On 13 December 2013, Beyoncé surprised fans and the music industry with the unexpected release of her fifth studio album, *BEYONCÉ*. Deemed a ‘visual album’, *BEYONCÉ* moved beyond popular music convention to include visuals for each audio track. Many of the visual texts offered as part of the album render visions of Beyoncé that counter her polished pop star image in ways that were only previously seen through the guise of her alter ego ‘Sasha Fierce’. Through her performances, Beyoncé calls on specific politics of both race and gender, and provokes questions about the intersection of feminism, performance, and visibility in popular culture. In particular, *BEYONCÉ* is an album that began a sea change in Beyoncé’s representation. This chapter explores how *BEYONCÉ* displays a hip hop feminist sensibility that emphasizes the importance of feminism to the lives of black women through a politicized hip hop aesthetic. I ask, how might an intersectional approach to popular music studies – one that attends to the politics of gender, race, and class – enable a reading of *BEYONCÉ* as a (hip hop) feminist text? Emily Lordi suggests that *BEYONCÉ* is about “testing, respecting, and dissolving borders between different facets of the self; between sound and vision; fantasy and reality; artist and public; the bodies of lovers; mother and child; sincerity and satire; provocative ratchetness and plain old bad taste” (2013). Indeed, *BEYONCÉ* dissolves boundaries within the self – gone is the alter ego of Sasha Fierce. Instead, the album presents a more nuanced representation of the intersectionality of black women’s lives.

As a theoretical framework, intersectionality is an “account of power” (Cooper 2015) that attends to the particular forms of oppression and subjugation faced by black women in their lived experiences. On this album, Beyoncé’s embodiment of black femininity provides a forceful rebuttal to anti- and post-feminist thought in a form that acknowledges the intersectionality of black women’s subjectivity and highlights the negotiation of political and social meaning through popular music. *BEYONCÉ* offers a provocative and explorative narrative that unfolds at the intersection of race, class, and gender. Unlike many of her contemporaries, Beyoncé has avoided the post-feminist trend of shunning feminism. Instead, she proudly declares herself a feminist and, consequently, calls attention to the ongoing necessity for feminist interventions. By sonically and visually resisting a singular, flattened identity, *BEYONCÉ* breaks free of the restrictive scripts, or what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as “controlling images”, of black womanhood that negatively portray black women as
“stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mommas” (Collins 2008, 67) and attempt to limit identity to a handful of stable, and denigrated, categories.

**Hip hop feminism**

Hip hop feminism, which is informed by black feminist thought, frames this chapter. As Whitney Peoples articulates, hip hop feminists “have been influenced by both the feminist movement and by hip-hop culture, and borrow core themes from both for the development of their own identity [...] to bridge the divide between hip-hop and feminism” (2007, 26). For many who assume mainstream feminism to be irrelevant or incompatible with their lived experience, hip hop feminism interrogates the complexity and contradiction of contemporary gender politics to offer a perspective that is both critical and accessible outside of academia. Black feminism has traditionally sought to make the experiences of diverse women visible in its analysis of the intersecting conditions of sexism, classism, and racism. In particular, hip hop feminism is a generationally and culturally specific one that, in spite of post-feminist and post-racial rhetoric, takes seriously the concerns of the hip hop generation. As one of its core principles, hip hop feminism makes use of intersectionality as an analytical tool for analyzing complex issues of gender and racial inequality, especially within the realm of popular culture. Such a framework enables analyses of black cultural performance and recognizes the hip hop feminist perspective as a critical, self-reflexive, and generative one. One critical tool of this perspective is the hip hop aesthetic, which Brittney Cooper outlines: “First, it uses a kind of social alchemy that transforms lack into substance. . . . Second, hip-hop music and cultural expression privilege a well-honed facility for defiance” and, lastly, “hip-hop aesthetics privilege street consciousness and cultural literacy” (2013, 56). When Jay-Z tells Beyoncé to “talk your shit” on ‘Upgrade U’, it is not to offer masculine validation of her accomplishments. Instead, he is calling on the aesthetics of hip hop to embolden Beyoncé to take pride and power in her position as a talented and successful black woman artist. Attending to the dynamics of hip hop culture allows for a reading of such utterances as part of the symbolic and significant exchange of endorsements common in a culture where artists rely on the participation of their audience in the construction of their performance and cultural capital. With these aesthetic qualities in mind, I read BEYONCÉ as a hip hop feminist work. Sonic, lyrical, and visual layers each provide a rich narrative that complicates, reiterates, and contradicts presumptions about the production of meaning in Beyoncé’s star image while mapping the album’s hip hop feminist sensibility.

Beyoncé’s embodiment of black femininity, at times steeped in the aesthetics of hip hop, carries a specific burden of representation. In recent debates about feminism, her embodiment has become a site of contestation over matters of race and gender. As Nathalie Wiedhase argues, “Beyoncé’s body does not contest her feminist status, but instead her body contests the whiteness of mainstream feminism” (2015, 130). Many white feminists, for example, took issue with her celebration of motherhood and her decision to name her tour the ‘Mrs. Carter World Tour’. Those who criticized this move overlooked an important note: black women’s marriageability has frequently been a topic of discussion in mainstream media that seemingly questions if black women can ‘have it all’. Thus, naming her tour in such a way signals the importance of her identity as a married black woman in addition to her career. The tension between feminism and the patriarchal conventions of marriage offers context but does not preclude a successful black woman celebrating her marriage as a way to counter the denigrating narrative of black women being unsuited for marriage.
The body is a specific site in which feminist tensions become visible. Tamara Harris suggests that the “judgment of how Beyoncé expresses her womanhood is emblematic of the way women in the public eye are routinely picked apart – in particular, it’s a demonstration of the conflicting pressures on black women and the complicated way our bodies and relationships are policed” (2013). Harris argues that the idea that feminist critique and the display of one’s body cannot co-exist is perplexing in a time when feminists routinely declare a woman’s right to her own body. Such critiques raise questions as to why Beyoncé’s performance of femininity and sexuality is read as problematic. Harris suggests that, unlike Madonna, “Beyoncé’s use of her body is criticized as thoughtless and without value beyond male titillation, providing a modern example of the age-old racist juxtaposition of animalistic black sexuality vs. controlled, intentional, and civilized white sexuality” (2013). One egregious example of this is a New York Post writer declaring Jay-Z a “poor excuse for a husband” for “letting” his wife perform a risqué song at the 2014 Grammys; similarly, UK Metro newspaper ran a story critiquing the same performance under a headline with the word ‘whore’ in scare quotes. Part of the critiques of her performance hinges on the faulty assumptions that motherhood marks the end of sexuality for women (“aren’t you a mother now!!?”, one person quoted in the UK Metro article declares). Though this assumption of motherhood limiting women’s sexual expression is often applied to women across identities of race and ethnicity, the black mother and/or wife must often work against such stereotypes as they are magnified by additional race- and class-based oppressions.

Critiques of Beyoncé’s performance demonstrate the power of what Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” of black womanhood, which include oppressive stereotypes about black women’s sexuality, power, and morality (2008, 67). The Jezebel or whore stereotype deems black women’s sexuality as wanton, immoral, or hypersexual. This stereotype works not only to limit black women’s power of sexual expression by any measure, it also justifies historical and continuing sexual abuse of black women. The Jezebel figure is presumed to be an immoral one who cannot be offended or assaulted because she is read as sexually aggressive and promiscuous. This is one of the scripts of black femininity (i.e. the ‘hot momma’) that Beyoncé frequently confronts in her performances. In her solo career, she has taken various measures to maintain her respectability as a black woman performer. One of these measures includes the use of an alter ego to coincide with the release of her double album I Am . . . Sasha Fierce (2008). Under the alter ego guise, Beyoncé – the middle-class, respectable, normative ‘girl-next-door’ – transforms into the dominant and fearlessly sexual Sasha Fierce. As Regina Bradley perceptively articulates, Beyoncé demonstrates “a dichotomy of grit and grace, two polarized representations of black femininity that only co-exist via performances of alter ego(s)” (2013). Alternatively, Ellis Cashmore argues that “Beyoncé is at the centre of an immaculately ordered industry in which ethnic divisions mean nothing and racism is imperceptible” (2010, 139). However, I understand the Sasha Fierce alter ego to be not just a racialized and gendered response to the reception of black women performers, but also a gender-queer performance that references black and Latino gay ballroom culture. Though Cashmore may insist that Beyoncé “has not presented us with a drama of multiple identities, reinvention, the merciless pursuit of fame and envy that purports to tell us something significant about modernity and ourselves [. . .] nor about the perils of marriage and motherhood” (2010, 138) (which he credits Madonna and Britney Spears with doing), alter ego Sasha Fierce and the release of BEYONCÉ (2013) offer strong counter-narratives to both the ‘controlling images’ of black womanhood and the carefully controlled separation of the public life from the private in Beyoncé’s representation.
The thematic and visual shift in Beyoncé’s image can be attributed to changes in her professional management that have led to her having more (though still shared) control over her own image and other choices. Her father, Mathew Knowles, was well known as the management figure behind the success of the group Destiny’s Child and the beginning of her solo career. In 2011, Beyoncé and her father severed their management relationship, and she and husband Jay-Z have taken control over her career. Consequently, the self-titled release marks an important moment of self-definition for Beyoncé. On the album, Beyoncé explores multiple aspects of her identity as they mingle, coincide, and, at times, contradict one another. The representation of all of these facets of identity under a single name – ‘Beyoncé’ – eliminates the previous necessity of Sasha Fierce by asserting the right to self-definition. Collins argues that “Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other” (2008, 94). I extend Collins’s analysis here to suggest that, for black women performers, identity negotiations include engaging with the contradictions that emerge when public performance comes up against private subjectivity. For Beyoncé, the renegotiation of her image post-Mathew Knowles meant taking greater risks in her representation of a black femininity that is shaped by professional success, marriage, motherhood, and increasing awareness of gender politics as a result of butting up against structures of power that disempower black women in dynamic ways.

The renegotiation of her image on the album, marked by the multiple naming devices used to refer to her, begins from the very start. In ‘Pretty Hurts’, she is referred to as Ms. Third Ward, a beauty pageant contestant. The lyrics, ballad-style vocals, and video detail the demanding and often painful requirements of perfection for those whose livelihood depends on stage performance: “Pretty hurts, we shine the light on whatever’s worst/Perfection is a disease of a nation, pretty hurts, pretty hurts” (‘Pretty Hurts’ 2013). The narrative of disillusionment continues throughout the album. Though the audio track listing does not indicate a distinction, ‘Haunted’ is visually split to render two discrete music videos: ‘Ghost’ precedes ‘Haunted’. On ‘Haunted’ we hear a monotone Beyoncé claim, “I’m climbing up the walls cause all the shit I hear is boring/All the shit I do is boring/All these record labels boring/I don’t trust these record labels, I’m touring” (‘Haunted’ 2013). Her sonic declaration and demonstration of boredom and a growing mistrust of the music industry are joined with the specters of multiple Beyoncé’s that reunite into a single vision of her by the song’s end. The visual accompaniment for ‘Ghost’ features a black, white, and grey color scheme, highlighting the contrast of the darkness of Beyoncé’s figure (she appears to be dipped in black paint) against the whiteness of the background against which she performs. Dancers who are encased in body-length sleeves of cloth create a feeling of entrapment as the shapes of their bodily figures remain visible through the veneer of fabric. Through these images, ‘Ghost’ provides context for the shift in Beyoncé’s approach to the music business and the management of her star image. These changes become clearer throughout the rest of the album, and viewers get a symbolic close-up of her eyes opening up shortly before the video comes to a close. Sonically and visually, we are (re)introduced to Beyoncé as many things: a black woman, wife, friend, sister, and seductress. The representation of various aspects of identity works to disrupt the repressive desire to split women’s subjectivity along the lines of illogical and oppressive opposing binaries that lack an intersectional perspective. These sonic and visual acts are representative of a hip hop feminist sensibility that accounts for the dynamic and complex character of black femininity.


Hip hop feminism in a post-feminist context

The release of *Beyoncé* came at a time when female pop stars had been explicitly refusing the label of ‘feminist’, a characteristic that exemplifies the post-feminist tendency for feminism to be acknowledged “but only to be shown to be no longer necessary” (McRobbie 2004, 259). Angela McRobbie defines post-feminism as “an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined”, with one of its defining features being its ability to undo feminism “while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism” (2004, 255). McRobbie asks, “Why do young women recoil in horror at the very idea of the feminist?” (2004, 258). The ‘horror’ that many young women feel in response to feminism cannot be condensed into arguments of ‘cool’ versus passé. The caricatures of feminism that are regularly deployed as a means of devaluing the ideals of critical feminisms may very well be repellent. In addition, many young women may feel disconnected from feminist assertions of empowerment in a moment when feminism is losing cachet. Post-feminist thought would have us believe that the goals of feminism have been met, or were unnecessary from the start. However, Beyoncé’s embrace of feminism – and rejection of post-feminism – has become unequivocal: as she states in a Shriver report on American women’s financial insecurity, “We need to stop buying into the myth about gender equality. It isn’t a reality yet” (Knowles-Carter 2014). Though some critics question the role of a pop star in spreading a message of feminism, when Beyoncé performs, the world watches and listens.

Though Beyoncé makes use of the generalized language of ‘feminism’, her speech act is also framed by her blackness. Black women’s relationship to feminism has been a negotiated one that has inspired a distinct brand of intersectional black feminist thought that is attuned to the concerns and experiences of black women’s lives. Intersectionality as a reading strategy is a critical tool developed by black feminist thinkers to attend to the erasure of the complexities of black women’s experiences. As the Combahee River Collective highlights, intersectional analysis and practice critically addresses the major systems of interlocking “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” (2000, 264). Intersectionality, as Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, elucidates the complexity of black women’s experiences: “Black women’s Blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas” (1989, 150). Whereas mainstream feminism takes its cues from the experiences of white women, black (and thus hip hop) feminism focuses on black women’s experiences to address the range of problematics that can emerge in meeting with the stereotypes and assumptions of a racist, heteropatriarchal, and classist society.

*“I woke up like this”*

By explicitly aligning her public self with feminism through the aesthetics of hip-hop, Beyoncé repudiates the position of the post-feminist female subject who is “despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl” (McRobbie 2004, 260). The refusal to be silent fits within the aesthetical parameters of hip-hop culture and feminism. At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, Beyoncé performed a medley of songs from her album, including ‘***Flawless’. As her performance segued into the section of the song that features a snippet of Chimamanda Adichie’s speech about why we should all be feminists, the lights were lowered as the word ‘FEMINIST’ in capital letters was brightly displayed on a screen. In silhouette, Beyoncé stood, legs firmly planted, in front
of the visual, sending a clear and unmistakable message that has now become associated with her image as a contemporary pop star who champions feminism. However, this track in particular caused a stir when it appeared nearly a year before the release of the album as the single ‘Bow Down’ because of her use of the term ‘bitch’. In a move that seemingly attempts to address this controversy, Beyoncé gave the following preface to iTunes Radio:

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, and if the song never comes out. […] Okay! I said it. […] And I won’t do it every day because that’s not who I am. 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 bitch’ and I guarantee you will feel gangsta! So listen to the song in that point of view again if you didn’t like it before.

(Beyoncé for iTunes Radio 2013)

Beyoncé says this is not ‘who she is’, and her refusal to mouth the word ‘bitch’ in the video hints at a discomfort with it, attesting to this sense of misidentification. When she claims the recorded performance of ‘Bow Down’/‘Flawless’ is not who she is, she also highlights how identity at times can be an unstable series of acts that requires reiteration to hold fast. Her recording of the song in a moment of aggression is not representative of who she is overall, and neither does it completely undermine her feminist endeavors. I suggest that when she sings, “I woke up like this”, she is not referring to her expertly applied makeup – she is signaling that her black femininity is unchanged as the markers of race and gender are often culturally and socially fixed.

Sonically, ‘Flawless’ calls on an aggressive, hard-hitting, chopped, and screwed Houston rap sound that connects her to the racialized, place-specific expressions of defiance and power in Southern hip hop and thus serves as critical to her message. She wants to express anger and assert herself as a feminist with the help of Adichie’s speech, which touches on the heteropatriarchal presumption that women must not compete with each other for anything except men and acknowledges the benefits of marriage while also encouraging women to have ambition outside of marriage (Beyoncé reminds listeners that she’s not just his ‘little’ wife). Instead, the idea of competition, particularly as important to the development of the artist, is built into the visual for ‘Flawless’. The three stars that precede the flawlessness refer to the rating system given to the girl group Girl’s Tyme (an early version of Destiny’s Child) by the Star Search talent competition show, clips of which bookend the visual for the song. The reproduction of this Star Search loss to an adult, white male rock band within the space of Beyoncé’s album ironically points out the inaccuracy of the show’s star-rating system as a predictor of musical success.

A large part of Beyoncé’s success can be credited to her ability to play across genres and performance styles. Her climbing operatic singing style lends a sense of gravity to the challenge: she is not just competing with other musicians (as the Star Search clips detail) but also with anti-feminist thought. The gritty sound of the song is reified by the punk, skinhead aesthetic seen in the ‘Flawless’ music video. The video opens with a flashback to Beyoncé’s beginnings as a child performer with the group Girl’s Tyme. As they break into performance, the video morphs into a black and white slow motion shot of Beyoncé, in high-cut denim shorts and a plaid button-up shirt, following a punk aesthetic. Soon, other ethnically diverse punk/skinhead young men and women – said to be members of the Parisian
Anti-Racist Skinhead Alliance – are interspersed into the shots. Adichie’s speech marks a turning point in the song and the direction of Beyoncé’s attention: no longer is it aimed at her detractors. Instead, the song becomes a celebration of women’s confidence as she is flanked by four dancers who perform tight choreography in step with the star. The image of Beyoncé in this video is much darker, cinematically and symbolically, and provides a Southern hip hop edge to the song. This is a noticeable digression from her typically polished image. As Bradley notes, “The discourses of respectability that Beyoncé frequents and consistently navigates are those of visual culture, often limited to what we see of and about Beyoncé rather than what we hear” (2013). Though the lyrics of the song lend themselves to images of dominant women, and the bass-driven Houston rap sound conjures up hip hop, the visual ‘**Flawless’ delivers an alternative to these otherwise non-mainstream cultural expressions. Notably, the visual rendering of Beyoncé as ‘FEMINIST’ in that VMA performance was accompanied by the sonic reference to the song ‘Superpower’, which, despite its slow musical calmness, is visually aligned with a revolutionary aesthetic. The intertextuality of this performance of ‘**Flawless’ effectively drives home the point that this is planned or designed to be a radical moment – it is not a moment driven by emotionality or irrationality.

The visual for ‘No Angel’ moves from centering Beyoncé to pay homage to her hometown of Houston, though not necessarily the segment of Houston in which she was raised. She is alienated from the people seen in the variety of clips, never appearing in a shared shot with any of them. While we see clips of Houston rappers, women sitting on porches, children playing, and strippers at work, Beyoncé – dressed in a white leotard, cowboy hat, and white hood fur coat – stands alone. For much of her career, Beyoncé has been the respectable figure with regard to her personal life, and her dressing in white, like an angel of sorts, calls on this history. However, Beyoncé, the social angel, is also a black Southern woman, and this aspect of her identity serves to situate the lives of ordinary black Southerners as respectable on their own terms. ‘No Angel’ – much like ‘**Flawless’ – takes on a ‘ratchet’ aesthetic that is meant to align Beyoncé with her Southern (hip hop) roots. In her piece ‘Hip Hop and the Black Ratchet Imagination’, L. H. Stallings outlines the category of ‘ratchet’: “Ratchet has been defined as foolish, ignorant, ho’ishness, ghetto, and a dance. It is the performance of the failure to be respectable, uplifting, and a credit to the race” (2013, 136). The visual for ‘No Angel’ functions to challenge notions of respectability by highlighting images of Houstonites at work and play of various sorts, thus making visible various ways of being as both possibilities and realities worthy of acknowledgement.

**On ‘Drunk in Love’**

Beyoncé’s restaging of her Star Search defeat is juxtaposed with her persisting musical success to acknowledge loss and challenge. However, the admission of defeat is not simply about reveling in overcoming it; the juxtaposition demonstrates a critical engagement with the dictates of success and the consequences of such fame, particularly for a black woman celebrity. In ‘Pretty Hurts’, the song and video that open the album, we see and hear the pressures of perfection to be an unliveable impossibility through the imagery of a beauty pageant. Though Ms. Third Ward (Beyoncé’s beauty pageant name) wins, it is not without great sacrifice of physical well-being and overall happiness, both of which are named in the song and video as points of desire. In ‘Drunk in Love’, the won beauty pageant trophy is ominously carried along the beach by Beyoncé; soon, it becomes nothing more than a prop that she leaves behind as she begins to dance alone on the night-darkened beach. Midway through the song, Jay-Z joins her. His rap verse on the song fictively offers a narrative of their
intimate sexual encounters but also troublingly makes reference to Ike and Tina Turner’s abusive relationship with the phrase “eat the cake, Anna Mae” (Jay-Z and Beyoncé 2013). As one critic put it, “On a record that critics lauded as Beyoncé’s most feminist to date, and one she proudly dubs her most honest so far, it’s strange to see two major stars shoehorn a domestic violence reference into a track that otherwise celebrates love and all the glory of marital hook-ups” (Mokoena 2014). The reference to domestic and sexual violence is puzzling; many music and cultural critics have avoided looking at it too closely and instead leave it as a matter of bedroom talk between two seemingly happy married people. Part of the reason the offending lines are so troubling is because they are included in this body of work by Beyoncé that demonstrates feminist sensibility in other ways.

What are we to do with the ugliness of violence against women within the context of women’s empowerment? Hip hop feminists insist on the practice of what Joan Morgan calls working with “the grays” (1999, 59), or the complexities of lived experience. ‘Drunk in Love’ may tell us about the strictures of imagination within a culture that often erroneously links women’s sexuality with the pornographic, which Audre Lorde describes as the opposite of the erotic (2007, 54). Lorde states that pornography “emphasizes sensation without feeling”, while the erotic springs from the deepest well of feeling (2007, 54). Popular representations of women’s sexuality treat women as objects, a collection of body parts that can be used for pleasure without consideration of women as whole beings. The cultural desensitization to women’s objectification results in an inability or unwillingness to recognize sexual violence as such and undermines our attempts to find empowerment in women’s self-expression of sexuality because the pleasures of the erotic cannot be disentangled from the mass objectification and abuse of women. Consequently, ‘Drunk in Love’, with its complicated and contradictory perspectives, demonstrates the joys of bodily, heterosexual marital pleasure while also reminding us of the imaginative slippage between the erotic and abuse in popular music and culture.

Critics have taken up BEYONCÉ in a number of ways, ranging from the perspective of women’s empowerment to those who see her work as representative of a dangerous, “post-feminist gender regime” (Chatman 2015, 3). For example, Dayna Chatman interrogates how Beyoncé’s “body and personal narrative reinforce normative conceptions of marriage, motherhood, and femininity” within a post-feminist ideology (Chatman 2015). For black women in particular, the body itself has been a site of contestation over matters of feminism and femininity. Black feminist and cultural critic bell hooks also added to critiques of Beyoncé’s image when she referred to a magazine cover image of the star as being a source of terrorism during a panel discussion. She is quoted as saying that Beyoncé is “colluding in the construction of herself as a slave” and that she sees “a part of Beyoncé that is in fact anti-feminist – that is a terrorist, especially in terms of the impact on young girls” (quoted in Stretten 2014). This provocative declaration was taken up by Crunk Feminist Collective member Crunktastic (aka Brittney Cooper) as “irresponsible feminist theorizing” (2014). In her online response, Crunktastic writes:

Beyoncé is not a terrorist. She isn’t systematically doing violence to any group of people, rolling up and taking folks’ land, creating a context of fear in which people must live, or usurping folks’ right to self-determination, raping women as a tool of war, or turning children into soldiers.

(2014)

Crunktastic/Cooper notes that it is important to distinguish between the “potential discursive and psychic violence” of Beyoncé’s image, which scholars should reckon with, and Beyoncé...
herself. Such distinctions are critical when examining popular culture representations, especially since they are so often mediated through various forms and structures of power.

The mediation of popular images of black women creates specific challenges for cultural and popular music studies. Since intersectionality is not “an account of identity but rather an account of power” (Crunktastic 2014), we must examine the structures of power that frame interpretations of popular music. The positioning of BEYONCÉ as a feminist text is deliberate, and this move signals a need to reframe discussions of Beyoncé as an artist and public figure. Weidhase asserts that the album “serves as a catalytic moment that frames the themes of bodily and monetary control evident in her earlier work as explicitly feminist” (2015, 121). Weidhase’s keen framing of Beyoncé’s performance within hip hop feminism recasts her image in a way that disrupts mainstream approaches to understanding her work. As she argues, “Within its pro-sex framework in the context of the lingering legacy of respectability politics, Beyoncé’s performance can be understood as an exploration of the potential of hip-hop feminism: her combination of explicitly feminist content with performances of sexual agency signifies an exploration of black female sexuality beyond respectability politics” (2015, 130). Hip hop feminism’s insistence on engaging the contradictions and tensions of experience and performance make it possible to read BEYONCÉ in a multitude of ways that neither tout the album as wholly and incontrovertibly feminist nor anti-/post-feminist.

Pleasure and power

The corrective measures taken to empower black femininity on the song ‘Blow’ reflect back to a previous era of flirtation and play commonly associated with young adulthood. The song is reminiscent of Prince’s ‘Minneapolis Sound’, and its video takes on a feel of young adult fun. Lyrically, Beyoncé encourages her lover to focus on her pleasure. In her analysis of the album, Melissa Harris-Perry argues that the “experiences of black women’s bodies are not exclusively those of destructive assault or morbid fascination” and that being “an embodied black woman is also to know joy, subjectivity, pleasure, and the latent capacity to enjoy being seen: to, in a sense, transcend invisibility and to resist erasure” (2015, ix). The ordering of the tracks and videos on BEYONCÉ highlights this embodied black femininity by acknowledging that Beyoncé’s womanly pleasure, like many women’s lives, is also subject to the kind of misogynistic hip hop masculinity husband Jay-Z emulates when he problematically refers to abusive representations of black male authority. ‘Blow’ instead offers a counter-narrative of (sexual) power. She is out with her girlfriends, having fun and disregarding the advances of potential suitors, but lets her lover know that she can’t wait to get home so he can please her. This demonstrates Harris-Perry’s assertion that Beyoncé thwart the “narratives that black women who are seen must be broken, that they are unequivocal victims of the gaze, or that they do not possess ownership of their intimate desires and sexual pleasures” (2015, x). Harris-Perry’s reconsideration of women’s engagement with the gaze demonstrates one way in which scholars are reinvigorating discussions of visual representations of sexuality. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, Laura Mulvey characterizes the gaze as a combined one in which both the male protagonists and the spectator view the woman as “isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualized” and derive scopophilic pleasure from such imagery (2009, 348). But what do we make of the black woman artist who closely manages her image in light of Mulvey’s contention that “cinema builds the way [the woman] is to be looked at into the spectacle itself” (2009, 351)? During her most overtly sexual dance moments in the video, Beyoncé is either surrounded by women or perched atop a sports car (both objects of male
objectification), even while she declares that the song is for “all my grown women out there” (‘Blow’ 2013). In a sense, Beyoncé is in command of the looker’s (and her implied lover’s) gaze and redirects focus from the scopophilic pleasure of the looker to the bodily pleasure of the performer.

The power to control the gaze drives the narrative of ‘Partition’. The song sees Beyoncé declare she wants to be the “kind of girl you like” and insists that everything you could want is right there with her (2013). When discussing the inspiration for the video, she recounts taking her husband to see the Crazy Horse burlesque show in Paris and wanting to then emulate it. As Aisha Durham notes with regard to Beyoncé’s video catalogue, her performance maps “ideal beauty and sexual desirability [...] onto the curvaceous, ethnically marked female body” (2012, 36–37). The song does offer an imaginary glimpse into the sexual life of Beyoncé; however, sex is not the endpoint here or elsewhere on the album. As such, Lordi is right to be wary of overstating the import of sex:

Sexuality is an important and compelling part of all this, but when we fixate on the sex we replicate the very problem this album is designed to expose: that it is still so hard for a black woman artist to be seen as deeply sexual and as a range of other things – intellectual, creative, maternal, virtuosic, self-critical, egotistical, and hilarious. When Beyoncé claims all this brilliant complexity she issues a challenge that is also a gift, whether you want to call it feminist or not. (2013)

As Lordi implies, black women’s representations of sexuality present a challenge to the ideals of feminism. Because black women’s bodies are often read as always and already hypersexual, any mention of sexuality can be taken up as evidence of self-exploitation or participation in one’s own oppression. Such conclusions rely on the controlling images outlined by Collins and offer some perspective on the kinds of challenges respectability politics sought to protect black women from within public discourse. But, as Harris-Perry reminds us, ‘Partition’ is also a song about power and control: “It is a reminder that we are allowed to look, but only on her terms and only through a lens of her design” (2015, x). This performance is designed to show grown woman sexual empowerment, as opposed to youthful naïveté.

The bonus video ‘Grown Woman’, a dedication to mature black femininity, rounds out and counters the beauty queen narrative that opened the album. Beyoncé has outgrown her days as an unhappy pageant contestant struggling for perfection and claimed her right to do whatever she wants. This counter-narrative to the beauty queen offers an important critique of pageants as oppressive structures that attempt to dictate ideal ‘womanhood’. Pageants restrict participants on the basis of age, marital status, and parental status. In order to fulfill her desire for grown womanhood, Beyoncé had to leave behind the culture that creates beauty pageants. Her growth is visually presented through footage of young Beyoncé practicing her performance styles and honing her entertainer skills (at times with Destiny’s Child members) that is manipulated and synced with the vocals of grown-up Beyoncé. The video ends with shots of Beyoncé sitting beneath her mother Tina and, finally, holding two children while another leans into her for a kiss. Visually, images of motherhood end the album. Sonically, parenthood and family also stand as the closing representation as the song ‘Blue’ – dedicated to her toddler daughter – ends with the sounds of Blue Ivy’s voice saying “mommy, mommy, mommy! Can we see daddy?” (2013). As Chatman highlights, the image of the Knowles-Carter family, married and raising their child together, offers a “counter to
prevailing discourses that the ‘typical’ black family is composed of an absentee black father, and an unwed, poor, or welfare-dependent, black mother” (2015, 10). The closing sounds and images of BEYONCÉ solidify the album as an affirming representation of black femininity that includes love, marriage, and motherhood.

Conclusion

The encoding of pop culture images and sounds may not align with how meaning is decoded from texts. BEYONCÉ espouses what some scholars have referred to as ‘Bey feminism’ (Whittington and Jordan 2014, 156), which, in many ways, succeeds at reaching the women black feminism seeks to empower. However, I differ slightly from Elizabeth Whittington and Mackenzie Jordan’s positioning of ‘Bey feminism’ as oppositional to ‘Ivory Tower Black feminism’ (2014). As demonstrated through my analysis of various songs and videos from the album here, I see ‘Bey feminism’ as being more closely aligned with hip hop feminism, which is a version of black feminism that is self-reflexive and interrogative of the continuing role and necessity of feminism for the hip hop generation. Black feminist thought emerged from a position that questioned the dominance of ‘Ivory Tower’ modes of thinking. To understand the greater implications of the album on popular culture, the complex politics of performance relevant to black women performers of the hip hop and post–hip hop generation must be considered. By taking a less cynical view of Beyoncé’s embrace of feminism, the significance of this declaration becomes clearer: it is a necessary and timely response to post- and anti-feminist thought that often privileges the individual and choice over the collective good. Beyoncé is undoubtedly a privileged celebrity who can live her life without fear of economic insecurity or vulnerability to the full range of gender inequalities. However, raising one’s voice in the service of the collective has both benefits and risks. The insistence on disregarding the (hip hop) feminist sentiment of the album or dismissing ‘Bey feminism’ as not feminist enough is an unproductive and alienating act. Replete with images of black femininity that celebrate marriage, motherhood, and sexuality, BEYONCÉ represents a break with Beyoncé’s past and an embrace of feminism that is unequivocal in a contemporary moment of post-feminist ambivalence.

Notes

1 The hip hop generation is commonly defined as those born between 1965 and 1984 (Kitwana 2002, xiii).
3 Four stereotypical tropes Collins notes are the Jezebel or whore, the Mammy, the Welfare Mother, and the Matriarch. For further detail, see Collins (2008).
4 In Stars, Richard Dyer outlines the star image as a “complex configuration of visual, verb, and aural signs” (1979, 153).
5 This use of the term ‘skinhead’ reflects the original usage of the term to refer to the working-class youth subculture of 1960s London, England. Though the term is now often associated with white power/white nationalism, the origins of skinhead culture lacked this racism and reflected more diversity.
6 In their article “Race and Genre in the Use of Sexual Objectification in Female Artists’ Music Videos”, Jennifer Stevens Aubrey and Cynthia M. Frisby conclude that Black women artists tend to dress more sexually provocative than artists of other races and thus “might still feed into stereotyped notions of Black female sexuality” (2012, 81). This restrictive view of black women’s performances deeply limits readings of such productions outside of arguments about controlling images and stereotypes.
7 For example, Miss USA rules read: “contestants may not be married or pregnant. They must not have ever been married, not had a marriage annulled nor given birth to, or parented a child. The titleholders are also required to remain unmarried throughout their reign” (Miss Universe 2015). Up until 1999, Miss America contestants had to swear that they were not and had never been married or pregnant.

Bibliography


———. 2013. “‘Blow’,” BEYONCÉ.

———. 2013. “‘Blue (Feat. Blue Ivy)’,” BEYONCÉ. MP3.


———. 2013. “‘Haunted’,,” BEYONCÉ. MP3.

———. 2013. “‘Partition’,,” BEYONCÉ. MP3.

———. 2013. “‘Pretty Hurts’,” BEYONCÉ. MP3.


Hip hop feminism and black femininity


