foundational work in the history of Black Feminism.

Some important key figures during this time of movement included Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lord, Alice Walker, and Barbara Smith, who began to critique how mainstream feminism failed to address the intersectional experiences of Black women and whose work on intersectionality had a lasting impact on the feminist discourse. It is important to note that the discourse around intersectionality and the representation of Black women has not stopped evolving. Nowadays, the entertainment and music industry has become a powerful platform to promote and widen these conversations to a bigger audience. Entertainers such as Beyoncé have emerged as prominent figures in the movement toward celebrating and empowering Black women. Kimberlé Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality” in 1989 and stressed the importance of acknowledging the overlapping and intersecting oppression that individuals face. This phenomenon is crucial in understanding the experiences of those who stand at the crossroads of multiple exclusions (Kimberlé Crenshaw: *The Urgency of Intersectionality* | TED Talk).

The emergence of Womanism as a theory occurred during the third wave of feminism between the 1990s to early 2000s. This Womanist movement is closely related to the Black Feminist movement since both aim to end oppression and gained popularity in the 1970s to 1980s when author Alice Walker coined the term. In Walker’s book of poems, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens*, she explains the term as the following,

“It was to give us a tool to use, as feminist women of color, in times like these. These are the moments we can see clearly, and must honor devotedly, our singular path as

women of color in the United States. We are not white women, and this truth has been ground into us for centuries, often in brutal ways” (Walker 187).

The author criticizes the mainstream feminist movement for not respecting Black women's experiences and not including them. This outcome led Black women to raise their voices and opinions and forced them to create their own movements. During earlier waves of feminism, the term was often met with hesitation among African American women as it tended to blur the lines between issues of race and sexism. Layli Philips expresses that,

“Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in African American women and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment and nature and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.”

Overall, the third wave of feminism is characterized by a broader focus on addressing all forms of oppression, including race, gender, and class. While it shares similarities with other movements, such as feminism and the principles of Black Feminist Thought, it seeks to tackle oppression of equal importance rather than focusing solely on the issue of sexism (Cole and Guy-Sheftall). Philips has argued that while Womanism, Black Feminism, and Feminism all deal with the concept of womanhood, they are distinct movements with different roots, experiences, and priorities.

## **Black Feminism**

Patricia Hill Collins expresses that the Womanist movement signifies the beginning and the separation from the mainstream white feminist movement. Women of color felt that their rights as women were being ignored due to their race, which led to long-term marginalization. In *What's In A Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond*, Collins defines feminism as “the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities - intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic” (1996,12). There have been several Black Feminists, who have expressed critique towards the feminist movement of their time, such as Audre Lord, who states, “by and large within the women’s movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist” (1984, 2007,109). Lorde highlights the limitations of the mainstream feminist movement, particularly during the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. Furthermore, she critiques how white women within the movement prioritize their experiences as women over the unique experiences of Black women, LGBTQ+ women, working-class women, and older women. The fact that this movement focuses on single experiences of womanhood obliterates the diverse ways in which different forms of oppression intersect and impact women’s lives.

In Collins's book *Black Feminist Thought*, she conveys that Black Feminist theory can take a different path “from standard academic theory—it can take the form of poetry, music, essays, and the like” (Collins 32). This quote clearly states that Black Feminist theory is not limited to traditional academic forms, such as scholarly essays or articles. This highlights the diversity of Black Feminist thought and how it reflects the unique ways Black women have been able to express themselves and bring attention to their struggles and issues. In addition,

Black Feminist thought allows for easy accessibility outside of academia, regardless of race or class, allowing them to spread their beliefs and ideas to a larger audience. Audre Lord adds,

“Of all the art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper...as we reclaim our literature, poetry has been the major voice of poor, working class, and Colored women...When we speak of a broadly based women’s culture, we need to be aware of the effect of class and economic differences on the supplies available for producing art” (1984, 2007, 109).

This quote highlights the importance and accessibility of poetry as a medium for expressing Black Feminist thought. Lorde comments that, for example, poetry is an art form that requires minimal effort to produce and can be enjoyed all over the world. She then argues that it is crucial to recognize this kind of media's impact and how it allows marginalized people from different backgrounds and classes to access this art form, despite not having access to resources or education. Collins adds, "Social theories emerging from and/or on behalf of U.S. Black women and other historically oppressed groups aim to find ways to escape from, survive in, and/or oppose prevailing social and economic injustice” (Collins 32). The author defines Black Feminist thought further, explaining how the core of this theory lies in acknowledging that these diverse forms of oppression are interconnected and cannot be split from one another. Additionally, Black Feminism is a form of resistance against multiple forms of oppression within the Black community.

“Intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Collins 40).

Again, Collins emphasizes that multiple forms of oppression and discrimination intersect with each other rather than existing isolated. By understanding and recognizing these different forms of oppression, we can better address and fight systemic injustices. Beyoncé's music, public image, and activism align with the beliefs and ideas of Black Feminist thought. The artist's music often addresses how race, gender, and class oppression intersect with the lives of Black women. In Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*, the artist touches on various topics, including self-love and Black Feminism. One specific example that portrays the importance of intersectionality in her art is in her song "Sorry," where she addresses stereotypes and preconceptions that Black women face. In the song, she sings, "I ain't sorry, I ain't sorry/ I ain't sorry, nigga, nah," reclaiming her agency as a Black woman. The coexisting visual components are a diverse group of Black women, including Serena Williams and the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, holding pictures of their sons who were killed due to systemic racism (BeyoncéVEVO, 2016). By highlighting and including these women, she demonstrates the intersection of race, gender, and motherhood, shedding light on the unique experiences of Black women and the multiple forms of oppression. Beyoncé brings attention to these matters by featuring these women and images in her art, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and intersectional approach to the feminist movement.

Beyoncé's approach also aligns with the idea of looking beyond traditional institutions, instead focusing on marginalized groups. Collins adds that a key perspective of Black Feminist thought "involves searching for its expression in alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals" (Collins 2022,37). The artist includes the experiences of women who may not be typically involved in the mainstream feminist discourse. However, by doing so, she expands and advocates for a more inclusive perspective of Black women's oppression in society. Additionally, Collins recognizes that "all U.S. Black women who somehow contribute to Black feminist thought as

critical social theory are deemed to be “intellectuals” (Collins 2022, 37). This quote is another inclusive example of the perspective that the definition of “intellectual” is not limited to those who have received a formal education, instead, it welcomes anyone who contributes to Black Feminist thought as “critical social theory.” This point of view includes people from different backgrounds and occupations, for instance, musicians and other performative artists.

Another important theme of Black Feminist theory is empowerment. Collins comments that women’s activism “reflects a belief that teaching people how to be self-reliant fosters more empowerment than teaching them how to follow” (Collins 2022, 229).

Additionally, “Heroines from the 1950s to the present represent a significant shift toward self-knowledge as a sphere of freedom” (Collins 2022, 136). The quotes highlight that being self-reliant, meaning being able to take care of oneself without having to depend on any outside factors, is way more important than teaching others how to follow—further saying that the individual empowerment of one Black woman will lead to the empowerment of a group of Black women. This way, marginalized groups can break free from oppression and stereotypes and ultimately achieve liberation. Self-determination, self-reliance, and empowerment are additional themes that Beyoncé includes in her art. For example, in her song “Run The World (Girls),” she promotes and encourages women to take control of their lives and career and that their success should not depend on their male counterparts.

Similarly, in her song “Sorry,” she sings,

“Middle fingers up, put them hands high/  
Wave it in his face, tell him, boy, bye, tell,  
him, boy, bye.”

An additional noteworthy aspect that explains why Beyoncé fits into this discourse is when Collins states that “white-male-controlled social institutions led African American women to use music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behavior as important

locations for constructing a Black feminist consciousness” (Collins 2022, 258). The historical exclusion and lack of opportunities by white institutions forced Black women to find their own ways and form their own communities to express themselves and exchange their thoughts and knowledge. Understanding what kinds of knowledge are considered valid and accurate is crucial to understand how knowledge is constructed. In Collins's book, she adds, “Epistemology constitutes an overarching theory of knowledge” (Collins 2022, 259). Also, “it investigates the standards used to assess knowledge or why we believe what we believe to be true...Epistemology points to the ways in which power relations shape who is believed and why” (Collins 2022, 259). This highlights how societal power dynamics very much influence knowledge and can reinforce inequalities rather than just being factual and neutral. Black women must move away from the power structure, which seems to silence and limit them, and must be at the center of their own knowledge production. Collins aims for one to understand that Black women's lived experiences are valid perspectives for Black Feminist epistemology, which goes against the traditional research approach. In the past decade, Black women have used their lived experiences and music as a space for scholarly discussions. This allows artists such as Beyoncé to qualify as Black Feminist intellectuals by highlighting her lived experiences in her art.

## **Hip-Hop Feminism**

Hip-hop as a genre marks an essential area for the intersection of gender, race, and class and is considered the most recent spectrum of Black feminist theory. For example, in the article “The Stage Hip-Hop Feminism Built,” Aisha Durham, Brittany C. Cooper, and Susana M. Morris argue that hip-hop feminism has created a space for new directions within the feminist movement, allowing it to challenge and transform traditional conceptions of feminism. Furthermore, the authors highlight the importance of centering the voices and experiences of Black women in the feminist movement and how hip-hop feminism created a platform for this. Additionally, they “consider how the creative, intellectual work of hip hop feminism invites new questions about representation, provides additional insights about embodied experience, and offers alternative models for critical engagement” (Durham et al. 722). Hip-hop feminism is considered the latest wave and development of Black feminist theory and contemporary culture and is known to be a continuation of this practice. Durham, Cooper, and Morris define hip-hop feminism as “a generationally specific articulation of feminist consciousness, epistemology, and politics rooted in the pioneering work of multiple generations of black feminists based in the United States and elsewhere in the diaspora but focused on questions and issues that grow out of the aesthetic and political prerogatives of hip hop culture” (Durham et al. 723). This shows how important it is to highlight hip-hop feminism as its own product and not just as an extension of previous forms of feminism. Additionally, Durham, Cooper, and Morris explore how “hip-hop feminists insist on living with contradictions because failure to do so relegates feminism to an academic project that is not politically sustainable beyond the ivory tower” (Durham et al. 723). “Living with contradictions” is essential to hip-hop feminists, believing in embracing contradictions in their beliefs and actions rather than trying to solve them. Trying to eliminate all contradictions would lead to making feminism too stringent and academic and preventing it



from being effective in making fundamental political changes. Furthermore, the term “ivory tower” refers to academia and simply suggests that if feminism is limited to theoretical discussions in academic settings, it will not substantially impact societal and political issues. Durham, Cooper, and Morris’ approach to contradictions refer to how they exist among popular music and artists. The authors argue that artists can empower and express knowledge but may reinforce patriarchal and capitalist ideologies simultaneously. Hip-Hop feminists appear to be prepared to confront the problematic aspects of an artist’s work while still acknowledging their contribution to challenging patriarchal principles. In “The Third Wave Black Feminism?” Kimberly Springer states, “the recuperation of the self in a racist and sexist society is a political enterprise and a Black feminist one that deprioritizes generational differences in the interest of historical activist continuity” (Springer 1061). Hip-Hop feminism is unique because it created its own space by addressing the intersection of race, gender, class, as well as sexuality for women of color. Furthermore, it allows for feminist activism to be more accessible to those outside of academia, making it a more inclusive and diverse movement.

### **What scholars say about Beyoncé**

The persona and image of Beyoncé have triggered an ongoing debate within the feminist movement, oftentimes marked by disagreement and inconsistencies. While some scholars criticize her brand of feminism as superficial and self-serving, others applaud her for challenging traditional notions of femininity and empowering women, particularly Black women, and women of color. Beyoncé’s engagement with feminism began to rise with the release of her self-titled album *Beyoncé* in 2013, which displayed her shameless embrace of her sexuality. However, it is important to carefully analyze how she presents herself and whether it may unintentionally support the expectations set by the standards of capitalist

patriarchy while also acknowledging the positive impact she has had on empowering women. For example, in the song “Partition,” the music video features elements such as pole dancing and revealing outfits, raising questions about whether her expressions and performances unintentionally cater to the male gaze. Bell hooks critiques Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* for preserving stereotypical frameworks of womanhood. I argue that Beyoncé is not merely accepting these roles, but rather using them to raise awareness and challenge societal norms. By incorporating elements of traditional gender roles in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé presents a complex exploration of womanhood. She chooses to confront and subvert these frameworks urging her listeners to question and examine societal expectations placed upon women.

Despite this criticism, Beyoncé’s brand of feminism has also gained support from scholars who argue that she provides a platform highlighting the empowerment of Black women. By proudly embracing and presenting her curvy body and Black features, she is able to challenge mainstream beauty standards and provide a sense of freedom to those who have been marginalized. Nonetheless, some scholars question the authenticity and the long-term impact of Beyoncé’s activism, implying that her actions are motivated by business rather than her support of social change. They argue that Beyoncé could have a greater impact if she used her platform to address and challenge the existing barriers in the music industry, leading to long-lasting and meaningful change. The debates surrounding Beyoncé’s feminism highlight the complexities of her image and messages, as well as the complexities and debates within feminism. From my perspective, Beyoncé’s art and activism have the potential to inspire and empower women, serving as a role model for resilience, self-definition, and empowerment. By challenging mainstream beauty standards, embracing her sexuality, and advocating for social justice, she creates a platform for marginalized voices and provokes conversations around gender equality. While recognizing the ongoing debates surrounding

Beyoncé's image, it is time to highlight the cultural importance of Beyoncé's contributions to feminism and the ways she has unlocked new possibilities for women in the entertainment industry. In a world where women in the entertainment industry have faced challenges and gender inequality, Beyoncé's commitment to feminism and her determination to challenge stereotypes have created new possibilities and opportunities within the industry. It is essential to recognize that artists such as Beyoncé have the agency to shape their own narratives, as well as utilizing stereotypes and incorporating them within their art to confront and transform these frameworks. As a businesswoman, a philanthropist, and a feminist, Beyoncé has shown women that they can be powerful leaders, take on sexism, and be feminized.

In recent years, the growing body of literature regarding Beyoncé has taken on many aspects, exploring diverse approaches and themes within her music, performances, and image. As I continue with my thesis, I am mindful of the significant contributions made by researchers and academics, who have depicted the various representations of Beyoncé and her work. A collective of essays that examine the cultural impact and significance of Beyoncé can be found in *The Beyoncé Effect. Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism*, edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek. The essays depict the complexities of Beyoncé's influence on contemporary culture and her role as an influential figure within the entertainment industry. Moreover, the book highlights how Beyoncé's art is worth discussing in terms of her brand feminism, her brand, use of sexuality, and the connection between race, gender, and class found both in her persona and art. For instance, in the article "Beyoncé as Aggressive Black Femme and Informed Black Female Subject," Anne M. Mitchel utilizes queer identity theory to examine Beyoncé's public persona and argues that the queer identities of femininity are intertwined with the image of Black female bodies within popular culture. Mitchel suggests that the powerful representation of femininity by Beyoncé challenges the conventional portrayal of how women should behave or look, which aligns with the belief that gender can

be more flexible and diverse and is not strictly binary. In “Beyoncé and Blue: Motherhood and the Binds of Racialized Sexism,” Sonita R. Moss discusses the complex opinions society has and forces on Black women. This article is inspired by an online petition in 2014 which demanded that Beyoncé should take better care of her daughter’s hair and highlights the way Black women and girls are limited by these types of racialized sexism.

Moreover, *Beyoncé in the World. Making Meaning with Queen Bey in Troubled Times* by Christina Baade and Kristin McGee is another scholarly essay collection that examines Beyoncé’s art and reception from different perspectives of critical race studies, gender and women’s studies, as well as queer and cultural studies. For example, “From Coloring to Conjuring: Tracing the Dust in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*,” Cienna Davis examines *Lemonade* and *Daughters of the Dust* as important Black feminist projects and examines through the history of colorism Beyoncé’s performance of race, gender and sexuality. Riché Richardson’s article “Beyoncé South and a “Formation” Nation” is based on the concept of a new Southern study in the United States as introduced by Houston A. Baker Jr. and Dana D. Nelson. The study explores how gender, race and sexuality affect the perception of the way people are seen in the South. Richardson explores how Beyoncé fits into this and how her art and image are influenced by this matter. The author also includes different examples of popular culture such as Farah Fawcett and her iconic blonde hair and Daisy Duke from the TV series *Dukes of Hazzard*. Furthermore, the article highlights the Southern aesthetics that are visible within Beyoncé’s career but are often overlooked in academics’ discourse. Moreover, in the article “At the Digital Cross(roads) with Beyoncé: Gospel Covers That Remix the Risqué into the Religious,” Brigitta J. Johnson explores the impact that Beyoncé’s music has on gospel music artists’, focusing on her songs “Drunk in Love” and “Partition,” as well as offers insight about the history of the gospel music genre. In the next contribution “The Performative Negotiations of Beyoncé in Brazilian Bodies and the Construction of the Pop Diva in

Ludmilla's Funk Carioca and Gaby Amarantos's Tecnobrega," Simone Pereira de Sá and Thiago Soares argue that Brazilian artists such as Ludmilla and Gaby Amarantos represent the idea of embracing diverse cultural influences, and aesthetics. The article examines diverse responses to Beyoncé's music and visual representation, ultimately hoping for an understanding of the large range of responses and interpretations of her art. Lastly, in "Musical Form in Beyoncé's Protest Music," Annelot Prins and Taylor Myers argue that the structure of Beyoncé's protest songs differs from her usual song structure. The authors state "The structural decisions made on *Lemonade*, as well as *Beyoncé*, indicate that political songs have political forms, urging the audience to listen to their message, while classically novel yet predictable songs represent a more digestible entertainment format" (292). This argument highlights Beyoncé's skill in aligning her musical form with the lyrical messages.

As discussed, the many aspects of Beyoncé's literature have grown into a wide range of perspectives and themes. This thesis will look deeper into examining Beyoncé's unique approach to sisterhood, female empowerment, and intersectionality and the way her messages are incorporated into her art. A comprehensive analysis of her songs and performances will demonstrate how Beyoncé's art advocates for unity, female empowerment, particularly Black women, and encourages sisterhood and support. The following section will explore a range of perspectives on Beyoncé's image, highlighting both positive and negative opinions that have emerged in discussions surrounding her feminist persona.

A well-known third-wave feminist is Jessica Valenti. She welcomes the idea of a pro-sex framework and the freedom of women's sexual liberation, but it is critical to comprehend that still today, our concepts of what is considered sexually attractive are still affected by and played for the pleasure of capitalist patriarchy. For instance, in Beyoncé's music video for her song "Partition," which was part of her self-titled album *Beyoncé* in 2014, she embraces and proclaims her sexuality but still utilizes images such as pole dancing and revealing outfits that

are created to please men. Beyoncé's music and performances have been celebrated for her empowering messages; however, some Black feminists have also criticized the artist for representing stereotypical ideas of femininity that are often based on the standards of the capitalist patriarchal society. For example, regarding Beyoncé's album *Lemonade*, bell hooks makes an introductory statement in her article "Moving Beyond Pain" about the relationship between men and women as a continuing theme in Beyoncé's album. She argues that Beyoncé's representation of Black women in her visual album *Lemonade* idealizes a society of gendered contradiction; it certainly does not determine black women's freedom. Furthermore, she states that once Black women resist "patriarchal romanticization" (hooks) in overpowered relations, not only Black women but all women will be able to free themselves from the role of the victim. On one side, bell hooks appreciates Beyoncé's representation of Black women in her album. Yet, on the other, she criticizes that most of the women in her album are portrayed as a common stereotypical framework and still display women as the victims. Additionally, bell hooks criticizes Beyoncé's representation of the black female body; she adds, "Its purpose is to seduce, celebrate, and delight — to challenge the ongoing present-day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body" (hooks). The "contradiction" of asserting agency over one's body and embracing her feminist self while at the same time creating this perception of pleasuring men is a contradiction hip-hop feminists have to battle with. Hip-hop feminists do not think of themselves as the new wave of Black feminists, they instead seek to add to the work of Black feminist scholars, such as Collins and the Combahee River Collective.

Even though Beyoncé is known to be one of the most influential and popular living entertainers, I have come across several mixed opinions and contradictions regarding her image. In one of her girl-power anthems, the artist sings, "Who run the world? Girls!" while other songs express themes of heartbreak, infidelity, and anger towards her husband when she

sings, “Ring the alarm, I’ve been through this too long, but I be damned if I see another chick on your arm.” Some of Beyoncé’s listeners have not been fond of her empowerment messages because she remains married to her husband, Jay-Z, who publicly admitted that he was not always truthful to her throughout their relationship. Incorporating personal details about her personal life and experiences shows that even privileged Black women cannot escape the hardships within a relationship. Hip-hop critic and feminist Minna Salami expresses her disapproval of Jay-Z’s new album from 2017, “4:44,” stating, “The theme that particularly stands out is Jay-Z’s remorse for mistreating and cheating on “the baddest girl in the world” Beyoncé. Indeed, much of the album is a response to his wife’s hit album *Lemonade*, lauded as a “revolutionary work of black feminism.” But let’s be real here: the romantic melodrama played out in these two albums is neither revolutionary nor feminist, but instead rather old and tired” (Salami).

Ongoing debates surrounding Beyoncé’s persona and image, which are oftentimes marked by contradictions and inconsistencies, lead to questions arising about whether her choices are primarily driven by business motives aimed at generating significant attention and publicity. A particular concern that many scholars have expressed involves Beyoncé’s brand of feminism. In 2013, in an interview with *Vogue*, Beyoncé stated that she considered herself to be “a modern-day feminist” (Cubarrubia). Interestingly, the artist would later define herself more publicly with three key events that I believe intensified the discourse about Beyoncé within the feminist movement, including many Black feminist academics. Firstly, her surprise release of her self-titled visual album *Beyoncé* in 2013, secondly, her including of Chimamanda Adichie’s speech in her song “\*\*\*Flawless”, and lastly, her VMA performance in 2014, in front of a big neon white FEMINIST sign. In the article “Beyoncé Feminism and the Contestation of the black feminist body,” Nathalie Weidhase presents Annie Lennox's

critical reaction to Beyoncé's performance at the 2014 MTV Music Awards. Lennox argues the following,

“It’s tokenistic to me. [...] I see a lot of it as them taking the word hostage and using it to promote themselves, but I don’t think they necessarily represent wholeheartedly the depths of feminism – no, I don’t. I think for many it’s very convenient and it looks great and it looks radical, but I have some issues with it. Of course I do. I think it’s a cheap shot. [...] What can I tell you? Sex always sells” (Weidhase).

The current discourses that are critical of Beyonce's feminism are mainly led by white women such as Annie Lennox, who condemn it to be superficial and counterproductive to the movement. On the one hand, they criticize Beyonce's apparent use of the movement to capitalize on the hype in order to benefit her branding and marketing. On the other, she is criticized for her apparent hypersexuality and misuse of her body. It is clear that Beyoncé's activism challenges traditional feminism, which is why she has been marginalized into the sub-category of Hip-Hop feminism by some feminist leaders. The author emphasizes that Lennox's rejection of Beyoncé's feminism as a ‘feminist lite’ is based on the absence of intersectional thinking and that it could even be seen as an attack on her female body. “Beyoncé’s body does not contest her feminist status, but instead, her body contests the whiteness of mainstream feminism” (Weidhase). This article underlines how Beyonce is a controversial figure in this area and how present-day feminism is still primarily led and dominated by white women.

Moreover, regarding Beyoncé's persona, Kirstin Lieb debunks in her article “I’m Not Myself Lately The Erosion of the Beyoncé Brand” that Beyoncé's life and career in the music industry were also primarily influenced and dependent on the men in her life, such as her husband Jay-Z and her father. She does state that Beyoncé portrays this strong black woman



and supports and fights for women through her actions, songs, and performances. Nonetheless, Lieb argues that Beyoncé's activism is somewhat forced to be self-serving, convenient, and predictable because she is limited by specific industry, societal, and cultural barriers. Her actions could be more influential if she used her vast platform to create actual long-term change in the music industry. This article portrays ongoing criticism in relation to Beyoncé's actions and influence on feminism, being nothing more than a short-term solution. Barbara Read notes in her article "Britney, Beyoncé, and me – primary school girls' role models and constructions of the 'popular' girl," that Beyoncé challenges traditional femininity but fails to do so in a productive way. Read writes that the singer's portrayal of the movement represents the harmful side of feminism, claiming that Beyoncé's sexual performances are damaging to feminism, causing, for example, an increase in eating disorders and self-harm (Read 11), especially among her younger audience. Her appearance causes girls and women to be intimidated and doubt themselves as they strive to look the part i.e., to look like Beyoncé. Read does not see Beyoncé as a role model but as a manipulation that reflects the wrong ideal. Thus, for Read, her portrayal of femininity is damaging and anti-feministic. This article shines a light on some of the concerning outcomes of Beyoncé's influence on feminism.

On the other hand, during my literature review, I also came across predominantly supportive scholarly articles highlighting the importance and positive impact of Beyoncé's brand of feminism. The book, *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism*, includes multiple essays in support of Beyoncé's image. In regard to Beyoncé Knowles's femininity, Janell Hobson discusses in her article "Feminists Debate Beyoncé," the fact that in our current understanding of feminism, Black women like Beyoncé are still not represented as the ideal face of feminism. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that Beyoncé is one of the most influential women in popular culture today, referring to her performance at the VMA's where

the singer put on a show for the entire world in front of a monumental neon white "FEMINIST" sign. This iconic moment is widely considered a significant turning point within the feminist movement. Hobson explains how Beyoncé, by her example, presents other black women with the opportunity to showcase their sexuality and to portray themselves just the way they are while continuously supporting the work done by Black feminists such as Dorothy Pittmann Hughes. This article demonstrates the key role Beyoncé plays in regard to the feminist movement and how she arguably single handedly formed a new era of feminism (Hobson, 20-33). Similarly, Noel Siqi Duan discusses the acceptance of black female bodies in our communities. It is the deeply embedded postcolonial and racist mindset in modern-day society that makes it difficult for Black women to live up to the standards of female beauty. The author mentions that these thoughts are systematically ingrained in our sociocultural system. Even producers of entertainment content, such as industry-leading fashion magazines, are unaware of or seem to ignore the oppression of black female bodies. Duan describes how Beyoncé manages to create a unique space through her powerful influence and the manner of representation of her female body, which liberates the oppression of Black American womanhood (Duan, 64-79).

Furthermore, in the article "All That You Can't Leave Behind": Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe," Daphne A. Brooks argues that Beyoncé's feminine presentation gives black women a sense of freedom since black women have been stripped of this basic human right as well as of their femininity for many years. The discussion of Beyoncé's body is significant for the modern implications of the oppression of the Black female body. Beyoncé proudly displays her curvy body, and her beautiful black features, to inspire and empower other women of color. According to Brooks, Beyoncé uses her body to bridge equality for all Black women.

Interestingly, Aria S. Halliday and Nina E. Brown conducted an exciting study, asking Black college-aged women how the song “Feeling Myself” by Nicki Minaj and Beyoncé influenced their political behavior and their feeling of empowerment. The authors argue that the song gave birth to the trending movement of “#blackgirlmagic in an age of police brutality, anti-blackness, and misogyny” (Halliday, Brown). Halliday and Brown conclude by saying that many participants were disappointed by the unconcealed sexuality portrayed by Minaj and Beyoncé in the music video and that, contrastingly, famous black artists such as Alicia Keys and India Arie were, in their opinion, more pleasant representations of the Black female body. Nonetheless, the song still encouraged these college-aged Black women to feel empowered, confident, and free, essentially giving them the feeling of “Black Girl Magic” (Halliday, Brown). This article is an interesting observation of how songs such as “Feeling Myself” influence Black women in society. It gives them a “social, familial, and psychological glue” (Halliday and Brown) to stick together in times when society dismantles Black women. This is a good example of Beyoncé as a global superstar bringing people together and “broadening the church” of Feminism.

In addition, *Crunktastic*, Crunk Feminist Collective's platform, promotes discussions and blog posts regarding relevant topics. In the article “Oh Bell, Beyoncé, and Bullshit.” they review an article by bell hooks, who criticized Beyoncé for her feminist representation. bell hooks' comments became the center of a national debate when she publicly heavily criticized Beyoncé's sexuality, calling her an “anti-feminist” and a “terrorist to young girls.” In response, Co-founder of *Crunktastic*, Brittney Cooper, argued:

“She trots out the ‘what about the children argument’ as a way to police how Beyoncé styles and presents her body. Black women should be able to be publicly grown and sexy without suffering the accusation that our sexuality is harmful, especially to children.”

Cooper's article "5 Reasons I'm Here for Beyoncé, the Feminist" expresses her support for Beyoncé's feminist journey. She opposes the idea of academic feminism by saying: "Academic feminism ain't the only kid on the block. I'll take a feminist that knows how to treat her homegirls before one who can spit the finer points of a bell hooks to me all day erry-day." She argues that instead of focusing on despicable critique, society should accept self-identified brands such as Beyoncé as a valid portrayal of the feminist movement. With Beyoncé self-identifying as a feminist, she works towards justice for black women's identity. Cooper concludes by saying that all feminists could learn from Beyoncé since she creates her own identity in this world. In the form of a blog, *Crunktastic* is a unique addition to this annotated bibliography because the platform encourages its readers to focus on the broader picture of feminism from a more casual, conversational, and especially participatory standpoint.

Jamila A. Cupid and Nicole Files-Thompson, make an interesting point in their article "The Visual Album Beyoncé, Feminism and Digital Spaces", focusing on how digital spaces have opened a new era for the feminist movement. For example, Beyoncé utilized a digital strategy to generate mass hype and reach for the release of her visual album *Beyoncé*. The authors put forth that digital spaces give women worldwide the opportunity to access the internet to inform themselves, and they explain how Beyoncé uses this avenue strategically. Whereas women might have been disconnected or discouraged in the past, they can now learn, join, engage, and play a part in the ongoing growth of the feminist movement. Digital spaces enable Beyoncé to reach, connect with- and empower women on a global scale, creating and strengthening a platform for deeper and more meaningful discussions of what Feminism means and its relevance to young females of color.

After the release of the album *Lemonade*, which became one of the highest-selling records worldwide (Billboard, 2017), critics first began to comment on Beyoncé's political tone. *Lemonade* represented a departure from Beyoncé's previous solo projects, but not because she tackled subjects like women's liberation or advocated for female financial independence and prosperity. Instead, she chose to align herself with the highly publicized and timely issues surrounding racialized movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackGirlMagic, #ICantBreathe, and others that dominate contemporary media, politics, and cultural discussions. In response, her dedicated and passionate fan base, known as the Bey-Hive, passionately defended her talents and status as a globally acclaimed artist, actively pushing back against anyone who dared to question her.

Stephanie Li notes in her article "Introduction: Who is Beyoncé?", "Is her more pointed embrace of black cultural forms politically expedient in the age of Black Lives Matter or a reflection of the contemporary blueswoman she has always been?" (p.106). Celebrities and other well-known individuals play a significant role in shaping our perceptions of one another and serve as mirrors of the social roles that different groups hold. Artistic content created for mass consumption and widespread display is subject to evaluation and analysis as a means of communication, as it aids us in comprehending the intricacies of the world we inhabit. The different interpretations of Beyoncé are relevant, especially when thinking of how U.S. culture is overloaded with celebrity images.

## Conclusion

When I review the scene from Beyoncé's historic performance at the 2014 MTV VMAs, I see two versions of Beyoncé's image in the opening seconds of the performance. First, the daring and powerful superwomen-esque silhouette, pictured standing in front of the lit-up capital letter feminist sign. Second, the sexy and untouchable boss lady, leading a pack of bodaciously dressed female entertainers, shouting and gesturing at the crowd to "Bow down bitches." The performance leaves a lot of space for interpretation, which explains Beyoncé's controversial image in relation to feminism as well as the contradicting opinions explored throughout this literature review.

Beyoncé's standpoint is evident in the following quote stemming from Beyoncé's "Dear Class of 2020" virtual graduation video, which may significantly tighten the space for interpretation created through her performance.

"To the young women, our future leaders, know that you're about to make the world turn. I see you. You are everything the world needs. Make those power moves. Be excellent. And to the young kings, lean into your vulnerability and redefine masculinity. Lead with heart. There's so many different ways to be brilliant. I believe you and every human being is born with a masterful gift. Don't let the world make you feel that you have to look a certain way to be brilliant. And no you don't have to speak a certain way to be brilliant. But you do have to spread your gift around the planet in a way that is authentically you."

This quote clearly explains Beyoncé's point of view and objectives in relation to her feminist activism, which has been understood and supported by the majority of the literature reviewed above. I would conclude that Beyoncé Knowles is a feminist and that she is continuously making an effort to contribute to the cause. Nevertheless, some feminist

scholars, primarily white, criticize her for her apparent misuse and misrepresentation of the movement. Her powerful and authentic feminist image has undeniably created a new space in feminism in which Black women feel included, accepted, and represented. The “practical” (Weidhase) and the overt manner in which Beyoncé approaches feminism definitely include her expression of sexuality, which, when condemned by critics, should not take away from her intentions but highlight the racial, class, and gender differences that are still present in the realm of modern-day feminism.

Furthermore, the additional literature I reviewed highlights scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins, Lorde, Crenshaw, et al. essential contributions, promoting Black feminist thought, mainly concerning the intersections of race, gender, and class. As mentioned above, Beyoncé has emerged as a significant figure in using her platform to promote messages of empowerment and unity among Black women. Through her use of performative femininity, Beyoncé consciously subverts traditional standards of the male gaze and is able to reclaim agency over her own body and image. I believe that there is a need for more research on the intersection of Black feminist thought and popular culture, especially in relation to music and performance. By looking at various literature, I noticed that given the vast influence and platform, an artist such as Beyoncé has and her ability to shape cultural narratives and initiate social change, this gap is relevant to explore further.

Lastly, while scholars such as Laura Mulvey have studied how women’s bodies are often objectified in popular culture, I am confident that there remains a need to further explore the potential for resistance and subversion within this framework. Beyoncé’s art is a powerful example of how performative femininity can be utilized to challenge these hegemonic ideologies and continue to support and empower women. By continuing to build upon these insights, I will aim to further contribute to the knowledge of how Black feminist

thought can be supported through contemporary popular culture and how artists such as Beyoncé make a great example in promoting and shaping these dominant narratives.

## CHAPTER TWO: BEYONCÉ IS A FEMINIST

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter has emerged as one of the most influential artists of our time. Throughout her career, and especially within the last years, she has gained recognition not only for her musical talents but also for her outspoken feminist views and her devotion to social justice issues. Beyoncé's music and performances are deeply influenced by Black feminist thought, as voiced by Patricia Hill Collins and other Black Feminists. This chapter will explore how Beyoncé's career journey has created and contributed to her feminist identity and impact and how she uses her platform to promote Black feminist themes and ideas.

Beyoncé's songs largely encourage women to be confident and powerful and to embrace their sexual and professional autonomy. From songs such as “\*\*\*Flawless” and “Formation” to her iconic 2018 Coachella performance, the artist consistently highlights the experiences of Black women and celebrates their strength. Her latest album *Renaissance* debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 chart making her a solo artist with one of the biggest first-week sales of the year (Trust). Additionally, it is worth mentioning that Beyoncé's early career with Destiny's Child, also contributed significantly to her success with an impressive 60 million in sales (Kot). This highlights the artist's ability to clearly maintain her influence throughout her career. In the early stages of her career, Beyoncé's use of certain elements already showcased her agency. However, while it may not have been explicitly acknowledged, as her career progressed, she became progressively aware of the power and responsibility she had as such an influential artist. Beyoncé's remarkable achievements and massive platform have allowed her to connect with a global audience and



at the same time, make a profound impact in the music industry. According to the RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America), Beyoncé's digital sales have surpassed 113 million, making her the top female artist in digital sales in the United States. Beyoncé won 32 Grammys, more than any other artist in the history of the Grammys (Andrew), and her 2023 "Renaissance" world tour is expected to generate over \$1 billion in gross revenue, which would make it one of the most successful tours of all time, potentially exceeding the earnings of Taylor Swift's "Eras" tour by \$500 million (Cohan). Her record sales and award history serve as a testament to her wide popularity and noteworthy influence on the world. They have allowed her to develop her agency and own her individuality. As part of her art, Beyoncé incorporates personal experiences and intertwines them with larger political themes. By doing so, she is able to create a connection with her audience, while at the same time using her platform to address universal concerns to advocate for social justice and equality.

### **Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter ("Queen Bey")**

"My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana. You mix that negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama" (Beyoncé-Formation).

Beyoncé was born and raised in Houston, Texas, to parents Tina and Mathew Knowles. She began performing at an early age, attending her first talent show at the age of seven. In the late 1990s, Beyoncé formed the girl group Destiny's Child, which was one of the most successful girl groups of all time, releasing their first self-titled debut album in 1998. The group, which included Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams in the final line-up, became a huge success with their catchy R&B hits and performances with their second studio album, *Writing's on the Wall*, in 1999, ranking #5 in Billboard Top 200 Albums of the Decade (Malone). They later won their first Grammy for their song "Say My Name" at the 2001 Annual Grammy Awards (Grammy Rewind).

Beyoncé's solo career began in the 2000s, with the release of her first solo album, *Dangerously in Love*, in 2003. The album's lead single, "Crazy in Love," featuring her now husband Jay-Z, became her first #1 single in the United States, leading to her continued success with subsequent albums, tours, and performances. Since then, the artist has released many more albums: *B'day* in 2006, and *I Am...Sasha Fierce* in 2008. A pivotal moment in her career came in 2011, when Beyoncé professionally split from her father and manager, Mathew Knowles. Her documentary *Life is But a Dream* (Parkwood Entertainment, 2013) expresses her biggest reason for managing herself: "Because at some point, you need your support system, and you need your family. When you're trying to have an everyday conversation with your parents, you have to talk about scheduling, and you have to talk about your album and performing and touring. It's just too stressful, and it really affects your relationships. I needed boundaries, and I think my dad needed boundaries." Beyoncé went a step further and founded her own production company, Parkwood Entertainment.

Additionally, Beyoncé released her album *4* in 2011, *Beyoncé* in 2013, *Lemonade* in 2016, and her most recent album *Renaissance* in 2022. She also collaborated on other albums throughout her career, such as *Everything is Love*, in 2018 with her husband Jay-Z, and the musical film *Black is King* in 2020, which inspired the soundtrack to the film *The Lion King: The Gift* in 2019. Ten years after the beginning of Beyoncé's solo career, she managed to become a cultural icon, a wife to Jay-Z, and a mother to Blue Ivy in 2012, all while releasing her signature female empowerment songs such as "Run the World (Girls)," "Single Ladies," and "Diva."

In addition to her musical career, Beyoncé has managed to further establish herself as a renowned figure in popular culture, known for her vibrant live performances and expressive music videos. She has also been invested in the fashion industry, becoming the owner of her brand Ivy Park and collaborating with Adidas in 2019. As of now, Beyoncé is partnering with

the French fashion brand Balmain and designer Olivier Rousteing on a new clothing line called “Renaissance Couture” (Bushard).

Through controversial and influential songs, videos, and performances, such as in the cases of “\*\*\*Flawless” and “Formation,” Beyoncé has presented herself as an advocate for change and has proven that she aims to use her voice and platform to support and speak up for the Black community worldwide. Both songs entail direct and critical messages aimed at modern-day society about the issues that Black women in particular face, especially in the space of intersectionality between gender and race. “\*\*\*Flawless” is a feminist anthem that influences and most definitely empowers Black women to speak up for themselves without being limited by deeply rooted stereotypes in society. Weaving in her personal story gives Black women the chance to relate and, at the same time, demonstrates to Black women that it is possible to take the next step. “\*\*\*Flawless” depicts a powerful union of Black women, opening a world of success and achievements. Whereas “\*\*\*Flawless” can be described as a movement in which Beyoncé is recruiting Black female soldiers to test her boundaries and to take a first clear stance on the topic of feminism. “Formation” can be interpreted as Beyoncé gathering her soldiers, ready to go to war. The song does not only address the empowerment of Black women but takes a step further in supporting the Black community in America and confronting society with the still relevant topic of racial discrimination. The evolution throughout these songs seems to reflect her personal development simultaneously. “\*\*\*Flawless” was her first step into encouraging Black young girls and women to test the waters, whereas in “Formation,” she went bolder and became more political, raising awareness and expressing that Black women of all generations are powerful, commanding respect for her people from the white community.

Black feminist thought presents a powerful framework for analyzing the ways in which gender, race, and class intersect to shape the experiences of Black women. As a

feminist theory, Black feminist thought recognizes the specific struggles and experiences of Black women and aims to center Black women's voices, something the traditional feminist theories have often ignored.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's definition of intersectionality points to the idea that,

"It's basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality, or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts" (Steinmetz).

Beyoncé's artistic endeavors have consistently highlighted her commitment to addressing social issues and challenging stereotypes, empowering Black women, facing racial discrimination, and promoting unity within the Black community. With her album *Lemonade* in particular, Beyoncé centers on Black women's experiences and provides a platform for their voices to be heard. Drawing from Patricia Hill Collins' foundational work *Black feminist thought*, I argue that Beyoncé's songs present a deep understanding of the key themes and messages expressed by Collins.

By examining "Run the World (Girls)," "Flawless" and "Formation" through the lens of Black Feminist thought, I can uncover and highlight the ways in which Beyoncé's art serves as a platform for challenging stereotypes, empowering Black women facing racial discrimination and promoting unity within the Black community. My analysis will be structured around three themes that resonate with Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* and that I believe are best reflected in Beyoncé's art. The three main key themes for my analysis are intersectionality, drawing from Beyoncé's own experiences as a Black woman as highlighted, for instance, in her album *Lemonade*, empowerment and agency, and finally, the significance of community and collective action, which I will refer to as "Sisterhood" within the context

of Beyoncé's engagement with her vast audience. The songs selected for each theme span across Beyoncé's career, effectively showcasing the evolution of her artistry, themes, and messages over time. These earlier songs provide valuable insight and demonstrate the growth of Beyoncé's artistry. Her work demonstrates the foundational influences that shaped her identity, as well as thematic threads which have consistently interwoven through her work.

It is through her art that Beyoncé is able to establish a meaningful connection with her audience, including me, and especially with Black women, who find inspiration in her art. She has the ability to reach her global audience by including the experiences and concerns of Black women, highlighting her dedication to using her platform for social change. I strongly believe that Beyoncé's role as an artist, activist, and most definitely an advocate for Black women's empowerment remains a powerful tool for social change.

### CHAPTER THREE: "COLLECTIVE EXPERIENCES" - SISTERHOOD

The theme of Sisterhood, the importance of unity and collective action within the Black community, is a foundation for this part of my analysis. I chose this theme since it not only reflects my personal story but especially because it is central to Black feminist thought and plays a big role in advancing solidarity and coalition across marginalized communities. Furthermore, it represents the power collective action can have in order to challenge systems of oppression and aim toward social justice. Patricia Hill Collins expresses the importance of creating support systems and encouraging a deep sense of sisterhood within the Black community. Furthermore, it is crucial for Black women to acknowledge their connected experiences and work together in solidarity to recognize the power that comes with it. Collins continues by stating that U.S. Black women have developed alternative practices and knowledge which are purposely created to encourage the group empowerment of U.S. Black women and serve as tools of resistance. She goes on to display that the collective experiences

and group knowledge of Black women are characterized by a dialogical relationship, meaning that there is an ongoing dialogue and interaction between the individuals in the group. “On both the individual and the group levels, a dialogical relationship suggests that changes in thinking may be accompanied by changed actions and that altered experiences may in turn stimulate a changed consciousness” (Collins, 52). Sisterhood remains a transformative tool within Black feminist thought, advancing social justice and equality for Black women and marginalized communities.

### **Sisterhood in Beyoncé’s songs**

Sisterhood is a recurring theme in Beyoncé’s work. Looking back at the artist’s career, including her time as part of Destiny’s Child, it is evident in many of her songs, such as “Independent Women Part.1” (2000), “Girl” (2004), and “Run The World (Girls)” (2011).

The song “Independent Women Part 1” provides a deep sense of support and unity with the following lyrics:

“All the women, who independent  
Throw your hands up at me  
All the honeys, who making money  
Throw your hands up at me  
All the mommas, who profit dollars  
Throw your hands up at me  
All the ladies, who truly feel me  
Throw your hands up at me”

This clearly highlights messages of women supporting and encouraging each other, and shows the way these lyrics celebrate women’s accomplishments and encourage unity.

The lyrics “Throw your hands up at me,” sounds like an invitation for women to come

together and celebrate their independence and success. Additionally, the way Beyoncé addresses different types of women (“Ladies,” “Mommas,” “Honeys,”) she creates a sense of solidarity among these women. It is evident that collective empowerment in this song promotes the idea that when women come together, they can achieve great things. While the song also highlights individual achievements such as, “The shoes on my feet, I bought it/ The clothes I'm wearing, I bought it/ The rock I'm rocking, I bought it/ 'Cause I depend on me if I want it,” it also implies that women that stand together have the power to create change and overcome obstacles. Interestingly, the song was featured in the movie *Charlie's Angels* with Drew Barrymore, Cameron Diaz, and Lucy Liu, who are also mentioned in the song. Similarly, the movie revolves around a group of highly skilled and strong female private investigators who work together to solve cases while promoting themes of teamwork and unity which makes this song such a great fit. Destiny's Child themselves embody the traits of independence, strength, and unity that the song and the movie promotes which aligns with the strong and capable females represented on the screen. Beyoncé is listed as the head songwriter for “Independent Women Part 1,” and around that time, one could slowly see how her feminist identity began to form, even though she did not identify as a feminist openly at the time. Previous Destiny's Child songs, such as “Bills, Bills, Bills” (1990), covered themes of financial dependency and its impact on relationships. It explores how women would end their romantic relationships if their male partners were unable to provide financial support. Thus, this led to disapproval of the girl band Destiny's Child, which they were able to clarify with their song “Independent Women”, showing their audience that the members of Destiny's Child are capable of financially taking care of themselves.

The song “Girl” is part of the album *Destiny Fulfilled* and serves as a perfect example of the unity and support found in female friendships. This can be clearly seen in how “Girl” utilizes lyrics such as “Take a minute girl, come sit down and tell us what's been happening.”

This line signifies the significance of creating a supportive space for women to share their experiences and challenges. It also highlights the need for open communication and sisterhood, where women come together, support, and uplift each other. Additionally, the chorus of the song supports the message of solidarity when Beyoncé sings, “Girl, I can tell you’ve been cryin’, and you’re needin’ somebody to talk to.” This part of the song addresses hardships in a relationship but highlights how friendship is there to overcome such moments in life. As well as the lyrics “I’m your girl, you’re my girl, we’re your girls/ We want you to know that we love ya,” referring to the strong bonds of sisterhood and friendship and reinforcing the concept of unity and the love they have for each other. Visually the song complements what the lyrics say, showing Destiny’s Child standing together in unity and sharing moments of friendship crying and laughing together.

After the breakup of Destiny’s Child, one could see Beyoncé’s image slowly developing from a young teen girl to a Black woman in control of her business and image, which can be clearly seen in the song I particularly chose for the theme of Sisterhood, “Run the World (Girls)”.

### **Sisterhood in “Run the World (Girls)”**

With Beyoncé’s iconic song, “Run the World (Girls),” she created an anthem of sisterhood, emphasizing the strength and resilience of women as a collective force. This analysis will delve into the theme of sisterhood in “Run the World (Girls)” and explore how it aligns with the principles of Black Feminist thought. An examination of the lyrics and song’s cultural significance will uncover the ways in which Beyoncé’s art empowers and promotes unity among women. The song’s powerful energy and empowering message resonate with her audience, inspiring them to embrace their power and take action on their own dreams. In her autobiographical documentary *Life is But a Dream*, Beyoncé discussed the song during the rehearsals for her 2011 live performance at the Billboard Awards. She states, “I’m always



thinking about women and what we need to hear. It's difficult being a woman, it's so much pressure. We need that support, and we need that escape sometimes." Beyoncé tells the interviewer about her personal experience when, "I grew up in a house with my mother, who owned a hair salon, and my mother was a therapist. She was more than a stylist". "And women would come into that salon with problems. They expressed themselves, they'd get a makeover, and they'd walk out new women." The interviewer asks Beyoncé what she learned from these women, and she replies, "We're all going through our problems, but we all have the same insecurities, and we all have the same abilities, and we all need each other. And you know, I have been around the world, I've seen so many things. I love my husband. But there's nothing like a conversation with a woman that understands you. I grow so much from those conversations. I need my sisters" (*Life is But a Dream*). Beyoncé's words align strongly with the principles of Black Feminist thought, especially regarding sisterhood and the shared experience of women. The artist acknowledges the challenges and pressures women face and underlines the need for support and change. Furthermore, Beyoncé draws from her own experiences growing up in a household where women sought support in her mother's hair salon. She recognizes how space created a safe environment for women to express themselves and seek advice. These women underwent transformations that went beyond physical appearances. Additionally, by stating that "We all need each other" and speaking about the growth she gained among these women, she emphasizes the importance of sisterhood and the power of unity. She challenges societal narratives that set women against each other and promotes solidarity.

### **Lyrics and imagery in “Run the World (Girls)”**

In light of recent years, Beyoncé’s “Run the World (Girls)” has emerged as a profound exploration of the theme “Sisterhood.” This comprehensive analysis delves into the song’s lyrics, live performance, and music video, providing an in-depth understanding of the theme in her work.

“Run the World (Girls)” is part of her fourth album, *4*, and was released as the lead single on April 21, 2011. The song is a powerful anthem that asserts the power and agency of women. One of the most unforgettable live performances was at the 2011 Billboard Music Awards in 2011, where she performed the song. The live performance was posted on Beyoncé’s YouTube Channel on December 15, 2011, and opens up with several influential people speaking about Beyoncé and her impact over the years. Included are her parents, but also many influential people from the music industry, such as Lady Gaga, The Dream, Stevie Wonder, Bono, Solange Knowles, as well as Michelle Obama. For instance, Stevie Wonder states, “Beyoncé has made history, and she is not even 30 yet.” Michelle Obama adds, “Beyoncé, in addition to just being a beautiful woman, she’s been a role model and a powerful presence for young girls and women all around the world” (YouTube-Billboard Music Awards 2011). Beyoncé’s vibrant live performance was accompanied by special visual effects and a diverse group of women on stage. Additionally, in a powerful opening line Beyoncé says, “Men have been given the chance to rule the world, but ladies, our revolution has begun. Let’s build a nation, women everywhere, run the world” (YouTube-Billboard Music Awards 2011). She proclaims that “our revolution has begun,” pointing to a transformative movement toward female empowerment and gender equality. Furthermore, she emphasizes the importance of unity among women, implying a collective effort to create a better future and the importance of women supporting each other.

Within the song's powerful lyrics and visuals, Beyoncé emphasizes the unity, strength, and resilience of women while breaking stereotypes and challenging societal norms. The artist showcases several themes of sisterhood throughout the song.

Beyoncé emphasizes the unity and collective power of women in her song by highlighting the idea of women standing together and supporting one another. As Beyoncé likes to set the tone from the start, the theme is clearly evident in the opening lyrics, “Girls, we run this mother / Girls, we run this mother,” which immediately addresses all the women out there and establishes a sense of collective unity among women. With almost commanding lyrics, Beyoncé reminds women that they have the power to take control and lead. Surprisingly, in the first half of the song at her live performance, we can only see Beyoncé on stage dancing powerfully and singing the first half of the song. The visual effects show Beyoncé, as well as around 40 more Beyoncé’s added digitally to her performance, showcasing the image of an army ready to face the battle.



*Figure 1 Beyoncé at the Billboard Music Awards in 2011*

In the first verse of the song, Beyoncé quite boldly confronts the idea that men possess the same abilities and power as women. She highlights the unique qualities of women in comparison to men. By singing, “Like we do, but no, they don’t,” Beyoncé states how some men believe that they match the abilities of women, but she denies this idea. This part of the song aims to emphasize the distinct capabilities women own and underline their strengths. Furthermore, when addressing “all my girls,” who are in the club, wearing the latest fashion and demonstrating financial independence, she creates a feeling of solidarity, celebrating women coming together in the spirit of sisterhood. Similarly, in her music video, Beyoncé’s female approach is clearly seen by the female-to-male ratio throughout the visuals. Also, the clothing worn by the women includes bright and royal colors, such as red and gold, while the male counterparts are showcased wearing simple and black attire. Additionally, Beyoncé can be seen standing next to a lion, which knowingly is referred to as the “king of the jungle,” and again is used to demonstrate that women hold the power.



Figure 2 Image from the music video to “Run the World (Girls)”

Following the strong opening of the song, Beyoncé further emphasizes the theme of sisterhood by highlighting the strength and resilience of women in times of struggle. Beyoncé sings, “This goes out to all the women getting it in/ Get on your grind/ To other men that respect what I do/ Please accept my shine.” The artist creates an understanding of the hard

work and dedication women have invested in pursuing their dreams and goals in life and encourages them to keep moving forward. This message of solidarity and respect among women promotes the idea that women have the ability to achieve greatness and should continue to support each other in their endeavors.

Similarly, in the music video, the theme of sisterhood is evident throughout the strong visuals of women coming together in unity. Throughout the video, Beyoncé is surrounded by a diverse group of strong women, highlighting different backgrounds, cultures, as well as ethnicities. This inclusive representation emphasized the importance of intersectionality within sisterhood and the urge to support all women, regardless of their differences. Additionally, the choreography throughout the music video, as well as in her live performance demonstrates the dancers' synchronized movements, embracing the collective power and the strength when they work together.



*Figure 3 Collective choreography in "Run the World (Girls)"*



*Figure 4 Collective choreography at the Billboard Music Awards in 2011*

A further message that caught my attention is the lyrics, “We’re smart enough to make these millions/ Strong enough to bear the children/ Then get back to business.” This verse challenges societal expectations placed on women, declaring that women are capable of both, achieving success in their personal and professional lives. Furthermore, it emphasizes the idea that women should not be defined by traditional gender roles and can be empowered to make their own choices. The video also presents women in various roles, breaking stereotypes and placing them at the forefront. Additionally, it shows strong women who are capable of balancing their responsibilities and pursuing their passions and dreams.

“My persuasion can build a nation, endless power,” portrays the power of women’s power. The word “endless” emphasizes that a woman’s power has no limitation. As well as being capable of “building a nation,” this verse emphasizes the self-confidence and agency of women. Additionally, with “Disrespect us, no, they won’t,” Beyoncé draws attention to the fact that women no longer depend on men, she highlights that by being independent, men and women can be equals.

“Run the World (Girls)” is a powerful song that celebrates sisterhood, as well as female empowerment within the context of Black feminist thought. Beyoncé’s lyrics and

visuals highlight the unity, strength, and resilience among women, by challenging stereotypes and promoting gender equality. If women do not support each other, how will we be able to work towards a common goal, ultimately running the world as equals.



*Figure 5 Powerful unity of Beyoncé and her diverse female dancers*

#### CHAPTER FOUR: FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN BEYONCÉ'S SONGS

Female empowerment, resilience, and strength, as well as promoting positivity and unity, have been recurring themes in Beyoncé's music throughout her career. As seen in her early days with Destiny's Child to her solo career now, Beyoncé has consistently used her platform to inspire women. In songs such as "Survivor," Beyoncé and her allies encourage women to believe in their inner power and to overcome challenges. By singing, "I'm a Survivor, I'm not gon' give up, I'm not gon' stop, I'm gon work harder", Destiny's Child highlights the resilience and determination of women, encouraging women that despite the challenges and setbacks, they will persevere and continue to shine. Every individual, but in this case every Black woman, has survived something in life and come back stronger. Similarly, in her song "Diva," released in 2009, Beyoncé encourages women to embrace their financial independence, singing, "I'm a diva, best believe her, you see how she gettin' paid?/"

She ain't callin' him to greet her, don't need him, her bed's made.” Additionally, in “Pretty Hurts” (2013), she addresses societal beauty standards and motivates women to recognize their inner beauty. The visuals in the music video communicate a powerful message about self-image and the harmful impact of perfectionism. In the video, Beyoncé portrays a beauty pageant contestant, underlining the pressures and expectations placed on women to conform to these beauty standards. Additionally, the visuals present several scenes that critique the beauty industry, as well as the lengths women are often pushed to fit societal beauty ideals.

One song that stands out in Beyoncé’s discography in terms of its importance to female empowerment and Black Feminist thought is “\*\*\*Flawless.” In the context of a significant feminist resurgence and discussion surrounding gender equality, the album *Beyoncé* was released on iTunes without any prior notification. During that time, the feminist movement achieved great milestones, such as Wendy Davis’s impactful actions in the Texas Senate, as well as Malala Yousafzai’s inspiring speech at the United Nations. *The Guardian* article “2013 was a big year for feminism, but the movement still alienates minorities” by Erika L. Sánchez acknowledges the significant milestones achieved throughout the year 2013. However, the author also expresses ongoing challenges and the need for progress, particularly in the sphere of intersectionality and the inclusion of women of color within the feminist movement. Sánchez continues by saying how she is frustrated with the limited representation of women of color and their experiences within the movement. She argues that the feminist space needs to be more inclusive and attentive toward different ethnic backgrounds, hence, addressing stereotypes and harmful narratives, which can further silence the marginalized. In “\*\*\*Flawless,” Beyoncé confronts these issues and purposely presents herself as a strong Black woman with agency. Furthermore, by embracing her own identity and personal experiences, Beyoncé is also able to utilize her platform to embrace a feminist



perspective that is inclusive, addressing the unique struggles of Black women, and at the same time celebrating their achievements within the feminist movement.

As Beyoncé's career progressed, it becomes clear that her advocacy for female empowerment and social issues has become more visible and intentional. From Destiny's Child to her solo career, she consistently used her art to inspire women to celebrate their strength and individuality. Songs, such as "Survivor" and "Diva" emphasize the importance of believing in one's strength and financial independence, while songs, such as "Pretty Hurts" addresses societal beauty norms and the impact of perfectionism on women's self-esteem. However, it was the song "\*\*\*Flawless" that serves as a defining moment, especially in regard to female empowerment and Black feminist thought.

### **Female empowerment in "\*\*\*Flawless"**

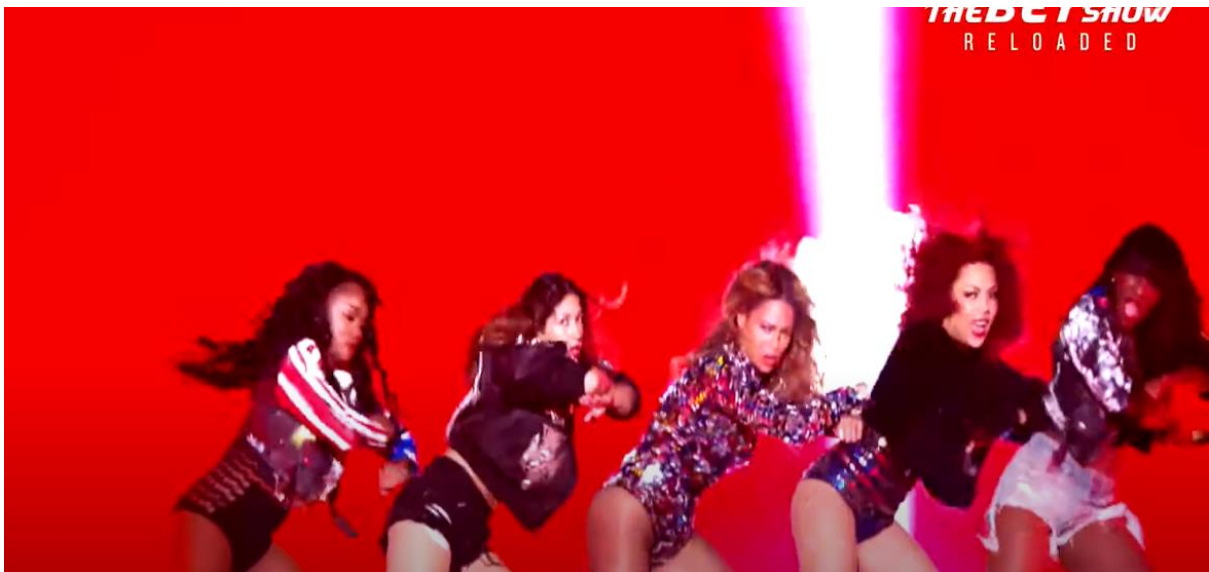
"\*\*\*Flawless" was the first song released and the opening track from her self-titled *Beyoncé* album, which incorporates three versions. With this song, Beyoncé demonstrates her growth as an artist and her unapologetic expression of feminism. The first version is titled "Bow Down/I Been On" and was published as a six-minute version on her Soundcloud page in March 2013. Later in the year, the song re-emerged as "\*\*\*Flawless" with the secret release of her visual album "*Beyoncé*," which created massive hype and led to a tremendous increase in album sales. Furthermore, the song's original second half was replaced with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx talk named "We Should All Be Feminists," published on the *TEDx talks* YouTube channel in 2013, which reignited a global conversation about feminism and was eventually published as a book in 2014. Beyoncé included this statement, once and for all claiming her identity as a feminist, a part of her persona she had yet to fully express in her music. The last version of the song was released in August of 2014 as a remix that featured rapper, Nicki Minaj. The initial version, "Bow Down/I Been On," portrays a more assertive tone, with Beyoncé expressing her success and confidence. The lyrics focus

more on challenging societal norms and expectations rather than addressing feminism. Within the context of her visual album *Beyoncé*, released in surprise that year, the album highlighted a shift in the artist's career. In 2013, in an interview with *Vogue*, Beyoncé stated that she considered herself to be “a modern-day feminist” (Cubarrubia). By using the term “modern-day feminist,” Beyoncé is making a statement about her commitment to advancing the cause of gender equality and challenging traditional expectations. Furthermore, it also highlights her recognition of the ongoing struggle for gender equality and the need to continue to urge for progress. The reason why I chose to analyze the version featuring Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s TEDx talk (TED YouTube) in my thesis is that the significance of this version lies in the fact that it marks a crucial moment in Beyoncé’s public image, officially identifying explicitly as a feminist for the first time in her career. In the *New York Times*, Parul Sehgal wrote that Beyoncé turned “\*\*\*Flawless” into a “proud, almost swaggering femininity.” Analyzing this version aligned with the key themes of Black feminist thought will allow for an exploration of how Beyoncé includes messages of female empowerment in her art. The artist chooses to promote discussions on gender, race, and empowerment and actively contributes to ongoing conversations through her vast platform, all while elevating black women within the feminist movement. The fact that Beyoncé decided to include Adichie’s excerpt simply shows how important this matter was to her and that she wanted to bring awareness to the issues women continue to face in modern-day society. According to Janell Hobson, by choosing this exact part of Adichie’s talk, she publicly picked a side and fully identified as a feminist for the first time. Beyoncé opened her show at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2014, standing on stage in front of a grandiose neon white illuminated “Feminist” sign, wearing a superwoman-like outfit with her hair blowing in the wind like a heroine’s cape. The singer chooses this strong and direct opening to set the tone and leave no room for doubt in regard to her stance on the topic. Throughout the live performance, Beyoncé is accompanied by confident and fierce multicultural women,

underlining her powerful message of self-love, self-acceptance, and female empowerment.



*Figure 6 Beyoncé opened the show by standing in front of a “FEMINIST” sign at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2014*



*Figure 7 Beyoncé and her diverse female dancers at the MTV Video Music Awards in 2014*

The overall structure of “\*\*\*Flawless” can be outlined as follows:

Intro: Star Search clip 1

Verse 1: Beyoncé, “Bow Down”

Verse 2: Chimamanda Adichie sample

Verse 3: Beyoncé, “Flawless”

Outro: Star Search clip 2 (Cox)

When analyzing the songs Beyoncé released throughout her career, it is noticeable that she stuck with a predictable verse-chorus format, for example, “Crazy in Love,” “Single Ladies,” as well as “Irreplaceable,” and “Halo.” Earlier Beyoncé songs followed a predictable format, which allowed for a catchy and memorable song structure and included messages that supported heteronormativity and traditional gender roles. “\*\*\*Flawless” seems to distance itself from the “old structure,” potentially signaling a pivotal transition, i.e., Beyoncé redefining herself. The song does not include a chorus that links each verse to one another, and “\*\*\*Flawless” is the only song that reflects this kind of structure (Cox). This setup allows her to present an unexpected journey, forcing her listeners to listen, and allows Beyoncé to punctuate her music the way she does. The unconventional structure of the song highlights the way Beyoncé desires to redefine herself as an artist and to push boundaries within the music industry. The absence of the conventional chorus creates a sense of focus on each part of the song and allows one to understand the different themes and vocals, as well as a deeper understanding of the overall song. Beyoncé is able to capture the attention of her audience through compelling lyrics and powerful messages. With this fresh approach, the artist maintains her reputation as a boundary-pushing icon.

### **Lyrics and imagery in “\*\*\*Flawless”**

#### Intro: Star Search Clip 1

The visual intro of the song begins with a real-life *Star Search* excerpt (*Star Search* was a leading talent show at the time) (AllMusic) in which Beyoncé competed as part of the girl band “Girl Tyme.” “Girl Tyme ” was the former name for “Destiny’s Child,” consisting of the 12-year-old girls: Beyoncé, Lativia, Nina, Kelly, and Ashley. Beyoncé chose this specific scene as an intro to outline the beginning of her personal journey. Through this scene, the singer simply presents a young girl with her friends, following her dreams while

also showing that she started at the bottom and worked hard to achieve her queen-like status. As Hobson states, “she proclaims “flawlessness” by inserting a reminder that she didn’t always “win,” which can be described as a “humble brag moment.” Additionally, one could argue she is presenting her own story of femininity as a young girl, and while showing real-life footage, “\*\*\*Flawless” also becomes a cultural memory. By sharing this real-life footage, Beyoncé presents her own story of femininity and centering her personal experience, but at the same time, representing the experiences of many young girls who struggle to follow their dreams and break barriers.



Figure 8 “Girl Tyme”, Beyoncé is the third from the right.

#### Verse 1: Beyoncé, “Bow Down”

Overall, the lyrics of “\*\*\*Flawless” represent a strong message of female empowerment, highlighting the experiences and aspirations of women. The opening lines of Verse 1, when Beyoncé sings, “I know when you were little girls, you dreamt of being in my world,” recognizes Beyoncé’s awareness that she embodies a particular ideal of femininity and that she is a role model and idol to younger generations and women. The fact that Beyoncé purposefully uses these lines, being aware of her large influence, shows that she focuses on continuously empowering and influencing little girls to go for their dreams and

that each dream should be respected. Beyoncé's intersectional approach towards her audience becomes very visible in this part of the song. To her audiences, her life may seem perfect and free of flaws, but it is important to recognize how everyone's life comes with imperfections. Emily J. Lordi states,

“Overall, BEYONCÉ presents a vocal and visual style that is less concerned with being flawless than with being versatile. In place of the feminine ideal of excessive work made to look easy, Beyoncé advances an aesthetic of easeful imperfection” (Lordi, p.139).

She urges her listeners to make sure to appreciate the truly important little things between the challenges and struggles everyone faces.

Furthermore, the singer and songwriter highlights the importance of women asserting agency and that a woman's worth is not tied to any relationship with a man. She sings, “I took some time to live my life, but don't think I'm just his little wife”, emphasizing her independence and refusing to be limited to traditional gender roles. Additionally, this line can be seen as a reflection of Beyoncé's personal story and the birth of her firstborn daughter Blue Ivy, in 2012. The artist took a break from her career to focus on motherhood and her personal life, to explore her own identity, and reclaim her individuality. While this specific connection between the line and the birth of her daughter is not exactly mentioned, the timing can be inferred as a significant moment in Beyoncé's personal and artistic journey that influenced her message of female empowerment. It is worth noting how the nature of her audience is constructed. Beyoncé does not need to specify the reasons for including certain themes in her music, as her fans and listeners are well aware of the way she seamlessly interweaves the personal and political aspects within her art. This intersection has become a defining characteristic of Beyoncé's work and her audience seems to appreciate this approach. Looking at my own experiences of becoming a mother, I can clearly relate to how her daughter's birth had a significant impact on her personal life, artistry, and agency and

that she is aiming towards challenging societal expectations placed on women. It reminds her listeners again to break free from restrictive roles and to be recognized for their individuality. One of the challenges that women often face is finding a balance between family and career. The fact that she chose to become a wife and mother does not indicate that her career or life choices are managed by or have to be approved by her husband. On the contrary, she reminds her listeners that she is a woman who can handle the honorable duties of a wife/mother and a multi-million-dollar career. Beyoncé chose to share this side of her personal life and encourage her audience that the status quo can be broken. The fact that she presents herself as a powerful, independent woman, artist, businesswoman, wife, and mother indicates that she is stating that women can do it all, pushing them to go for their dreams without feeling judged, guilty, or restrained by society. The phrase “Bow, down, bitches” is repeated several times throughout the song. This quote is reclaiming the word and using it as a form of empowerment, as well as a way of Beyoncé expressing her success and power. You are worthy and powerful, so be confident and go for your dreams each day, Beyoncé is telling us. The lyrics carry a strong and assertive tone, as if Beyoncé is calling women for action and urging them to embrace their power and agency. Looking at this through the lens of Black feminist thought, one can see how the lyrics can be seen as a reclaiming of power and a calling out to women to refuse being silenced or limited. In an interview with iTunes Radio, Beyoncé states,

“The reason I put down out ‘Bow Down’ is I woke up, I went to the studio, I had a chant in my head, it was aggressive, it was angry, it wasn’t the Beyoncé that wakes up every morning. It was the Beyoncé that was angry. It was the Beyoncé that felt the need to defend herself...But I feel strong. And anyone that says, ‘Oh that is disrespectful,’ just imagine the person that hates you. Imagine a person that doesn’t believe in you. And look in the mirror and say, ‘Bow down, bitches’ and I guarantee you feel gangsta!” (Kornhaber).

This quote provides meaningful insight into the inspiration and intention of the creation of the song. It expressed Beyoncé's personal experiences and the challenges she has faced, making her feel angry and something she wanted to express through her art. Additionally, by acknowledging the existence of people who try to bring us down, Beyoncé aims to empower her audiences to embrace their confidence and stand up for themselves. The aggressive tone in the lyrics and the anger Beyoncé describes can also be seen in the visuals in the music video. While the music video highlights and showcases confident and diverse women, one can clearly see her rage through her facial expression while at the same time presenting herself as powerful and confident as ever.



Figure 9 Beyoncé angry and powerful in the “\*\*\*Flawless” music video



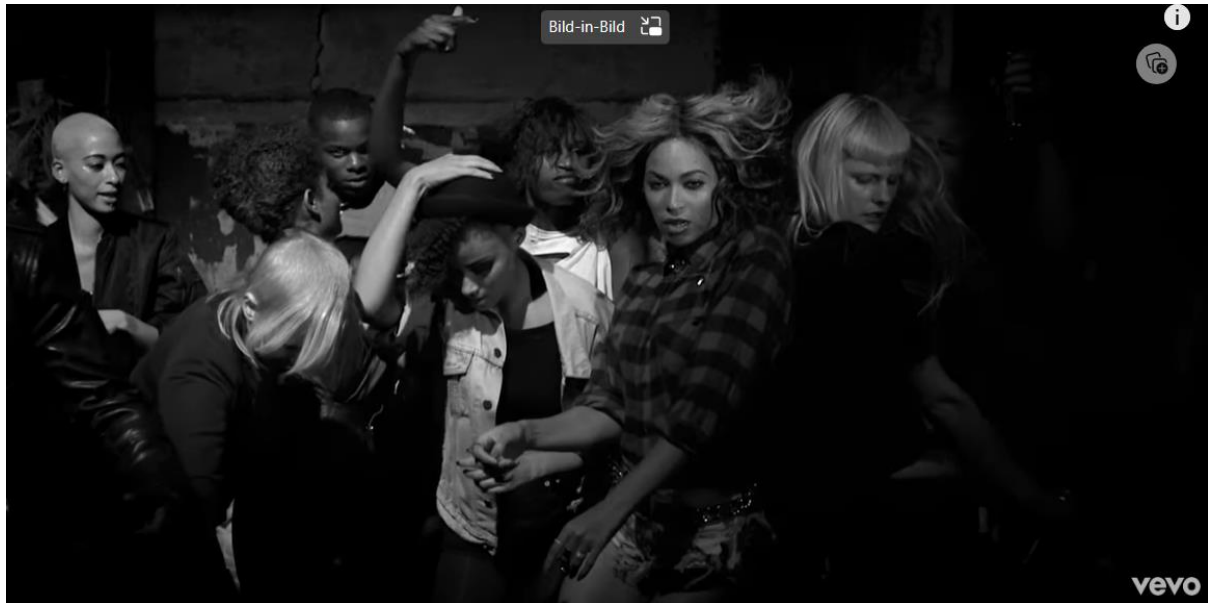


Figure 10 Beyoncé surrounded by strong and diverse women in the “\*\*\*Flawless” music video

## Verse 2: Chimamanda Adichie sample

“We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller

We say to girls: "You can have ambition, but not too much

You should aim to be successful, but not too successful

Otherwise, you will threaten the man"

Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage

I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important

Now, marriage can be a source of joy and love and mutual support

But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same?

We raise girls to see each other as competitors

Not for jobs or for accomplishments, which I think can be a good thing

But for the attention of men

We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are

Feminist: A person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes”(Adichie).

By incorporating this powerful section, Beyoncé raises her voice about several stereotypes related to female empowerment and addresses her commitment to speaking out about expectations that are imposed on women. The line "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller" confronts the stereotype that women should be obedient, which challenges the idea that women should limit their dreams and ambitions to avoid "threatening the man." Furthermore, it speaks about how society expects women, on the one hand, to be successful, but on the other hand, to not aim too high since this could potentially cause a conflict of power with the male gender. Adichie is known to speak within a Western context and heavily draws on her experiences growing up in Nigeria. When Adichie's words, "You will threaten the man," resonate strongly with the concept of the glass ceiling theory, which portrays an invisible barrier for women and prevents women from soaring to the next level. This barrier is a strong reminder of the systemic challenges women face in their pursuit of success. In addition, this excerpt highlights that women are taught to aspire to marriage and asks why society does not teach men the same. Furthermore, society raises girls to see each other as competition, which makes one wonder, how can women push for feminism and equality when they see each other as enemies? It can be disputed that this type of behavior reinforces sexism, in a space where girls treat each other poorly, men think they have the right to act the same way. Rather than presenting women as competitors, Beyoncé emphasizes the importance of solidarity among women. This again aligns with the principles of Black Feminist thought, encouraging sisterhood and the recognition of shared struggles and experiences. Interestingly noted, the visuals to this part of the song in the music video are presented in slow motion, not only emphasizing the shot but also making sure the audience is not distracted by the fast visuals and paying attention to the message.

### Verse 3: Beyoncé, “Flawless”

This part of the song serves as an affirmation of self-acceptance and confidence for women. Beyoncé states how women “wake up flawless,” referring to a woman’s natural and unique beauty. Additionally, she includes the word “diamond,” which seems to represent the purity and beauty of women and how every woman should see herself. Women should not aim to look a certain way, they should feel comfortable in their skin and own it. Kornhaber includes a quote from the artist “The Dream,” who co-wrote the song, stating, “Nobody wakes up flawless. It’s an oxymoron. But the meaning behind it, to say ‘I just woke up feeling good,’ is what it’s about.” Teaching self-love aligns with the principles of Black Feminist thought, as well as asserting agency and autonomy. The lyrics “My mama taught me good home-trainin” refer to Beyoncé’s own experiences growing up. She shares how lessons passed down from her mother shaped her and impacted her actions today.

Incorporating her personal experiences and the influence of the women in her life and on her, represents the importance of support and empowerment among women. With the line “My daddy taught me how to love my haters,” Beyoncé challenges the perception that women should simply tolerate and accept criticism and negativity. It expresses the resilience and self-assurance that is necessary to navigate through the obstacles faced by women.

Beyoncé included the message that women can rise above criticism and turn it into something powerful. Overall, this part of the song reinforces themes of self-confidence, self-love, and resilience which are central principles of Black feminist thought. Beyoncé aims to celebrate her natural beauty and embrace her imperfections, which allows her listeners to relate to her story. She encourages her audience to be confident and reject societal pressures.

Interestingly, the music video ends where the song started. “Girl’s Tyme” competed against a boy band called “Skeleton Groove” and lost by one point. The male band received four points, whereas “Girl’s Tyme” received three points, which links to why the name of the song is written with three stars. Including the results of the Talent Show serves as a reminder

to her listeners of the difficulties Black women still face in a world where power dynamics are often skewed in favor of Whites. It highlights the intersectionality of gender discrimination and systemic racism that Black women continue to face but also emphasizes the importance of overcoming societal barriers with determination. Beyoncé did not let the limits of society box her in, instead, she kept fighting and became a global icon in the process. *The Atlantic* states that at the time, Beyoncé might have felt like this was a career-ending loss, but now she laughs about it since it only reflects a “funny little asterisk in her biography” (Kornhaber). Emily Lordi expresses how the singer's imperfect self-realization is Beyoncé herself “claiming the right to her own rich, complex imaginative landscape, one that can be just as dark and twisted and fantastic as any male artist’s, in addition to being fun and self-critical and maternal and sad” (“Beyoncé’s Boundaries”).

The visuals in the music video underline the messages portrayed throughout the song. Beyoncé presents herself as fierce and confident, supported by her multicultural representation in the punk-rock mosh pit. The individuals can be seen moshing and engaging with the sound of the song.



Figure 11 “\*\*\*Flawless” representation of the punk-rock mosh pit

The creative director for the music video, Todd Tourso, explains how the representation of the punk-rock mosh pit scene aims to challenge the stereotypes associated with skinhead subculture, as well as demonstrate Beyoncé's energetic immersion in the spirit of the mosh pit (Kornhaber). According to Merriam-Webster, the definition of "mushing" means "to engage in uninhibited often frenzied activities (such as intentional collision) with others near the stage at a rock concert." The director adds, "We thought once we got those FastCams and fire in there, we'd dial up this '90s hip-hop counterpart to the '80s Rude Boy skinhead party." The visuals of collective engagement celebrate diversity and challenge biased beauty standards. The dancers in the video are embracing their authentic selves while breaking free from societal limitations and complementing the song's theme of female empowerment.



*Figure 12 Diverse group of dancers embracing their authentic selves*

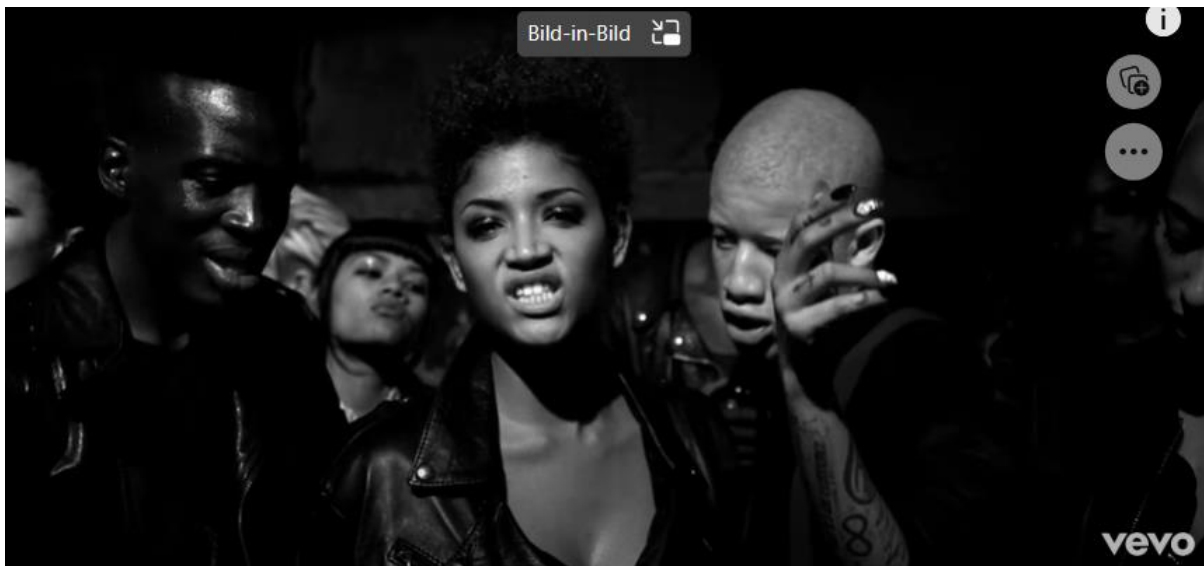


Figure 13 Diverse and powerful representation in “\*\*\*Flawless”

Overall, Beyoncé’s song “\*\*\*Flawless” serves as a powerful anthem where she fearlessly shares her personal story about a time when she also struggled in society, related to the history of femininity, and uses it to inspire women worldwide to feel that same power. That same power that turned the 12-year-old talent show finalist into the 32-time Grammy-winning artist, Beyoncé. “Moreover, it is important to remember that Black women’s full empowerment can occur only within a transnational context of social justice” (Collins 41). Hence, it is crucial to view Black women’s empowerment through a transnational lens and acknowledge that only by highlighting the interconnectedness of their struggles and the power of collective efforts. Beyoncé manages to include her audience and urges them to not let any defeat hold them back. In conclusion, Beyoncé’s songs analyzed above not only align with the principles of Black feminist thought, but also serve as a powerful way to inspire her listeners to embrace their inner strength, accept their flaws, and embody empowerment, self-love, and resilience as Black women.

## CHAPTER FIVE: INTERSECTIONALITY IN BEYONCÉ'S SONGS

Through controversial and influential songs, videos, and performances such as in the case of “Formation”, Beyonce has presented herself as an advocate for change and has proven that she aims to use her voice and platform to continuously support and speak up for the Black community worldwide. Both songs combined entail direct and critical messages aimed at modern-day society about the issues that Black women face, especially in the space of intersectionality between gender and race. “\*\*\*Flawless,” as explored earlier, is a feminist anthem that influences and most definitely empowers Black women to speak up for themselves without being limited by deeply rooted stereotypes in society. Weaving in her personal story gives Black women the chance to relate, and at the same time, demonstrates to Black women that it is possible to take the next step. Whereas “\*\*\*Flawless” can be described as a movement in which Beyoncé is recruiting Black female soldiers to test their boundaries and to take a first clear stance on the topic of feminism, “Formation” can be interpreted as Beyoncé “gathering her soldiers, ready to go to war.” The song does not only address the empowerment of Black women but takes things a step further in supporting the Black community in America and confronting society with the still relevant topic of racial discrimination. The evolution throughout these songs seems to simultaneously reflect her personal development. “\*\*\*Flawless” was her first step into encouraging Black young girls and women to test the waters, whereas in “Formation” she went bolder and became more political, raising awareness and expressing that Black women of all generations are powerful, commanding respect for her people from the white community.

Beyoncé’s art is characterized by her utilization of intersectionality, which is evident in her lyrics, music videos and performances. Patricia Hill Collins argues that “If intersecting oppressions did not exist, Black feminist thought and similar oppositional knowledges would

be unnecessary. As a critical social theory, Black feminist thought aims to empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (Collins 45). Beyoncé’s work highlights exactly that, as her work embodies this critical social theory by addressing the experiences and struggles faced by Black women in a society shaped by intersecting oppressions. For instance, in her song “Sorry” from the *Lemonade* album, the music video portrays a group of dancers with diverse body types and cultural aesthetics. Black beauty and African-inspired fashion, make-up and body art are celebrated through the visuals, challenging societal beauty standards based on race, gender, body image, as well as the multiplicity of Black culture. Furthermore, the music video included the renowned professional tennis player Serena Williams. By featuring her in the video, Beyoncé is making a statement about female empowerment and resilience, as well as emphasizing the intersectionality of Black women’s experiences. Serena Williams embodies the intersection of race and gender within her professional journey, highlighting the challenges faced by Black women in traditional white dominated spaces. Beyoncé incorporates her to celebrate the achievements of women who face multiple forms of oppression.



Figure 14 Serena Williams in the music video “Formation”



Kimberlé Crenshaw developed a metaphor for demonstrating intersectionality:

“Discrimination, like traffic through intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination... Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm” (Crenshaw 1989, 149).

This recognition of concurrent and intersecting forms of discrimination aligns with Beyoncé’s emphasis on the complex struggles and realities faced by Black women.

Furthermore, in the song “Pretty Hurts” the lyrics state, “We shine the light on whatever's worst/ Perfection is a disease of a nation/ We shine the light on whatever's worst/ You're tryna fix something/ But you can't fix what you can't see/ It's the soul that needs a surgery.”

The lyrics underscore the pressures and expectations placed on women to adapt to society’s beauty standards. Beyoncé’s utilization of this matter emphasized the critique of the idea of perfection, as well as the harmful effects it can have on certain individuals. While the lyrics themselves do not explicitly address intersectionality, the message of the song resonates with the theory that women from diverse backgrounds face intersecting forms of discrimination in their pursuit of societal acceptance.

In “Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons,” Anna Carastathis writes that intersectionality prevails “in its ability to reveal and transform relations of power, as these constitute the categories basic to our thinking, the conditions that structure our lives, and the identifications that enable our resistances” (2016, 238). In addition, she states that “white women’s gendered experiences are no less racialized, and therefore no more generalizable than are Black women’s; but this racialization is rendered invisible through the representational, territorializing claim to ‘women’s’ experiences that position white women as normative subjects of that category” (2016, 81). Carastathis explains that intersectionality can be seen as a helpful tool in understanding how societal power operates and how different

aspects of our identity intersect and shape the experiences. In her view, society overlooks the racial aspects of white women's experiences, resulting in the misconception that white women's experiences are the norm and Black women's are not fully comprehended. The artwork of Beyoncé emphasizes the importance of recognizing intersecting forms of oppression and aims to raise awareness of the diverse experiences Black women face in society. Alexis McGee's article "The sociolinguistic and rhetorical strategies of Beyoncé's *Lemonade*," in *The Lemonade Reader* explores how Beyoncé's rhetorical strategies "(conjure) spaces for Black women's healing" by representing intersectional identities in Black public and private spaces (2019, 77). By "conjuring spaces for Black women's healing," Beyoncé's *Lemonade* furthers a sense of community, and resilience. It creates a platform for Black women to see themselves represented and celebrated. Besides addressing Black women's experiences, the album brings together listeners from different backgrounds to learn and support the fight against systemic injustices. In addition, bell hooks writes about the concept of "Talking back" in her book, *Talking back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. She writes about the process of "talking back" as an "act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (1989,8). Hooks adds, "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject-the liberated voice" (1989, 9). This quote gives an example of how Beyoncé's art can be interpreted as a way of her utilizing her art as a tool to speak out about several social issues and advocate for the empowerment of marginalized communities, in particular those of Black women. Beyoncé emphasizes the concept of "talking back" by utilizing her art as a means of resistance, as well as healing. Her expression of her voice are not just empty words, rather a

powerful way for freedom and transformation. Hence, I am determined to conduct a thorough analysis of the song “Formation”, where I will demonstrate how Beyoncé utilizes an intersectional approach to shed light on the experiences and perspectives of those silenced, in particular Black women.

### **Intersectionality in “Formation”**

“Formation” was released in 2016 as part of Beyoncé’s sixth studio album *Lemonade*, which is also her second visual album. The term visual album became noticeable when Beyoncé released her self-titled album *Beyoncé*. Visual albums contain audio-visual tracks, each song being accompanied by an audio track. After the release of her first visual album Beyoncé stated,

“I wanted people to hear things differently and have a different first impression. Not just listen to a 10 second clip but actually be able to see the whole vision of the album. It was important that we made this a movie, we made this an experience. I wanted everyone to see the whole picture, and to see how personal everything is to me” (Saad).

“Formation,” which served as the album's lead single, and the accompanying video, were unexpectedly released on February 6th, 2016, through Parkwood Entertainment (a production and entertainment company founded by Beyoncé Knowles in 2010). In anticipation of her performance at the 50th Super Bowl halftime show, Beyoncé released "Formation" one day in advance. The renowned British rock band Coldplay headlined the show, but Beyoncé’s performance took over the event and concluded with an announcement of her upcoming “Formation” tour. Blogger Zandria Robinson states in an article,

“Beyoncé places her own reckless, country blackness—one of afros, cornrows, and negro noses, brown liquor and brown girls, hot sauce, and of brown boys and cheddar bay biscuits—in conversation with and as descended from a broader southern blackness that is frequently obscured and unseen in national discourses, save for as (dying, lynched,

grotesque, excessive) spectacle” (Howard).

*Lemonade* was released during a difficult period for the United States. As a result of the controversial presidential election in 2016, the end of Barack Obama's presidency in 2017, and the rise of conservatism, marginalized communities have faced significant challenges. Furthermore, the Black Lives Matter movement grew extensively in 2014 due to the tragic killings of Michael Brown in Missouri and Eric Garner in New York. Many individuals were deeply affected and sought a sense of understanding and support.

*Lemonade* resonates with the ongoing struggles of African Americans in the United States. The album acknowledges marginalized communities, creating a safe space and a platform to express their frustrations, and aspirations. Since the previous album release *Beyoncé*, fans had been waiting for new material to be shared, when “Formation” was simply released via a YouTube link of the music video and shortly went viral. Visually and lyrically, the song represents Beyoncé as a Black feminist and follows along with the FEMINIST statement she made earlier in her career. The song functions as a tool of empowerment and the celebration of Black identity, culture, as well as resilience. Additionally, “Formation” speaks out about police brutality, racism and the systemic struggles faced by marginalized communities. By incorporating powerful imagery in the music video, Beyoncé brought further attention and raised awareness about the realities of Black people in the United States.

### **Lyrics and imagery in “Formation”**

Beyoncé’s “Formation” and its accompanying music video serve as a strong representation of intersectionality, highlighting the experiences of the Black community, as well as Black women. Additionally, I will include visuals from her 2016 performance at the 50th Super Bowl, as I firmly believe that these visually tie together the core themes and messages of my analysis. The song highlights several themes of intersectionality that I will

be exploring throughout this analysis. Although my analysis is focused on the lived experiences of Black women, and the need to understand how different forms of oppression intersect within their lives, I also want to highlight other important issues Beyoncé addresses through this song. Marginalized groups still experience issues such as racial injustice, police brutality, and historical oppression, which need to be addressed, just as Beyoncé has. By emphasizing these crucial issues, Beyoncé creates a platform for action, urging society to confront and dismantle the societal structures that maintain such injustices.

### Racial injustice and the power of gender

Beyoncé's song "Formation" is a politically filled masterpiece that boldly confronts racial injustice within the Black community. The music video's powerful opening sets the tone by referencing Hurricane Katrina and how the government failed to support and protect the people of New Orleans, particularly minorities, after the catastrophic natural disaster. By strategically choosing this starting point, Beyoncé highlights the ongoing racial issues that persist and are still relevant today. Furthermore, it shines a light onto the unrightful treatment of the citizens of New Orleans, especially of the minorities, that occurred following the event. The city's most disadvantaged neighborhoods were those with predominantly Black residents who were only supported with food and water (Frank).

Visually, Beyoncé is standing on a sinking Police car in a completely flooded landscape. The image captures Beyoncé with a powerful body posture which subverts the dominant stereotype of police authority. In this case, the fact that it is a Black woman who is positioned on top of the police car highlights its subversion. The symbolism is significant, signaling the intersectionality of race and gender and challenges the oppressive system that unequally impacts Black women. The image sets the stage for exploration and creates a sense of "Us vs. Them," a theme closely related to the Black Lives Matter movement.

The incorporation of the Black Lives Matter movement in the imagery, and its connection to the theme of intersectionality, is a significant aspect of “Formation.” The movement’s historical significance is evident, with moments such as Hurricane Katrina serving as one of those key moments. The government’s failure to support and protect the predominantly Black neighborhoods, intensified the existing inequalities, further highlighting the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement in addressing racial injustice.

Beyoncé aims to shed light on the interconnected issues of racial inequality and the fight for justice. By connecting the themes of racial injustice and the fight for justice, Beyoncé’s art amplifies the voices of the Black community, and especially Black women. By interconnecting the experiences of race, gender, and socio-political factors, she amplifies the voices of Black women within the bigger context of the Black Lives Matter movement, demanding justice for all marginalized communities.



*Figure 15 Beyoncé is standing on a police car surrounded by floods*

### African American heritage

Throughout the song Beyoncé celebrates her roots, cultural identity and her personal experiences. The way Beyoncé incorporates her African American heritage aligns with the theme of intersectionality in Black feminist thought, acknowledging the interconnectedness of race and gender. Born and raised in Houston, Texas, Beyoncé continually references her Southern background in the lyrics throughout the song. “I got hot sauce in my bag,” refers to stereotype of Black people who in modern-day society are said to add hot sauce to everything, especially in the South (Kendall). By expressing her southern heritage, she acknowledges the historical and cultural significance of the region, as well as the shared struggles within the region.

Furthermore, Beyoncé recognizes the complexities of racial identity by including references to colorism within the African American community. The term “yellow-bone it,” used in her song, refers to light-skinned Black African American people and is used as a “Mostly Southern” slang (Urban Dictionary). As stated in the New York Times, Beyoncé stands “as an Entertainer and an Activist” supporting the Black community in the South (Caramanica et al.). The inclusion of the term “yellow-bone it,” is important in understanding intersectionality within the context of Black feminist thought. Intersectionality acknowledges that individuals hold multiple social identities, and in this case, it reflects the intersectionality of race and colorism within the African American community. The practice of colorism refers to the way people with lighter skin tones are often favored and regarded as more beautiful and privileged, while those with darker skin tones often face discrimination.

Moreover, Beyoncé includes her parent's cultural backgrounds and how this formed her own racial identity. By choosing to start “Formation” with the injustice that affected the Black community of New Orleans and continuing the verse with the acknowledgment of her personal background, Beyoncé symbolically bridges the gap between her as a wealthy Black

woman and the more unfortunate Black community, indicating that she is one of them. Beyoncé addresses this verse to “the South,” where she is from, writing, “You mix that Negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama.” The term “bama” does not only define people from the South but was originally a Black slang for working-class Black people who migrated from the South to the North after the American Civil War. The term was used in society to refer to Black people who supposedly did not know how to behave in front of white people (Reddit). Beyoncé points back to the Civil War in America, and the fact that the issues have never fully gone away, using her lyrics to reclaim “the South” on behalf of the Black community, underlining the fact that Black people are not inferior to the white race. The song’s powerful message underscores the importance of Black identity and culture, serving as a call for unity and pride within the Black community. Beyoncé is trying to inspire confidence in Black culture by proudly proclaiming her African American features and showing pride in her heritage. While exploring her own life and sharing her own racial identity, Beyoncé is confronting the complexities and hierarchies that exist within the Black community, and at the same time urging people to celebrate their Black culture.

She is also shown wearing the traditional American female attire prior to the Civil War, the antebellum dress. The image symbolizes the wealthy white society who, at the time, enslaved people in the South, and the fact that Beyoncé is now wearing it shows that power has shifted from white people to black people. As Brinkhurst-Cuff states, “Beyoncé’s “Formation” is a defiant reclamation of blackness.” Additionally, Beyoncé is surrounded by beautiful Black women wearing similar antebellum dresses, representing a traditional upper-class plantation household from the antebellum period. By representing herself and the other Black women in those dresses, Beyoncé reclaims it as a symbol of resilience and agency for Black women. This specific portrayal of Black women challenges the historical narrative that has often depicted Black women as invisible or submissive during this period. With these visuals, Beyoncé demonstrates the intersectionality of race and gender, as well as the



experiences of Black women, and challenges the dominant narrative of oppression by highlighting Black women's strength and resilience.

By highlighting and celebrating her Southern identity in “Formation,” Beyoncé represents a fundamental aspect of her identity as a person who is categorized by both race and gender. Riché Richardson writes in his article “Beyoncé’s South and a “Formation” Nation” that, “she positions Southern identity as being core to her identity as a raced and gendered subject, drawing on it to challenge narrow and exclusionary notions of American selfhood” (Riché 228). Beyoncé is able to challenge the limited idea of what it means to be American by emphasizing her Southern identity at the core of her self-expression, recognizing that American identity is more than one type of identity, but rather a mix of diverse backgrounds and cultures, which shape our experiences as individuals, and needs to be acknowledged.



*Figure 16 Beyoncé in antebellum dress*



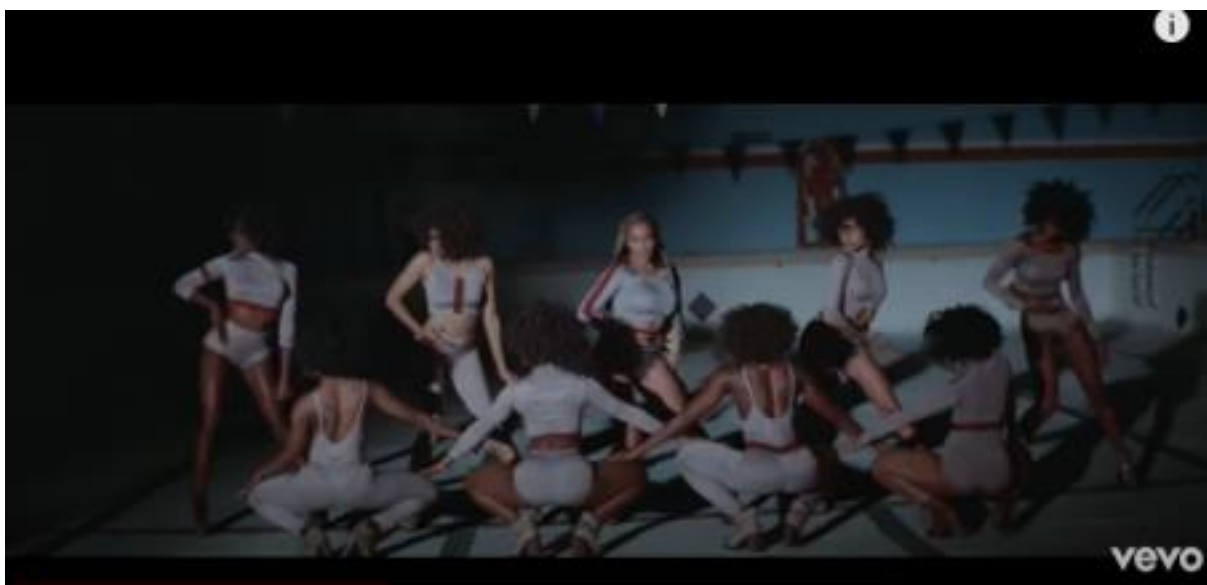
*Figure 17 Female representation of traditional upper-class plantation household from the antebellum period*

### Empowerment

“OK, OK, ladies, now let’s get in formation, ‘cause I slay’ ” is perhaps the most memorable line in the song. It is clear that this powerful statement is addressed to all Black women worldwide. It feels like a command for women to unite in order to take action and to demand change. Beyoncé states that Black women are finally strong enough to stand at the front in the style of soldiers to fight for their rights. When Beyoncé declares, “I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it,” here once again, Beyoncé communicates how hard she had to work to get to where she wanted to be, she “takes what’s hers” stating that she finally has the power to decide over her own life and harness the voice she has earned and the platform she has established demand change. In doing so, she empowers women to pursue their dreams. In alignment with Black feminist thought, it emphasizes self-determination, agency, and the rejection of societal limitations placed upon Black women. The term “slay” appears in her song multiple times and takes on deeper meaning within the framework of Black feminist thought. As McFadden states, “an additional embrace of the language of the black queer community and, in its repetition, it’s an incantation that can slay haters, slay patriarchy, to slay white supremacy.” This term could further define “slay to denote an amazing achievement or success (Urban Dictionary). “Slay” functions as an affirmation of

power and resilience, as an ability to overcome and thrive within the struggle of patriarchy and white supremacy. It emphasizes the strength and power of Black women. Beyoncé simply states that no person, circumstance, obstacle, etc., will derail her from her path to success and this is exactly the message she emphasizes.

Beyoncé continuously portrays a “formation” of empowered women within her music video. Her visuals represent confident, sexy Black women dancing in formation, dressed in almost identical outfits, perhaps symbolic of strength in numbers, fighting as a team against the stereotypes of Black women deeply rooted in society. The abandoned swimming pool scene depicts Black women as strong and resilient, but also draws attention to Hurricane Katrina's impact on marginalized communities, especially the Black community. The image shows an abandoned swimming pool, where people from poor areas, mostly African Americans, were being forced to take temporary shelter after their homes had been destroyed. Beyoncé aims to empower women throughout her song and the Black community as a whole, who are still being discriminated against in today's society. The message underlines the intersection of race, class, and environmental injustice, addressing the effects of natural disasters on vulnerable populations.



*Figure 18 Beyoncé and her dancers in an abandoned swimming pool*

Another visual features Beyoncé and her Black female backup dancers, who are standing in an X-Formation in tribute to civil rights leader Malcolm X. Malcolm X advocated for the empowerment and liberation of Black people, and the fact that Black women are now standing in formation in homage to Malcolm X, serves as a symbol of strength and unity among Black women. Further, they have come a long way to the point where they are now seeking liberation and reclaiming their identities and voices. As she depicts the images in the music video, she addresses how far the Black community has come, showing that the American Dream is being successfully obtained by people that share her heritage. By portraying these strong Black characters in her video, she pushes back against historical stereotypes which prevented Black people from achieving this status in the past.



*Figure 19 Beyoncé and female dancers in "X-Formation"*

Throughout Beyoncé's music video, she continues to support and empower not only Black women but, overall, the Black community. As the song reaches its end, Beyoncé incorporates colorful and wealthy images of Black people, to emphasize the achievements that have been made. Furthermore, they convey the message that through collective effort, the Black community can achieve greatness together. Similarly, the visual of a wealthy-looking Black man in a black suit holding a newspaper with Martin Luther King on the cover in one hand and a box of cakes in the other. The title "The Truth, More than a Dreamer" resonates with the audience, asserting that the messages in this music video and

the empowerment of Black people she presents through her art is simply “the Truth.” This celebration of achievements amplifies the theme of intersectionality by underscoring the strength and potential of the Black community for the world to see and affirming the multifaceted identities and experiences of Black individuals.



Figure 20 A colorful representation of wealthy Black people



Figure 21 A Black Man holding a newspaper showing Martin Luther

### Black beauty

The lyrics and visuals to this song emphasize a strong message of self-acceptance, celebration of Blackness, and the importance of embracing diverse body types. Beyoncé acknowledges the challenges Black women face in navigating multiple forms of oppression in her song, celebrating the intersecting identities and experiences of Black women. Lyrics such as, “I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros, I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils,” showcases Black features in an uplifting way. The lyrics challenge Eurocentric beauty standards that have historically marginalized Black women, and Beyoncé underlines the importance of self-love and the acceptance of one’s physical appearance through her art. In the video, black beauty is further celebrated and reinforced through the visuals. The scenes portray a variety of Black women, as well as little Black girls (including her daughter Blue Ivy) with different body types, different hairstyles, and skin tones. Ultimately, this diverse representation challenges the mainstream beauty norms of Black women. “Formation” and its visuals showcase a powerful exploration of intersectionality, challenging the narrow beauty standards and urges Black women to embrace their unique features. Beyoncé sends a strong message stating that beauty comes in many forms and that it is certainly not limited to one single conception. Furthermore, Beyoncé, including her daughter and other young Black girls and the way she represents them in a positive and celebratory way, sends a powerful message of encouragement for the next generation. Telling young Black girls that they are beautiful, worthy and should not be limited, instead they should feel free from the pressure to fulfill certain beauty standards.



Figure 22 Beyoncé representing Black beauty



Figure 23 Beyoncé's daughter Blue Ivy in the middle



Figure 24 More representation of Black beauty



*Figure 25 Diverse representation of female dancers highlighting their natural hair*

### Police brutality

In the context of police brutality, Black women face unique challenges and forms of violence, which is why Beyoncé addresses the intersectional experience of Black women and emphasizes the ways in which Black women are disproportionately affected by this form of racial injustice. The visuals powerfully reinforce this message by showing a young Black boy dancing in front of a line of ten white police officers dressed in riot gear uniforms, positioned in front of a flashing police car. The image serves as a portrayal of the systemic problems within the law enforcement system in the United States, specifically highlighting the drastic issues of racial profiling. The scene refers to the numerous innocent Black children that have lost their lives as a result of police brutality.

Continuing the scene, the Black boy is seen holding up his hands to symbolize that he comes in peace. Surprisingly, the police officers mimic this gesture, portraying a completely different situation from what society is used to. This powerful scene carries the vision of an ideal of the American Dream, where Black people are treated equally. In addition to the scene, the graffiti on the wall reading “Stop shooting us,” supports the message of the Black Lives Matter movement and emphasizes the critical need for an end to violence within the Black communities. This scene highlights the need for justice and equality, demanding action



to put an end to the racial injustices Black people face.



*Figure 26 Black little boy dancing in front of 10 white Policemen*



*Figure 27 Black little boy and white Policemen holding hands up in peace*

The concept of intersectionality between white male power dynamics and their impact on Black men and women is a crucial aspect to consider confronting the theme of police brutality in Beyoncé's "Formation". This refers to the ongoing historical, as well as social and cultural institutional systems that favor white males and ignore and marginalize Black people, especially Black women. Unfortunately, these deeply entrenched power dynamics persist in today's society and lead to the sustaining of systemic racism and gender inequality. For Black women, their experiences of police brutality include a range of intersecting factors, such as race, gender, and class. The visuals of the little Black boy in

“Formation,” highlight the impact police brutality can have for Black women. It functions as a powerful reminder of the harm that Black children, in particular Black boys face within the criminal justice system. Moreover, for Black women this visual stimulates a scope of emotions related for instance to their role of motherhood, as well as their experiences of witnessing unjust treatment of their loved ones, which could include their sons, nephews, as well as Black women, caused by law enforcement. By incorporating such imagery, Beyoncé urges her audience to confront these harsh realities of police brutality on the Black communities. “Formation” tackles the intersectionality of race, gender, and class, demanding a destruction of the deeply rooted power structures that sustain systemic racism in our society.

#### “Formation” at the Super Bowl

The Super Bowl is not only a championship game but also a highly anticipated event known for its commercials and halftime performances. Since 1967, the event has become one of America’s most popular sporting events, attracting thousands of fans from all over the world. In 2016, the Super Bowl was watched by an estimated 111.9 million viewers, with headline performances by Coldplay, Bruno Mars and Beyoncé Knowles (NBCSports). Since the event is considered a family-friendly event, the musical acts chosen for the halftime show are supposed to be non-controversial and especially marketable. There was no way anyone would have predicted Beyoncé would change her performance from one of a safe artist to one who embraces racial and political themes.

Beyoncé’s “Formation” live performance was a bold and powerful expression of her solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. She featured an all-Black group of female dancers representing their afros, to signify Black pride, and all of them wore berets as a symbol of activism and revolution, just as it was worn by the Black Panthers. The dancers all black leather outfits, and the use of the “X” formation was Beyoncé’s way of addressing

social and political issues through her art. By incorporating Malcolm X's outspoken advocacy for Black rights into her performance, Beyoncé demonstrated her commitment to acknowledging and celebrating the legacy of Black leaders who fought for justice. Her willingness to take a risk for the right cause is evident in her choice to speak out about these issues during such an event, despite knowing that it could have damaged her brand.



*Figure 28 Beyoncé and her dancers in "X-Formation" at the Super Bowl in 2016*

There were political voices that disagreed with her message at the artist's live performances. For instance, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani stated to FOX News, "This is football, not Hollywood, and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive" (Chokshi).

With this performance, Beyoncé showed that she is unafraid to use her platform to address the ongoing issues and injustices faced by Black communities. By expressing her commitment to empowering the Black Lives Matter movement, Beyoncé delivered a powerful declaration of agency and resistance, leaving an impactful message for the world to see. Furthermore, the inclusion of afros and berets in the live performance is a significant representation of intersectionality. The visual elements of her live performance reinforce the

song's themes of celebrating Blackness, while also emphasizing Beyoncé's choice to embrace activism, challenging the mainstream expectations to speak out against racial injustice and oppression, in particular those concerning the experiences of Black women.

As strong as her Super Bowl live performance was, the ending of her music video carries a just as powerful message. The singer writes, "Girl, I hear some thunder, Golly, look at that water, boy, oh Lord," while Beyoncé is sinking, surrounded by water, giving the expression of saying, "I'm done, that's all I have to say" about the issues in society. Furthermore, she states "If I go down, we all go down together," referring to the sinking police car. In this moment, the artist is reminding the world that events such as Hurricane Katrina cannot be ignored and addressing her anger toward the government who did not come to the aid of the innocent Black community who could do nothing but watch the water rise. Almost 20 years later, there are still parts of New Orleans that have not been restored and Black communities that are suffering as a consequence of the hurricane and the subsequent pushing out of Black communities, such as in the Tremé, one of the oldest African American neighborhoods in New Orleans. Drawing from Nina Simone's quote, "You can't help it. An artist's duty, as far as I'm concerned, is to reflect the times" (Price), it appears that this is exactly what Beyoncé is doing.



Figure 29 Beyoncé lying on drowning Police car

The lyrics of the song “Formation” and the additional imagery presented through her music video showcase a compelling narrative supporting the Black community in society. The lyrics and visuals of “Formation” depict a very powerful message and present Beyoncé as a strong, sexy, and fierce Black warrior who has gathered her soldiers to fight for “what’s theirs because they slay.”

Additionally, Beyoncé’s exploration of intersectionality extends beyond beauty standards and highlights the experiences and challenges faced by Black women. The artist emphasizes the interconnected identities that Black women hold - being Black and female - and depicts how these factors shape their lives in society. Moreover, Beyoncé underlines the unique struggles the Black community, and Black women face, while also celebrating their strength and resistance. To me, “Formation” is not just a song, it is a powerful anthem that highlights cultural empowerment and social awareness.

Beyoncé continuously succeeds in being one of the most prevalent voices and charismatic warriors of the culture. The singer remains to be an inspiration, and hopefully, the younger generations of Black girls will follow in her footsteps one day, preserving and continuing what she started. As Beyoncé sang in her song “Be Alive” at the 2022 Academy Awards, she reminded the world of the progress achieved by Black women and what it took to get this far.

“I got a million miles on me  
 They want to see how far I'll go  
 The path was never paved with gold (Gold)  
 We worked and built this on our own (Own)  
 And can't nobody knock it if they tried  
 This is hustle personified  
 Look how we've been fighting to stay alive  
 So when we win we will have pride  
 Do you know how much we have cried?  
 How hard we had to fight?

(It feels so good to be alive) It feels so, so, so, so good  
 (Got all my sisters by my side) I got all my sisters by my side  
 (Couldn't wipe this black off if I tried) Black off if I tried  
 (That's why

I lift my head with pride) Now we're sitting on top of the world again.”

## CONCLUSION

My daughter, [REDACTED], was born in Munich, Germany.

Throughout her life, I hope to expose her to a variety of cultures and empower her to embrace her own identity with pride.

On July 9th, 2023, I was fortunate enough to take my daughter to her first-ever concert, Beyoncé's *Renaissance* Tour in Toronto, a momentous experience that I will forever cherish. As we stepped into the vibrant atmosphere, the stage came alive with sparkling lights and fascinating visuals, and the energy of the crowd was simply magical. When Beyoncé appeared on stage, glowing with grace and power, it was such a special moment witnessing my daughter's eyes light up with excitement and joy. Throughout the concert, Beyoncé's performance was a masterful piece of art, celebrating empowerment and unity while incorporating her powerful vocals and dance moves, supported by a diverse group of background dancers. Her background dancers added to this extraordinary show by acknowledging the diversity in race, gender, and individuality. Additionally, their energetic performances represented a medley of identities, coming together in unity and empowerment. Beyoncé's intentional choice to include such a variety of dancers further acknowledges the importance of inclusivity and breaking down barriers in society. *Renaissance* was released on July 29th, 2022, and as Beyoncé described it in *Renaissance*'s liner notes, "Creating this album allowed me a place to dream and to find escape during a scary time for the world. It allowed me to feel free and adventurous at a time when little else was moving" (Carlin). And this is exactly what it felt like, a big celebration of cultural identities, resilience, and the beauty of simply being yourself. The full setlist for the concert consisted of 45 songs, ranging from her early songs, "Dangerously in Love," "Crazy in Love," "Formation," "Run the World (Girls)," to all the new songs of her latest album *Renaissance*. Her performance demonstrated the power of music to unite people and uplift them as she took her audience on

a journey across her inspiring career. Moreover, the diverse crowd came together as one, celebrating and singing together the themes of love, empowerment, and self-expression that Beyoncé's music represents.

After demonstrating how Beyoncé's artistry aligns with the key themes of Black feminist thought, it becomes clear that her image plays a crucial role in reaching and resonating with her audience. As a cultural icon, Beyoncé strategically utilizes her platform to address crucial issues and advocates for equality, in particular for Black women. Throughout her career, from her time with Destiny's Child to her solo success, she has continuously evolved as an artist and masterly delivered powerful messages of empowerment, sisterhood, and intersectionality. An in-depth analysis of her songs has revealed Beyoncé's celebration of collective experience, unity, and support among women. Furthermore, her commitment to feminism is highlighted through her work, addressing the themes of sisterhood, female empowerment, and intersectionality. The songs discussed, such as "Run the World (Girls)" and "Flawless," highlight powerful messages of unity, female empowerment, the urge to break free from societal norms, as well as embracing one's individuality. Additionally, the song "Formation" stands out as a powerful song by addressing racial injustice and the power of gender. In this track, Beyoncé shares her experiences as an African American woman and emphasizes the strength, resourcefulness, and agency of Black women. Beyoncé's ability to utilize popular music as a platform for promoting Black feminist thought is what sets her apart from other artists. The way she incorporates elements of her own lived experiences and cultural identity into her music allows her to challenge limited and discriminative concepts of American identity. Lyrically and visually, the artist encourages her listeners to realize how similar their lives are to hers, ultimately finding empowerment in their own uniqueness.



When reflecting on Beyoncé's new album and tour *Renaissance*, it becomes clear that the term "Renaissance" does not only signify her personal story and transformation throughout her career but also demonstrates the need for a global rebirth. Furthermore, it also signifies a rebirth of her own artistic identity and a moment of reaffirming her beliefs and agency. The album represents a cultural and social awakening, urging society to continue to confront remaining racial injustice and discrimination and to keep in mind that despite the progress, there is still work to be done. Furthermore, it can be seen as a mirror, a reflection of a society that is struggling with persistent racial inequalities and injustices. By highlighting the need for a global rebirth, Beyoncé's art serves as a reminder to reconsider the progress that has been made so far and more importantly, it raises the question about the scope of our society's development, and whether we have truly reached a state of fairness and equality. The term "Renaissance" urges us to address the deeply rooted issues that cannot be easily erased. In my thesis, it is important to note that while "Renaissance" is a powerful statement and call to our society, my study dives deeper into the themes of sisterhood, female empowerment, and Black feminism and its connection to Black feminist thought. Furthermore, my thesis aligns itself with Beyoncé's call of looking at things from a new and fresh perspective. It acts as a space where academic meets artistic expression, showing the importance of change through a "Renaissance," and how an artist such as Beyoncé can serve as a tool for societal change.

Witnessing Beyoncé's performance on stage felt like a signal of hope for the future of our generation, and while I reflect on the impact she has on her audience and the way she utilizes popular music to address critical issues, I am hoping that her messages will be acknowledged even further. I hope that her art will inspire more artists to take the risk to speak out about systemic inequalities and support the voices of marginalized communities. Moreover, I hope that popular culture will be acknowledged as a powerful force for social

change, where artists such as Beyoncé embrace intersectionality and advocate for a more inclusive society. Beyoncé's art serves as an example of using popular music to address ongoing societal issues and promote the key messages of Black feminist thought. She has the ability to connect with her audience on a personal level while addressing global and political themes, which has allowed her to be a leading Black woman in the music industry and an inspiring icon who advocates for social change. By incorporating her cultural heritage and identity and sharing her personal experiences as a Black woman, Beyoncé challenges the status quo and motivates her listeners to speak up and take action for a more inclusive world.

Leaving the concert that day, hand in hand with my daughter, I knew that this experience will forever hold a special place in our hearts. I am hoping that my daughter will be able to live in a world where the principles of sisterhood, female empowerment, and intersectionality are a crucial part of society. I am hoping that my daughter can experience a world where diversity and inclusivity are celebrated and not ignored.

This thesis has demonstrated the journey of Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter, "Queen Bey," as an artist and cultural icon and has presented the power of popular music as a medium for addressing important social issues. Just as the feminist movement has evolved, so has Beyoncé evolved from a young artist in Destiny's Child to a powerful solo performer who embraces her identity while advocating for the empowerment of marginalized communities, especially Black women. Additionally, by challenging the controlling images and stereotypes, Beyoncé's art aligns with the historical foundations of Black feminism, encouraging Black women to speak up and reclaim their agency and power. Beyoncé's artistic journey illustrates that popular music is not just a form of entertainment but rather a tool for social change as well.

I hope to see a society in the future that has dismantled the controlling images such as the "Mammy," "Jezebel," "Sapphire," and the "Tragic Mulatto" that have been ingrained in

society for far too long. Instead, I am hoping for a world that celebrates the strength of Black women by replacing stereotypes and is accepting of their unique identity. Furthermore, a future where every individual, no matter their race, can live without the unease of discrimination or violence. Ultimately, a world where the intersections of race, gender, and other socioeconomic factors are accepted and celebrated, eventually leading to a more inclusive society for everyone.

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## APPENDIX

**A: Lyrics to “Run the World (Girls)” by Beyoncé Knowles**

Girls, we run this mother (Yeah!)  
 Girls, we run this mother (Yeah!)  
 Girls, we run this mother (Yeah!)  
 Girls, we run this mother girls

Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!

Some of them men think they freak this  
 Like we do, but no they don't  
 Make your check, come at their neck  
 Disrespect us, no they won't  
 Boy, don't even try to touch this (Touch this)  
 Boy, this beat is crazy (Crazy)  
 This is how they made me (Made me)  
 Houston, Texas, baby  
 This goes out to all my girls  
 That's in the club rocking the latest  
 Who will buy it for themselves and get more money later  
 I think I need a barber  
 None of these niggas can fade me  
 I'm so good with this, I remind you, I'm so hood with this  
 Boy, I'm just playing, come here, baby  
 Hope you still like me, F-U, pay me

My persuasion can build a nation  
 Endless power, with our love we can devour  
 You'll do anything for me

Who run the world? Girls! Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!

Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls! Girls!

It's hot up in here  
 DJ don't be scared to run this, run this back  
 I'm repping for the girls who taking over the world  
 Help me raise a glass for the college grads  
 41' Rollie to let you know what time it is, check  
 You can't hold me (You can't hold me)  
 I work my nine to five and I cut my check  
 This goes out to all the women getting it in  
 Get on your grind  
 To the other men that respect what I do  
 Please accept my shine  
 Boy, you know you love it  
 How we're smart enough to make these millions  
 Strong enough to bear the children (Children)  
 Then get back to business  
 See, you better not play me (Me)  
 Oh, come here, baby  
 Hope you still like me  
 F-U, pay me

My persuasion can build a nation  
 Endless power, with our love we can devour  
 You'll do anything for me

Who run the world? Girls! Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run this mother? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!  
 Who run the world? Girls!

Who are we? What we run? The world  
 (Who run this mother? Yeah!)  
 Who are we? What we run? The world  
 (Who run this mother? Yeah!)



Who are we? What do we run? We run the world  
 (Who run this mother? Yeah!)  
 Who are we? What we run? We run the world  
 Who run the world? Girls! Girls!  
 (AZLyrics)

**B: Lyrics to “\*\*\*Flawless” by Beyoncé Knowles (feat. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie)**

Your challengers are a young group from Houston  
 Welcome Beyoncé, Lativia, Nina, Nicky, Kelly, and Ashley  
 The hip-hop rappin' "Girls Tyme"

I'm out that H-Town coming coming down  
 I'm coming down, drippin' candy on the ground  
 H, H-Town, town, I'm coming down  
 Coming, coming down, dripping candy on the ground

8 I know when you were little girls  
 9 You dreamt of being in my world  
 10 Don't forget it, don't forget it  
 11 Respect that, bow down bitches (Crown!)  
 12 I took some time to live my life  
 13 But don't think I'm just his little wife  
 14 Don't get it twisted, get it twisted  
 15 This my shit, bow down bitches  
 16 Bow down bitches, bow bow down bitches (Crown)  
 17 Bow down bitches, bow bow down bitches (Crown)  
 18 H-Town vicious  
 19 H, H-Town vicious  
 20 I'm so crown crown, bow down bitches

21 I'm out that H-Town, coming coming down  
 22 I'm coming down, drippin' candy on the ground

23 H, H-Town town  
 24 I'm coming down  
 25 Coming, coming down  
 26 Drippin' candy on the ground

27 We teach girls to shrink themselves  
 28 To make themselves smaller  
 29 We say to girls  
 30 "You can have ambition  
 31 But not too much

32 You should aim to be successful  
33 But not too successful  
34 Otherwise you will threaten the man."

35 Because I am female  
36 I am expected to aspire to marriage  
37 I am expected to make my life choices  
38 Always keeping in mind that  
39 Marriage is the most important  
40 Now marriage can be a source of  
41 Joy and love and mutual support  
42 But why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage  
43 And we don't teach boys the same?  
44 We raise girls to see each other as competitors  
45 Not for jobs or for accomplishments  
46 Which I think can be a good thing  
47 But for the attention of men  
48 We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings  
49 In the way that boys are  
50 Feminist: the person who believes in the social  
51 Political, and economic equality of the sexes

52 You wake up, flawless  
53 Post up, flawless  
54 Ridin' 'round in it, flawless  
55 Flossin' on that, flawless  
56 This diamond, flawless  
57 My diamond, flawless  
58 This rock, flawless  
59 My rock, flawless  
60 I woke up like this  
61 I woke up like this  
62 We're flawless, ladies. Tell 'em  
63 I woke up like this  
64 I woke up like this  
65 We're flawless, ladies. Tell 'em  
66 Say, "I look so good tonight."  
67 God damn, God damn  
68 Say, "I look so good tonight."  
69 God damn, God damn, God damn

70 Momma taught me good home training  
71 My Daddy taught me how to love my haters

72 My sister told me I should speak my mind  
73 My man made me feel so God damn fine, I'm flawless!

74 You wake up, flawless  
75 Post up, flawless  
76 Riding 'round in it, flawless  
77 Flossing on that, flawless  
78 This diamond, flawless  
79 My diamond, flawless  
80 This rock, flawless  
81 My rock, flawless  
82 I woke up like this  
83 I woke up like this  
84 We're flawless, ladies. Tell 'em  
85 I woke up like this  
86 I woke up like this  
87 We're flawless, ladies. Tell 'em  
88 Say, "I look so good tonight."  
89 God damn, God damn  
90 Say, "I look so good tonight."  
91 God damn, God damn, God damn

92 The Judges give champion "Skeleton Crew" 4 stars  
93 A perfect score  
94 And the challenger "Girls Tyme" receives 3 stars  
95 "Skeleton Crew". Champions once again  
96 Congratulations. We'll see you next week  
(AZLyrics)

**C: Lyrics to “Formation” by Beyoncé Knowles**

- 1 What happened at the New Wil'ins?
- 2 Bitch, I'm back by popular demand
  
- 3 Y'all haters corny with that Illuminati mess
- 4 Paparazzi, catch my fly and my cocky fresh
- 5 I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress (Stylin')
- 6 I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces
- 7 My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana
- 8 You mix that Negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama
- 9 I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros
- 10 I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils
- 11 Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me
- 12 I got hot sauce in my bag, swag
  
- 13 Oh yeah, baby, oh yeah I, oh, oh, yes, I like that
- 14 I did not come to play with you hoes, haha
- 15 I came to slay, bitch
- 16 I like cornbreads and collard greens, bitch
- 17 Oh, yes, you best believe it
  
- 18 Y'all haters corny with that Illuminati mess
- 19 Paparazzi, catch my fly and my cocky fresh
- 20 I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress (Stylin')
- 21 I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces
- 22 My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana
- 23 You mix that Negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama
- 24 I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros
- 25 I like my Negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils
- 26 Earned all this money but they never take the country out me
- 27 I got hot sauce in my bag, swag
  
- 28 I see it, I want it, I stunt; yellow-bone it
- 29 I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it
- 30 I twirl on them haters, albino alligators
- 31 El Camino with the seat low, sippin' Cuervo with no chaser
- 32 Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)
- 33 Get what's mine (Take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star)
- 34 'Cause I slay (Slay), I slay (Hey), I slay (OK), I slay (OK)
- 35 All day (OK), I slay (OK), I slay (OK), I slay (OK)
- 36 We gon' slay (Slay), gon' slay (OK), we slay (OK), I slay (OK)
- 37 I slay (OK), OK (OK), I slay (OK), OK, OK, OK, OK
- 38 OK, OK, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay

39 OK, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay  
40 Prove to me you got some coordination, 'cause I slay  
41 Slay trick, or you get eliminated

42 When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster, 'cause I slay  
43 When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster, we gon' slay  
44 If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, I slay  
45 Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up, 'cause I  
slay 46 I might get your song played on the radio station, 'cause I slay  
47 I might get your song played on the radio station, 'cause I slay  
48 You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, 'cause I slay  
49 I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making

50 I see it, I want it, I stunt; yellow-bone it  
51 I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it  
52 I twirl on my haters, albino alligators  
53 El Camino with the seat low, sippin' Cuervo with no chaser  
54 Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard)  
55 Take what's mine (Take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star)  
56 'Cause I slay (Slay), I slay (Hey), I slay (OK), I slay (OK)  
57 I slay (OK), I slay (OK), I slay (OK), I slay (OK)  
58 We gon' slay (Slay), gon' slay (OK), we slay (OK), I slay (OK)  
59 I slay (OK), OK (OK), I slay (OK), OK, OK, OK, OK  
60 OK, OK, ladies, now let's get in formation, I slay  
61 OK, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay  
62 Prove to me you got some coordination, 'cause I slay  
63 Slay trick, or you get eliminated, I slay

64 OK, ladies, now let's get in formation, I slay  
65 OK, ladies, now let's get in formation  
66 You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation  
67 Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper

68 Girl, I hear some thunder  
69 Golly, look at that water, boy, oh Lord  
(AZLyrics)