

# A Beyoncé Feminist

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**Abstract**

Beyoncé's album *Beyoncé* is a vexing articulation of twenty-first century mainstream feminism that captivated audiences worldwide. Whether or not feminist scholars, activists, or artists agree with Beyoncé's discourse, her influence on popular culture is undeniable and it would be negligent for those of us invested in women's and gender studies to dismiss the album or its principal artist.

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**Résumé**

L'album *Beyoncé* de Beyoncé est une articulation fâcheuse du courant féministe dominant du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle qui a captivé le public dans le monde entier. Que les universitaires, les militantes ou les artistes féministes soient ou non d'accord avec le discours de Beyoncé, son

I know when you were little girls  
You dreamt of being in my world  
Don't forget it, don't forget it  
Respect that, bow down bitches.  
(Beyoncé, \*\*\*Flawless 2013)

To some extent, it is the mutability of her voice, the impenetrability of her image, the careful choreography of her public persona, and the astute manipulation of audio, visual, and audio-video mediums that position Beyoncé Giselle Knowles Carter as one of the most influential performers of the twenty-first century. Her record-breaking self-titled fifth album, released on December 13, 2013, was a vexing performance of twenty-first century mainstream feminism that captivated audiences worldwide.

The details of the contracts Beyoncé has with corporate stakeholders are private and so there is no way to ascertain the extent to which she controls her public image and messages. What is public knowledge, however, is that she manages herself through her company Parkwood Entertainment, was a writer on each of the seventeen songs on the album *Beyoncé*, and co-produced all but two of them. As Jake Nava, a director of one of the album's videos, said “[Beyoncé]’s been through this process of taking increasing control over her own career and identity” (Goldberg 2014, n.p.). In light of the depth of her participation in multiple aspects of the making of this album, it is unlikely that, at this point in her career, she is merely a corporate puppet who does and says what she is told. Therefore, when Beyoncé explicitly and problematically takes up feminism in the album *Beyoncé*, it is at the very least in part because she wants to. Four months after she did, Beyoncé achieved one of her career goals when she was featured in *Time Magazine*'s (2014) annual “100 Most Influential People” issue (see also Sandberg 2014). The accompanying article references the album *Beyoncé* and cites the song “\*\*\*Flawless” in which Beyoncé calls herself a feminist. Ironically, it was the image of Beyoncé on the cover of that same *Time Magazine* issue that led bell hooks, a foundational Black feminist scholar, to call Beyoncé an “anti-feminist” (The New School 2014). Now, whether or not feminist scholars, activists or artists think that Beyoncé is a feminist or agree with the feminist discourse on her album, her tremendous influence on popular culture is undeniable and hooks’ critique is revealing. That said, it would be negligent for

those of us invested in women’s and gender studies to dismiss the album *Beyoncé*, its principal artist, or hooks’ statement.

Beyoncé describes herself as a “modern day feminist” (Cubarrubia 2013) and the feminism she calls for and portrays in *Beyoncé* is hyper sexual, über rich, and politically ambiguous. Beyoncé, the commercial brand, is a compelling mythical display of capitalist female perfection—one that is categorically unattainable for those unable to mobilize entire industries at their behest. Beyoncé, the celebrity, is a capitalist feminist, one who often attributes her phenomenal success to the trope of the American Dream – the seductive narrative that the right blend of hard work and determination will lead to anyone’s success (Celebrity Universe 2014). Her command of popular culture is exerted not only through her songs, concerts, and interviews but perhaps, most notably, through her production company’s astute use of modes of distribution that are ubiquitous in twenty-first century popular culture (i.e., Instagram, YouTube, Vevo, Facebook, and Tumblr). When Beyoncé releases audio, visuals, or audio-video products, they are able to seep into the back and foreground of girls, young women, and women’s lives as well as the minds of those who make up her male fan base. In fact, the very title of this article comes from a man who was baffled by my friend’s decision not to change her last name to her husband’s and was only able to reconcile this fact with his experience of her as an amicable woman when he surmised: “Oh...she’s a Beyoncé Feminist.” In other words, as I understand his comment, she is empowered *and* non-threatening.

The sheer scope of Beyoncé’s influence is made more notable and worthy of careful contemplation given that she is an African-American woman at time in history when the predominantly white U.S. governments’ capacity to protect and uphold the basic civil rights of African-Americans is questionable. This is, perhaps, no more clearly evident than in the death of Michael Brown, an eighteen-year-old African-American young man who was unarmed when he was shot in broad daylight in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014 by a white police officer named Darren Wilson. Coming three years after the murder of Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his murderer, Brown’s murder became a touchstone—one that saw Black people and their allies vocalize their disgust with anti-black racism. In the days

that followed Brown's death, protestors, journalists and elected officials were arrested, detained, tear-gassed, and shot at with rubber pullets and wooden pellets by the police. What incensed protestors and observers, inside and outside of the U.S., was that Brown's murder was but one in a long list of extrajudicial murders of Black people by white people and/or U.S. law enforcement officials: Sean Bell (23 years old), Rekia Boyd (22 years old), John Crawford (22 years old), Malcolm Ferguson (23 years old), Jonathon Ferrell (24 years old), Ezell Ford (25 years old), Eric Garner (43 years old), Oscar Grant III (22 years old), Aiyana Jones (7 years old), Kathryn Johnston (92 years old), Trayvon Martin (17 years old), Renisha McBride (22 years old), Yvette Smith (45 years old), and Timothy Stansbury (23 years old)—to name some. When these deaths are combined with the disproportionately high rates of incarceration, poverty, and unemployment among African Americans, as compared to white Americans, a grim picture of systemic racial inequality in the U.S. is exposed.

It is within the context of a racially fraught country that Beyoncé, a 35 year old, light-skinned, African American, cis-gendered woman, wife, and mother has managed to use her music, image, and business acumen to catapult herself from pop diva to cultural phenomenon. As *New York Times* critic-at-large Jody Rosen (2014) wrote: "Beyoncé is, as a cultural studies professor might put it, popular culture's most richly multivalent 'text.' The question these days is not, What does the new Beyoncé record sound like? It's, What does Beyoncé mean?" (n.p.). The evolution of the question Rosen asked is most evident to me in the trajectory of the lyrics quoted in the epigraph—from their controversial debut in the single "Bow Down / I Been On" to their reappearance on her most recent album in the song "\*\*\*Flawless." This article begins with a historiography of Beyoncé and then, drawing on feminist, critical race, and performance studies, continues with a close reading of the song "Bow Down / I Been On" and an analysis of Beyoncé's fusion of misogyny and feminist rhetoric in the song "\*\*\*Flawless." It concludes with a reflection on what hooks' description of Beyoncé as an "anti-feminist" suggests about the evolution of Black feminist thought.

## **Beyoncé's Background and Reach**

Beyoncé was born on September 4, 1981 in Houston, Texas. Her father, Mathew Knowles, had a well paying job at Xerox and her mother, Tina Knowles, owned and operated a hair salon. Beyoncé describes herself as a "really shy" child who "did not speak much" (Subscribe for the Best of Bey! 2011) but, when her parents saw her perform in a dance class she was enrolled in, she says they realized that she was "in heaven...it was where I could step out of my shell and I just felt the most like myself" (Subscribe for the Best of Bey! 2011). As a young child, Beyoncé competed in and won beauty pageants. Beauty pageants require contestants to perform static notions of femininity—ones that affirm white, Euro-centric, upper-middle-class, heterosexual, and patriarchal fantasies of female perfection. Beauty pageants are a performative iteration of the "created image" that Susan Bordo (1993) describes as one "that has the hold on our most vibrant, immediate sense of what *is*, of what matters, of what we must pursue for ourselves" (104). In other words, at a young age, Beyoncé learned how to assess, meet, and exceed the expectations of the "created image" through onstage performances. And, to some extent, it is the performance of that same image that Beyoncé has made the central narrative in her public performances (in audio, visual, and audio/visual mediums) as an entertainer with one central deviation informed by her race. As Aisha Durham (2012) asserts: "Through performance, Beyoncé calls attention to intersecting discourses of racialized sexuality and gender, and she highlights the particular constraints that exist for Black girls and women who also want to express their sexuality in a society where Black bodies are always marked as deviant" (37). That marking is, of course, an off-shoot of the transatlantic slave trade and its practice of using auction blocks as stages where "racial-sexual codes" about female blackness were produced, distributed, and redistributed with impacts that persist in the present day (McKittrick 2006, 80). Beyoncé's long-lasting success, I suggest, is in part due to her constant reference to and exploitation of those same "racial-sexual codes" historically produced on auction blocks that emphasized physiological differences that were "not white and not masculine" (81).

As a child she was also part of a rapping and dancing all female group called Girl's Tyme that

rehearsed in the backyard of her family home and at her mother's hair salon. Soon thereafter, Girls Tyme was shopping for a record deal with a major music label and that pursuit led to the group's performance on Ed McMahon's then popular TV show, *Star Search*—a nationally televised singing competition where winners returned weekly to defend their title. Girls Tyme competed and lost in what Beyoncé describes as a “really defining moment” in her life:

In my mind, we would perform on *Star Search*, we would win, we would get a record deal, and that was my dream at the time. Is [sic] no way in the world, I would have ever imagined losing as a possibility.

You know, I was only nine years old so, at that time, you don't realize that you could actually work super hard and give everything you have and lose. It was the best message for me. (The Official Beyoncé YouTube Channel 2013b)

Eventually, Girls Tyme evolved into a girl group called Destiny's Child that was signed to Columbia Records in 1996. Destiny's Child subsequently went through numerous personnel changes (with Beyoncé as the only constant member) but what finally emerged was the highly successful trio of Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland, and Michelle Williams.

By the time Destiny's Child disbanded in 2005, they had released five albums, sold more than 40 million records worldwide (Kaufman 2005), and won three Grammys (Grammys 2014). Beyoncé launched her solo career in 2003 and, by 2013, her five solo albums were estimated to have sold more than 75 million copies worldwide (Evans 2013). By 2014, she had won seventeen Grammys (Grammys 2014) – along with numerous Emmy Awards, Golden Globe Awards, NAACP Image Awards, Billboard Music Awards, BET Awards, and countless other honours. Beyoncé has acted in films and commercials and has appeared in television shows and documentaries. In 2014, her YouTube channel (housing everything from music videos, to commercials, to interviews) had a total of 140,785,823 views (The Official Beyoncé YouTube Channel 2014). She has had endorsement deals with H & M and Pepsi and owns a line of fragrances. Beyoncé was estimated to have earned \$115 million from June 2013 to June 2014 (Pomerantz 2014) and was named

“the highest-paid black artist of all time” by *Billboard Magazine* (MTV.com 2014).

To some extent, Beyoncé exemplifies what Black feminist have long fought for—the right to a full professional career, her own body, and the space to define the parameters of her existence. She has shown consistency as a consummate performer. A performer's ability to sustain high levels of achievement over decades hinges on a heightened acuity for discipline, skill, and control—rare capabilities that have undoubtedly contributed substantially to Beyoncé's longstanding success and influence. Ironically, these capabilities are downplayed in her public persona in favour of a racialized “created image” of a woman who is beautiful, sexual, and very nice (Bordo 1993). Her choices can be read, as hooks does, as the anti-thesis of what feminist work has historically strived to do (The New School 2014)—a point that is perhaps no better exemplified than in the song “Bow Down / I Been On.”

### “Bow down bitches”

Beyoncé has consistently articulated her awareness of her impact on girls and young woman and she has described the ways in which she has found it stifling to fully express herself within the confines of her perceived responsibility to her fans and popular culture (The Official Beyoncé YouTube Channel 2013b). On March 16, 2013, an image was uploaded to Beyoncé's Tumblr account with a link to a 3 minute and 35 second digital audio recording that opens with the following lyrics: “I know when you were little girls / You dreamt of being in my world / Don't forget it, don't forget it / Respect that, bow down bitches. / I took some time to live my life / But don't think I'm just his little wife / Don't get it twisted, get it twisted / This my shit, bow down bitches” (Beyoncé 2014). The lyric “I took some time to live my life” refers to the time away from recording and performing that she took after the birth of her daughter Blue Ivy in 2012 and “don't think I'm just his little wife” refers to her marriage in 2008 to hip hop mogul Sean “Jay-Z” Carter. The recording “Bow Down / I Been On” is comprised of two distinct songs: the first 1:30 seconds is “Bow Down” produced by Hit Boy and the final 2:00 minutes is “I Been On” produced by Timbaland, Polow Da Don, Sonny Digital, Planet IV and Keyz.

The image posted to Beyoncé's Tumblr to announce her song was of Beyoncé as a child, wearing

an elaborate floor-length pink dress replete with lace, overlay, and what appears to be crinoline. A small gold crown with red details sits atop her head of coiffed loose brown ringlets. A red pageantry sash is draped over her right shoulder; the words are illegible. Beyoncé is framed dead centre; she stands on gleaming hardwood floors in front of a fireplace with an ornate gold screen and a wide white mantel. On the floor behind her sit two large trophies—on either side of her stand at least two larger trophies that tower well above her head and from which other red pageantry sashes are draped or hung. Atop the white mantel are no less than nine golden trophies and one large shimmering tiara. In the midst of all of these displays of competition and success, Beyoncé stands poised, hands placed neatly on either side, lips glossy, smiling comfortably. Superimposed on the image in white full cap typeface are the words “BOW DOWN.” The picture contained a link to Beyoncé’s SoundCloud account where a song entitled “Bow Down / I Been On” was available to listen to and share for free. By 2014, the song had been played on SoundCloud alone a total of 9,426, 226 and reposted from SoundCloud to other social media sites 40,868 times (Beyoncé 2014). These numbers, of course, fail to capture the numerous other ways in which music files are shared across digital media which renders the tracking of the song shares virtually impossible.

The lyrics of this song left the internet divided. The explicit use of the word “bitch” was a departure from Beyoncé’s catalogue that includes the song “Run The World (Girls),” a pop culture manifesto of female empowerment that infantilizes women and constrains female agency to heterosexual displays of sexuality. “Run The World (Girls)” features a protagonist, Beyoncé, who tells the “boys” that they fail to possess the veracity of character necessary to hold court with her and she bolsters her “girls” with lyrics like “My persuasion can build a nation.” When stripped of the captivating production qualities of the music and video, the song’s lyrics tell the familiar tale of female agency residing in women’s capacity to control men through sexuality. Speaking to her “girls” and then to the “boys,” she sings, “Endless power, with our love we can devour / You’ll do anything for me.”

Beyoncé has long described one of the objectives of her art as the empowerment of young women: “[M]y music is bigger than just performing and dancing and

videos. I have a voice and and [sic] I try to teach women how badly we need each other, how much we need to support each other and how anything that you really want you have to work for.” (Celebrity Universe 2014). The juxtaposition of Beyoncé’s talk of female solidarity with her request in “Bow Down / I Been On” for women to supplicate before her is jarring. Some argued that her use of the word “bitch” in the song was an extension of the braggadocio culture of hip hop. It is important to note that the connotative meaning of the word “bitch” has undergone a shift in popular culture that I would argue is being led by Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans culture in the U.S. YouTube sensation Kid Fury and his friend Crissle host a widely popular podcast called “The Read” that provides explicit, comedic coverage of popular culture. Kid Fury and Crissle are hardcore Beyoncé fans who have spoken about her regularly. In a gushing review of one of Beyoncé’s concerts in 2014, they described how, in their euphoria of seeing “Queen Bey” perform, Kid Fury called her “all manner of bitches” and Crissle said that, as she stood on her seat screaming “bitch,” others looked on upset (Kid Fury and Crissle 2014). This led Crissle to clarify in the podcast: “Don’t worry about me calling Beyoncé a bitch, it’s all out of love. Clearly, I am not calling her like a stank ass, ho ass, trollop ass bitch” (Kid Fury and Crissle 2014).

The re-appropriation of language is nothing new but I agree with bell hooks’ succinct analysis that it is a “fantasy that we can recoup the violating image and use it...I used to get so tired of people quoting Audre [Lorde]’s ‘the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ but that was exactly what she meant—that you are not going to destroy this imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy by creating your own version of it even if it serves you to make lots and lots of money” (The New School 2014). In a sense, this is precisely what Beyoncé did with the transformation of “Bow Down / I Been On” into “\*\*\*Flawless.” She said that she recorded over seventy songs for the album *Beyoncé* and selected fourteen because they were the ones that she “kept coming back to” (The Official Beyoncé YouTube Channel 2013a). She chose to tell women to “bow down bitches” with the release of “Bow Down / I Been On” in March 2013. She also chose to continue her misogynist message in “\*\*\*Flawless” but this time she made an attempt to “recoup” (The New

School 2014) and monetize it by affixing it to an excerpt from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TEDx Talk "We Should All Be Feminist" (TEDx Talks 2013).

### Misogyny Meets Feminist Rhetoric

On the evening of December 13, 2013, Beyoncé's Instagram account posted, to its 30 million followers, a video that appeared as a thumbnail image of a black square with all caps block font in a light pink with hints of gray that spelled out the word "Beyoncé." The caption that accompanied the thumbnail/video was "Surprise!" The video was 30 seconds long and was comprised of short clips of music videos, excerpts from songs, and the words "Beyoncé Visual Album 14 songs 17 videos available now" (Beyoncé 2013). Her followers ascertained that the album was available on iTunes and could only be purchased as a complete album – all fourteen songs and seventeen videos. Within twelve hours, Beyoncé's "Surprise!" caused 1.2 million tweets and, within the first three days, it was number 1 on iTunes in 104 countries (Apple Press Info 2013). Beyoncé's "Surprise!" took the internet by storm. What made the release of *Beyoncé* innovative was that an artist of Beyoncé's stature had never before released a full length album without any promotional materials whatsoever—not to mention the staggering, unprecedented feat that was the secret production of seventeen music videos that each boasted full production values. Keeping the album a secret was its own remarkable feat given the number of people who would have been involved in the recording of each song and creation of each video. Beyoncé described the impetus behind the surprise album as a combination of her desire to communicate directly with her fans and have her fans experience her album as an entire art project as opposed to giving them the ability to buy singles (The Official Beyoncé YouTube Channel 2013a). I also suspect that it is more profitable to sell entire albums than it is to sell singles.

Beyoncé is an undeniably astute and highly successful capitalist in an entertainment industry in which commercial success is notoriously fickle and fleeting. She has said that she only competes with herself and that, prior to starting a new album, she reviews the chart positions and content of her most recent album with the intent of surpassing those numbers (Subscribe for the Best of Bey! 2011). So when Beyoncé chose to explicitly address feminism, as she

did in the song "\*\*\*\*Flawless," we can presume at least two things: 1) the song would be heard by millions of people worldwide, especially the girls, young women, and women who are her principal demographic; and 2) she deduced that the kind of feminism she chose to articulate and endorse would be financially lucrative. It is this carefully constructed and executed rubric that permits Beyoncé, in the song "\*\*\*\*Flawless," to call women bitches who need to supplicate to her greatness mere moments before she features the following lengthy 50 second compilation of excerpts from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists" TED talk:

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: the person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.' (TEDx Talks 2013)

Beyoncé said that she happened upon Adichie's lecture one evening when she was watching videos about feminism on YouTube (The Official Beyoncé YouTube Channel 2013b). When listened to in its entirety, Adichie's TED talk is a thoughtful and engaging lecture about the relevance and place of feminism in contemporary Nigeria. Beyoncé's decision to ignore the rich body of Black feminist work from African-American women is an intriguing one—instead she made a foray into transnational feminism, one which simultaneously brought Adichie's voice, name, and literary body of work into popular culture in North America.

The video for "\*\*\*\*Flawless" opens with a nod to Beyoncé's childhood as an entertainer: the footage of Ed McMahon on Star Search introducing the performance

of “the hip hop rapping Girls Tyme” (\*\*Flawless 2013) followed by a brief shot of the six girls as they perform the first dance move of their routine—a high kick. The archival footage transitions into black and white footage of the legs of someone in torn fishnet stockings, a plaid skirt, and weathered black boots. Other lower limbs are visible in this shot too: one pair in distressed faded blue jeans with black leather boots and a pair of feet in well scuffed black leather lace up boots. And then there is a shot of Beyoncé, head bowed, one knee slightly bent, wearing a very short pair of frayed, torn, acid washed, cut off jean shorts, a black leather belt with large metal detailing, fish net stockings, high heeled black leather boots with elaborate chain detailing, a long sleeve plaid shirt tucked in at the waist, rolled up to just below the elbows and buttoned all the way up to the top. Her hair is a wavy, asymmetric blonde bob with dark roots, lowlights, and highlights. The video is populated by men and women dressed and coiffed like skin heads, punks, and rude boys who dance, kiss, lounge, push, and mosh on a filthy cement floor and abandoned leather furniture. The atmosphere is hard, aggressive, sexual; the surfaces are cement, leather, graffiti and the people are white, brown, black, and tattooed and they move in a cinematography that suggests that violence and sex lurks just below the surface. The set, camera work, performances, and production values culminate to create an artistic and compelling video.

For the opening verse, Beyoncé faces the camera and mouths the infamous lines: ‘I know when you were little girls / You dreamt of being in my world / Don’t forget don’t forget it / Respect that bow down’ (\*\*Flawless 2013) but her lips cease to move and her eyes harden into a cocky glare when the word “bitches” plays. Beyoncé’s performance of not mouthing the word ‘bitches’ reads as both a nod to and disavowal of all of the critiques about her use of the word in “Bow Down / I Been On.” Her refusal to mouth the word in her audio-visual performance permits her to conveniently sit on the fence in a controversy that she caused when she first called women “bitches” on “Bow Down / I Been On.” But Beyoncé’s fence sitting is lucrative and her assessment of the need to be politically ambiguous is clear. She and her husband marched in New York after the murder of Trayvon Martin but she remained conspicuously silent on the murder of Michael Brown. Ellis Cashmore’s (2010) analysis of

Beyoncé’s business practices have also made clear the synchronicity of her business and creative choices as evidenced by the invention and monetization of her alter ego Sasha Fierce. That said, I wonder if her team did a cost benefit analysis after the foray into moderate activism that her participation in the Martin rally signaled and chose silence on the Brown story. In that vein, the explicit introduction of “feminism” into Beyoncé’s repertoire and public persona suggests to me that, at the very least, an informal cost benefit analysis was performed with regards to the use of the word ‘feminism’ and the inclusion of excerpts of Adichie’s lecture in “\*\*Flawless.” When taken out of its original context and affixed to the tail end of Beyoncé’s call for supplication, Adichie’s feminist discourse becomes an endorsement of sorts, a container that almost justifies Beyoncé’s misogynist rhetoric because Adichie calls for competition between women (TEDx Talks 2013).

Beyoncé has a history of responding to criticism in this kind of measured, strategic, and indirect way. She sang the U.S. national anthem at Barack Obama’s second inauguration and a mild controversy erupted in the media when it was revealed that she had lip-synched the words. Several days later, at a press conference to discuss her upcoming performance at the NFL Superbowl, she entered the room, asked the press gallery to stand, and gave an excellent acapella performance of the national anthem—an indirect response to the criticism she had received. Similarly, when an audio less surveillance video of her sister, Solange Knowles, physically attacking Beyoncé’s husband in an elevator, was released in 2015, it trended on social media and in the tabloids. Days later, Beyoncé’s team issued an innocuous press release that was followed, several weeks later, by a surprise release on Beyoncé’s website of a remix of “\*\*Flawless” done with rapper Nicki Minaj. In the remix Beyoncé’s said: “Of course some times shit go down when it’s a billion dollars on a elevator” (Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj 2014), referencing rumours of her and her husband’s net worth of one billion dollars.

All this to say that Beyoncé does not just drop or ignore the moments when her name is in the news for reasons she deems unfavourable or unflattering. Instead, she often crafts some kind of indirect response which is, I would argue, precisely why feminism, and a text book definition of it, were dragged into Beyoncé’s pop music coup. She subsequently doubled down on attaching

feminism to her brand as I witnessed when I attended Beyoncé and Jay-Z's live concert tour "On The Run" that included a performance of "Flawless" in which excerpts from Adichie's TED Talk appeared in massive font behind Beyoncé and one of the words selected was "FEMINIST." Her performance of "Flawless" at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards featured the same set design. Ironically the word "bitches" never made it onto the big screen in either performance. Unlike the video, however, she sang the word in performance but opted against its projection on the screen. To be clear, my critique of Beyoncé is not a veiled attempt to police the borders of feminism. Instead, this is an attempt to carefully contemplate how the cultural phenomenon that is Beyoncé has managed to fuse misogyny and feminist rhetoric in popular and financially lucrative ways—much to the ire of some feminists.

### Beyoncé and bell hooks

In 2014, Beyoncé landed the cover of *Time Magazine's* "100 Most Influential People" issue, an accomplishment that she described as "definitely one of the goals in my life. It's something important for me as an artist because it's not about fashion or beauty or music; it's about the influence I've had on culture" (*Time Magazine* 2014). The magazine cover was not one of the plethora of glamour shots of Beyoncé that populate the internet nor did the black and white image conjure the familiar tropes of success, sexuality, and power that one might expect from a mainstream publication. The cover image in question was of Beyoncé clad in white high-waisted underwear, a white halter bra top, and a sheer white crew neck top with elbow length sleeves. The sleeve of the left arm is rolled up to her shoulder and the other is down. The hem of the shirt is partly tucked into the upper right hand side of the underwear. The roots of her hair are dark and lighten into wispy straight, almost invisible strands that end in a slight curl near her waist. It is an image that drew the ire of bell hooks' who in a live-streamed panel discussion said about the image:

[O]ne could deconstruct for days that first she's looking like a deer in headlights and she's wearing the little panty and bra set, you know that some of us wore like when we were 10 or 12. And I'm thinking 'Isn't this interesting that she's being supposedly held up as one of the most

important people in our nation, in the world, and yet why did they image her, I mean she's not glam on the cover of *Time Magazine*; what is that cover meant to say about the Black female body? (The New School 2014)

In my estimation, hooks' reading of the image reflects an attentiveness to the presence of the live audience at the panel and, as such, a desire to entertain and captivate them—hence, the bit about the panty set. Nonetheless, hooks raises a fair question about the implications of pairing an infantilized image of Beyoncé with text about her influence in the world. However, though hooks assumes that Beyoncé was styled for the *Time Magazine* cover by the corporation's employees, I would suggest that it is more reasonable to assume that Beyoncé had significant influence on how she was styled, given her public stature. Were the latter true, it would require that her image be read not as explicit coercion by proxies of corporate stakeholders but as Beyoncé's choice. Erin Hatton and Mary Nell Trautner's (2013) research on the sexualization of women on *Rolling Stone* magazine covers offers productive insights into what 'choice' means for female entertainers in positions of power. They conclude that "Whether or not women 'choose' to be sexualized, the sheer repetition of their sexualization *in combination with* the intensity of their sexualization (but not that of men) suggests that there is very little that is 'individual' about such choices. Instead, we argue, it is necessary to identify the social forces that shape and constrain individual choice" (74).

In Beyoncé's case, there are at least three social forces that warrant consideration: historical legacy, celebrity culture, and corporate expectations. Her historical context is informed by the legacy of female black bodies staged as working-sexual objects on auction blocks across the United States during the transatlantic slave trade (McKittrick 2006). Another social force that influences the range of choices Beyoncé has available with regard to her visual representation is her celebrity status as hip hop culture's southern belle with a voluptuous body and lyrics rife with sexual agency (Durham 2012). Lastly, from a corporate standpoint, Beyoncé has been described as "an industry" (Cashmore 2010, 142) and it is one she vehemently protects as evidenced by her statement: "I've worked too hard and sacrificed too much to do something silly that would mess up the brand I've created all of these years" (qtd. in Cashmore 2010, 142).

It is facile for some feminists to read Beyoncé's choices around her visual representation as those of a simple pop star performing a vexingly familiar narrative of female blackness as young, sexual, and non-threatening. But the reading I am suggesting here is that of a business woman and performer who successfully performs what is expected by social forces that delineate the boundaries of her choices while also subverting them. In the *Time Magazine* cover, that subversion is visible in Beyoncé's gaze that has a hint of an edge to it that reminds me of the ways in which Sarah Baartman disrupted the imaging she was subjected to (Strother 1999). In a sense, Beyoncé disrupts her own brand with a performance within her own performance and, as Stuart Hall (1990) argues, cultural identities are "[n]ot an essence but a positioning" (226). In that regard, Beyoncé uses performances of her self (in visual and audio-visual mediums) to position and re-position herself for the consumption of her audience's boundless fantasies of her gender, sexuality, race, class, and age.

## Conclusion

At worst, Beyoncé's feminism is vacuous rhetoric wielded to monetize feminism and affix it to the Beyoncé brand. At best, her feminism is an extension of her astutely managed and highly successful career that was built, in part, by her ability to perch perfectly on the fence when it comes to her political views. In the case of the song "\*\*\*Flawless," while fence sitting, she spins a captivating tale about a woman who is hyper sexual, über rich, supremely confident and politically ambiguous—a Beyoncé feminist—a woman who rehearses and subverts capitalist patriarchy while she performs messages of female empowerment.

When Beyoncé pinned her call for women to "bow down bitches" to Adichie's call for gender equality, she attached the following refrain: "I woke up like this / I woke up like this / Said I look so good to tonight / Said I look so good tonight / God damn God damn God damn" (\*\*\**Flawless* 2013). This most definitely is at the core of Beyoncé's feminism in "\*\*\*Flawless"—it most certainly emphasizes the "look." Beyoncé and her team were experts in the careful choreography of image production and distribution at precisely the same moment in time when hooks identified visual mediums as "the major assault on feminism in our society" (The New School 2014). Like the meticulously choreographed

images presented by her team, the feminism that Beyoncé argued for is mythological and manufactured. Beyoncé's brand of feminism is a twenty-first century story told by a brilliant performer. It has the vexing capacity to lure spectators into actually believing that misogyny, capitalism, and feminism can not only "look so good" (\*\*\**Flawless* 2013) on Beyoncé but it might just look good on you and me too.

For these very reasons, it is, of course, tempting for feminists to imagine the radical and impactful work that Beyoncé could do were she to make different career choices with regards to her image, music, and corporate affiliations. It is also easy to deride Beyoncé and to move from analytical to inflammatory as hooks did when she said "I see a part of Beyoncé that is in fact anti-feminist" (The New School 2014). When bell hooks decides that a woman who identifies as a feminist is not one, she provides a prime example of a staid Black feminist politic that risks alienating its younger generation or, even worse, becoming a relic with reduced contemporary relevance (Foster 2014). hooks' critique is particularly painful when I think of Patricia Hill Collins (1990) assertion that the "distinction between knowledge and wisdom, and the use of experience as the cutting edge dividing them, has been key to Black women's survival" (208). hooks' reading of Beyoncé leaves little to no room for Beyoncé's personal "experience" to determine what is necessary for her own "survival" as a Black woman.

My twenty-first century Black feminist thoughts are messy. My criticisms of Beyoncé are as intellectually complex as my admiration of her success as an artist and businesswoman navigating the institutionalized racism and patriarchy. The messiness of contemporary Black feminist thought means that I, and others like me, can abhor Beyoncé's feminist politics and root unabashedly for her continued domination of the music industry (Foster 2014). It also means that we can understand her feminist politics and the mere presence of her sexualized body in public view as a contestation of the "whiteness of mainstream feminism" (Weidhase 2015, 130). This is precisely because many of us long to see reflections of our own potential in Beyoncé's images of success. hooks' comments suggest that she is painfully out of touch with this evolution in Black feminist thought and is seemingly unwilling to relinquish "feminist authority" and make way for "popular feminism" (Hollows 2000, 203). When feminists deploy messy twenty-first century

Black feminist thought to root for Beyoncé, it is not a demonstration of uncritical cheerleading. It is instead a profound expression of sisterhood that longs for critical space to be Black, feminist, and fly while thoroughly enjoying the spoils of capitalism. I would not call that anti-feminist but I would certainly call it messy.

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