Giuseppe Polise*

BLACK WOMEN MATTER: THE #BLACKLIVESMATTER MOVEMENT, BLACK FEMALE SINGERS, AND INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM

The comeback in 2015 and 2016 of some of the most successful names on the contemporary American and global music scene coincided with the flourishing of a new season of black protest that has made its way into the artistic productions of several African American stars. Through the contributions of black women singers, in particular, such music seems to have gained unprecedented attention for its articulation of black feminist discourses that are also a major issue in the latest campaigns against systemic racism and condoned police brutality in America. In view of that, the present article analyzes the intersections and cross-fertilizations between black protest culture and US black female music in the wake of the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter.[1] Debunking dangerous narratives about black womanhood and questioning standardized norms of beauty, femininity, and masculinity, both forms of black protest, in fact, contribute to dismantling hegemonic white hetero-patriarchal ideologies that oppress the lives of black women and queer subjects who are forced to the margins of American society. If active participation – i.e. mass marches, sit-ins, and national strikes–is fundamental in the #BlackLivesMatter agenda, protest music complements the movement by echoing its messages on an international scale. Contemporary black women icons such as Beyoncé are using their platform of visibility to share with the audience feminist statements that lay in the fabric of the movement itself. As it will be shown, such strong connection between black women's music and protest culture has a long history: it was already witnessed in the era of Civil Rights when Nina Simone insisted on black women's experience in segregated America through her immense body of work, and again, with Lauryn Hill's Hip-Hop nationally acclaimed masterpiece *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). Such legacy, I posit, constitutes a major premise in fashioning contemporary black female singers' approach to *this* season of renewed political struggle, proving how black feminism is as much needed today as it was in 1964. The following analysis will move from an overview of the #BlackLivesMatter and its policies, of the why and how it is crucial in the understanding of today's black music. Section Two and Three focus on Nina Simone and Lauryn Hill respectively for their achievements in forging a strong black womanist tradition throughout their repertoire. Section Four, to conclude, will show how Beyoncé positions herself as Simone and Hill's descendant in supporting the movement with her latest art.

1. Reading the #BlackLivesMatter through the lens of Black Feminism

Started by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza, the #BlackLivesMatter was conceived with a specific purpose: it was a call to arms, a cry to galvanize concrete action in a world where “Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” (Garza 2014). It was the shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old African American, at the hands of neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman in February 2013, and that of 18-year-old Mike Brown by white police officer Darren Wilson in August 2014 that would ignite the mass-uprights in the small towns of Sanford, Florida, and, one year later, in Ferguson, Missouri. In the latter case, the young boy's corpse was reportedly left on the ground for more than four hours and a half after the killing, while the police were keeping his parents at bay so that it was impossible for them to identify the body. What triggered the protests that later converged into the movement, however, was the somehow predictable acquittal of both Zimmerman and Wilson from any charge. This course of action was far from being an isolated case, but rather seemed to confirm the endurance of an implicit norm at the expense of African American citizens: as Taylor put it, it is "the perpetuation of deeply ingrained stereotypes of African Americans as particularly dangerous, impervious to pain and suffering, careless and carefree, and exempt from empathy, solidarity or basic humanity what allows police to kill Black people with no threat of punishment" (2016, 3).

---

* *Giuseppe Polise finished his Master's Degree in Comparative Literature at the University of Naples "L'Orientale," defending a thesis on a corpus of black female singers who, since the 1950s, has had iconic resonance on American popular culture, while also showing how the concept of blackness is strongly performative, and strongly dependent on the social, political, and historical factors. He is a freelance translator, and is currently working on his future PhD project, an intersectional study of Black Feminism, contemporary black female music and US black protest culture in the wake of the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter movement.*

[1] Anderson and Hitlin point out how, in 2014, as the use of force against black males by police was gaining national media attention, hashtags began to be promoted as a way for activists to aggregate their messages and express solidarity. Such was also the case for the Black Lives Matter campaign, whose organizers made social media a highlight of their strategy, thus linking the growth of the movement offline to the online conversation. The movement is, therefore, referred to simply as #BlackLivesMatter.

Examples of the consequences of such social stigma abound: instances of police racism and brutality, before the murder of the two teenagers, include the 1992 beating of Rodney King, the 1997 sodomy of Abner Louima[2] and the execution of Amadou Diallo in 1999, and it was not so long after the incident in Ferguson that an off-duty St. Louis police officer shot eight bullets at African American teenager Vonderrit Myers, killing him in cold blood (2014).

Since Ferguson, however, something has changed. Namely, the media coverage of the past three years has played a decisive role in contributing to the exposure of a perpetuated white patriarchal supremacist ideology. In particular, social media has almost erased the lag between when an incident happens and when the public is made aware of it, remarking the downplaying or even the neglect of any public claims of police abuse, typically operated by mainstream media. The proliferation of smartphones has given people the possibility to record such events and share them so that their occurrence on a daily basis could not be ascribed to fortuitous glitches in police procedures, but inevitably constituted a trend. In other words, new technology has forced traditional news outlets and their audience to see and acknowledge the pernicious nature of racism in the US, painstakingly drawing attention to the many cases of inhumanity occurring in a presumed color-blind, post-racial America.

What has come up is very telling: according to *The Guardian*,[3] police tend to arrest and kill black men at far higher rates than other groups. Black males between 15 and 34, in fact, are nine times more likely to be killed by (white) police than any other demographic, also accounting for the 15 per cent of all 2015 deaths from law enforcement encounter. In terms of actual figures, a project again by *The Guardian* that tracks police killings in America has estimated that US police killed at least 305 black people in 2015, while 194 lost their life up until October 2016. In short, the ever-growing list of unarmed African American victims proves that "sometimes simply being Black can make you a suspect, or get you killed. Especially when the police are involved, looking Black is more likely to get you killed than any other factor" (Taylor 2016,13).

And yet, despite the equalizing effect of "looking Black" as a risk factor, not all victims seem to be the same in the eyes of the news cycles. It is a fact that most murders of African Americans at the hands of white police officers are underreported by traditional media and thus go unnoticed by the general public; but it is also a fact that when they do come in the spotlight, the victims are almost unmistakably black men and boys, rather than women or girls. This is to a certain degree unsurprising, as it indirectly confirms what has been historically identified as a threat to white masculinity.[4] Yet, African American women also get harassed and killed at the hands of law enforcement, and such episodes go even further unacknowledged. Statistics reported by the African American Policy Forum show, in fact, that even though they make up for only 13 percent of the female population of the US, black women and girls account for a third of all female victims to police violence.[5] The names of Korynn Gaines, Jessica Williams, Grey Shur, Kisha Michael and Mya Hall – all of them police victims in the past two years – have rarely made a ripple in the national news, especially when compared to the visibility given to Martin's and Brown's cases. Feminist scholar and co-founder of the AAPF Kimberle Crenshaw argues that “although black women are routinely raped and beaten by the police, their experiences are rarely foregrounded in popular understandings of police brutality,”[6] and even if African American women are murdered at disproportionately high rates, rarely, or never, are they accounted for when conversations about racism are taken on a national scale.

---

[2] The arresting officers reportedly beat Louima with their fists and nightsticks. When at the station house, he was strip-searched and put in a holding cell. The beating continued later, culminating with the victim being sexually assaulted in a bathroom at the 70th Precinct station House in Brooklyn. One officer kicked Louima in the testicles, while his hands were cuffed behind his back, and later sexually assaulted him with a broomstick. According to trial testimony, said officer then walked through the precinct holding the bloody, excrement-stained utensil in his hand, bragging to a police sergeant that he "took a man down tonight." For a full report, see Fried's article on *The New York Times* (1999).

[3] That a British newspaper run such project gives an idea of how the debate over state sanctioned racism and violence crosses national borders of the US; it also offers a more distanced, less biased perspective on the matter.

[4] See, for example, how the vivid account that agent Wilson gave about his altercation with 18-year-old Mike Brown exposes white men's fear of black masculinity. According to Wilson's testimony, his was a fight for survival where Brown was described as a "demon" who made "grunting" noises before running through a hail of bullets to attack the police officer, which left him no other choice but shoot. Wilson also added that, had Brown punched him in the face, it would have been fatal (Taylor 2016, 4).

If hardly ever are black women newsworthy when harassed or murdered, it is precisely because of a century-long narrative symmetrical to that of the black male beast and that represents them as less feminine and vulnerable, failing to live up to the standards of the American cult of the *true woman*. It is this assumption, the idea that the African American woman belongs to a lower social status – and therefore is less likely to be believed or even heard – that makes them the perfect target of abuse, and that let police officer Daniel Holtzclaw get off lightly with the alleged rape of thirteen black women in Tulsa, Oklahoma, while on duty (Taylor 2016, 164). Indeed, the relative silence when African American women happen to be the victims of on-going brutality unequivocally shows how racism towards them is much more intricate, because it also intersects sexism.[7]

In this sense, the way in which black women are perceived within a societal context not only is affected by their being African Americans, but also by their facing racism as females. In other words, in their being *socially constructed* differently from both black men and white women, African American females are subjected to further marginalization within an already marginalized group. The extent to which such marginalization occurs depends on the influence of reified images concurring in the creation of *narratives*, *myths* and *stereotypes* used to normalize the inequitable position of black women. Symbols and myths, in fact, are two-sided: if, on the one hand, they narrate a particular understanding of experience, on the other, they reinforce the idea that their narrative is accurate, and – in this sense – they can be deployed to validate dominant ideologies. In the case of the justification and promotion of supremacist beliefs, myths have historically allowed certain narratives to be seen as truths. Drawing on van Dijk's notion of *social memory* (1985, 1991), Jordan-Zachery convincingly argues that the efficacy of myths (or stereotypes) relies on their reiteration, while there is no need for them to be explicitly addressed because they are deeply rooted in “their collectively shared beliefs that provide the cognitive basis of our information processing about those considered as others” (2009, 28).

In the case of African American women, it is the institution of slavery that fostered the negative construction of their identity. Black women's morality, in fact, had been continually evaluated on the basis of the same *moral standard* that defined the respectability of 19th century's elite white woman, whose alleged natural sphere of activity was the house and whose primary role was that of the obedient wife and devoted mother. Within this frame, female black slaves were an anomaly: not only were they forced to toil in the fields, contradicting any notion of women's frailty, but their unions with male slaves were not officially sanctioned, making them sexually impure by definition. Even more crucially, their motherhood was reduced to being a resource to further the economic interests of white slaveholders, depriving them of the most sacred woman's role at the time. Those factors challenged the rhetoric of the virtuous woman who must be subjected and confined to the household and contributed to their being easily stigmatized as *sexually loose beasts*, which represented a means for slaveholders to justify rape, and constituted a defiance to the rhetoric of the virtuous woman who must be subjected and confined to the household. For these reasons, African American women represented a threat to the ideology of white patriarchy and were, therefore, trapped into stereotypes so that their condition of separate and subordinate group could be maintained and promulgated.

---

[5] The same statistic shows that white women, despite making up 64 percent of the female population in the US, constitute "only" 44 percent of fatal police shooting of women.

[6] Quoted from a Kimberle Cranshew's statement for the #SayHerName report on the AAPF website. For further information go to http://www.aapf.org/sayhername/.

[7] First coined by civil rights advocate and scholar of critical race theory Kimberle Crenshaw (1991, 2000), the word *intersectionality* refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of domination or disadvantage.

The narratives deployed to maintain a position of power over a subordinate group become, over time, part of the cultural iconography that slowly turns into introjected, implicit truths (Jordan-Zachery 2009, 35), a process explaining why the life of African American women is still affected today by pervasive models of black womanhood rooted in the post-slavery era.[8] Black women, Jordan-Zachery continues, persistently challenge the very notion of *racialized patriarchy*,[9] which regulates their oppression on the basis of the interaction between their gender and their race. Moreover, as the figure of the father has been stereotypically removed from the family, black women are usually perceived as the natural leaders within a predominantly matriarchal system, and, therefore, held accountable for many problems within the black community. In today's society, where law and order have so many black men convicted or killed, it is especially African American female solo parents who benefit from governmental welfare that are perceived as threatening because they also endanger “the racialized-gendered order, which posits that black women cannot play the role historically attributed to the white lady, a stay-at-home mother” (99). Under these circumstances, it is clear that what allows for the reification of deplorable narratives of African American women and for the maintenance of a system that makes women simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible – in that they do not have a voice of their own – is the implicit threat to the very notion of masculinity, a notion constructed by white men, interiorized by blacks, and perpetuated by both. In this respect, Mychal Denzel Smith brilliantly outlines such concept with reference to black women's literature:

> We love black women as ornaments to our masculinity. We hate to engage the intellectual and emotional complexity of black women and the art they create because it reminds us that even as black boys and men trying not to be crushed by oppression, we are mighty fine crushers ourselves. (2016)

Pictured in people's social memory as the evil that (both white and black) good citizens are called to condemn and keep at bay at all costs, African American women really represent that part of the American society that, more than any other, is exposed to misrecognition and misrepresentation. Their history as chattel slaves, their participation in the labor market as domestic workers, and their role as dependents in a modern welfare state, traps African American women in a normalized paradox. Ss members of a racially and gender stigmatized group, in fact, they are constantly denied full recognition and opportunities for self-affirmation, and yet must cope with the hyper-visibility, the scrutiny to which their assumed status as unworthy women exposes them (Harris-Perry 2011, 82).

In this climate of constant oppression, the #BlackLivesMatter resonates broad and wide because, within its goals of justice towards the black community as a whole, it explicitly addresses the extent to which African American women can exercise their own agency. Although not exclusively conceived as a feminist manifesto, the references to women's politics of self-representation are very much intrinsic to it. Founded and sustained by women, in fact, the campaign, while opposing the enduring referential strategies and discursive practices with which post-racial America has promoted the rhetoric of black women's dysfunctionality, provides a space to further negotiate individuality and exposed stereotyped forms of sexism *within* the black community. In a 2014 interview with black women activists, Braswell captures both their frustration and their commitment:

---

[8] Throughout her 1991 study, Collins describes the various images of black womanhood as *controlling images*. Such images are used in policy and by political actors as overwhelmingly negative, to suggest that black women are inept mothers, reckless, corrupt and oversexed, in order to maintain gender and racial hegemonies.

[9] The concept, first introduced by Zillah Eisenstain, “brings attention to the continual interplay of race and gender in a century-long established structure of power” (1994, 2-3). While patriarchy, in fact, differentiates women from men, privileging the latter, racism differentiates people of colour from whites, privileging whiteness. The overlapping of both systems of oppression generates a condition of inexorable confinement of black women at the bottom of the social ladder.

> I have never experienced such a blatant sexism [...] This movement has really put sexism directly in front of me and since has built intolerance within me. As women are the majority in the movement here in St. Louis, it puzzles me as to why we have to make sure we are heard for the work we are doing, rather than just pretty faces. I've had to check for so many brothers for coming at me as if I'm out here to look pretty and waiting for them to hit on me.
>
> [I]f it were not for Black Women, there would be no movement. We have seriously carried this to where it is now [...]
>
> [...] For the first time I have seen a large group of women, standing side by side, crying in anger, sorrow and pain. Our hurt and pain cause an organic bond to start forming. To go from the streets protesting with women being on the frontline, to inside closed meetings when women are the minority discussing what has happened in Ferguson. I continue to tell the truth about what happened by a female's perspective [...] Hopefully it inspires other women who stood on the frontlines to do the same. (Braswell 2014)

As a consequence to standing against their century-long confinement to a position of subaltern, the black women of #BlackLivesMatter insist on the concept of *intersectionality* to seek the inclusion of all types of oppressed black subjectivities, thus broadening the scope of the movement to other stigmatized groups such as homosexuals, transgenders and gender non-conforming people, whose exclusion from a hegemonic ideology has left them exposed to the scrutiny of society itself. Captained by black queer women, the movement ultimately caused a rupture with pre-existing societal norms that guaranteed the maintenance of patriarchal relations of power, and allowed for the creation of a more comprehensive space where the marginalized could actually speak and freely exercise their agency, bearing in mind the greater good of the whole black community. The spirit of the movement and its goal brilliantly echo educator Anna Julia Cooper's pioneering vision when she wrote that "only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole *Negro race enters with me*'" (1892, 31). Indeed, more than any previous protest movement, the #BlackLivesMatter promotes the idea that it is African American women, who, surviving racialized, gendered and class disprivilege, mark the progress of a nation, as their freedom would imply for the dismantling of all systems of oppression. Here lie both its strength and its revolutionary character, that is, in its undermining the social, racial and gender axes upon which the American nation is forged, while also exerting pressure on civil discourse and policy making. Also to be noted is its capacity to gather the black community around a re-discussion of notions such as identity and pride through trend-setting platforms of communication where young thinkers and conscious artists – painters, poets, and musicians – celebrate black culture, with particular attention to black women. This side to the movement seems to participate in a more radical aestheticization of black culture that makes its way to national conscience through a revived pride for "natural" hairdos and motherland-inspired fashion, as well as the celebration of black literature, visual arts, and music. More radically than in any previous organized protest movement, inclusiveness is crucial in the definition of #BlackLivesMatter (Cohen 2015, 280-290), in that it foregrounds black feminist struggles not only by giving prominence to the position of women and queer activists, but also by forging new connections between black female artists and the protest movement itself.[10] As a matter of fact, a great variety of voices has emerged in response to and informed by the movement, producing a new wave of black pop protest music that gathers all the anger over racism and injustice, and "[grapples] with racial catastrophe in the 21st century: from the prison-industrial complex, up to the wealth inequality and the violent expenditure of women" (Brooks 2016). Black women's pop music culture, in particular, seems to be awakening, acknowledging and articulating the consciousness of those on the margins through a diverse body of work that is able to remind people of how the art accompanying the movement is, in fact, as capacious as

---

[10] Although official websites do not openly endorse specific singers, many are the media prominent activists such as Darnell Moor, and Radha Blank who critically discuss black contemporary music productions in their connection with black feminist politics, thus contributing to spreading consciousness within the black community.

“blackness” itself.[11] Through the creation of compelling music and visuals, many artists are not only contributing to passing on the message that black lives do matter, but have become crucial agents in discussing black feminism in popular culture.

Many are the women in music committed to embracing and supporting #BlackLivesMatter since the war against state-sanctioned forms of injustice broke out in Ferguson. 2016, in particular, boasts the comeback of two of the most remarkable names in contemporary pop music, namely Beyoncé and Alicia Keys, as well as the publication of the politically mind-blowing "A Seat at the Table" by Solange. Their endeavors surely are different from one another in terms of sound and platform of visibility, but unquestionably have a shared investment in the presentation of black womanhood, its joys and sorrows, the statement of a female self within the community, and the ability to capture black cultural and social history with blatant truth; all elements that complement in music the feminist principles pervading this movement.

Timely as it was, this type of musical statement, the sound of black sonic dissent that comes from a dissatisfaction driven by race and gender inequality, exists because it has quite some history to it that stretches across last century, digging its roots in the era of Civil Rights.

2. Nina Simone: debunking black women's social stigma

First was Nina Simone, acclaimed as a genuine artist, pioneer and champion of the Civil Rights Movement who tackled many musical genres at a time when women, especially black women, were told to keep silent. “Mississippi Goddam” was the first song she wrote and produced in which she supported the struggle for black freedom in a more outspoken manner than many other black entertainers before her, and, by the end of the decade, her repertoire included songs about the effects that segregation had on children, gender discrimination, color consciousness among African Americans, and black pride.

Through her art, she seems to have gradually departed from the mainstreamed principles of the Movement to embrace a more radical black cultural nationalism and the ideology of Black Power. As a female entertainer who produced and performed specific kinds of politically engaged music, not only did Simone prove to be fundamental in the Civil Rights activism and black nationalism, but she did it in a way that enabled people “to see how much our sense of times and the ways in which we narrate black activism and black cultural nationalism have tended not to include women” (Feldstein 2005, 1375).[12]

---

[11] According to Johnson, blackness can be theorized as a slippery and elusive identity concept that does “not belong to any one individual or group, but rather is *appropriated* or *performed* by them in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups” (2003, 3), thus taking on political implications. Since the concept itself has no tangible essence, ideas such as *black authenticity* become subjected to the manipulation of capitalistic culture and end up being determined by the historical, social and political terms of its production. In short, the multiple ways in which blackness is built up depend on the historical moment black bodies live in and on the “evershifting subject position” at that given time (Id.). Since performance gives access to the process of constructing blackness, focusing on black female artists becomes paramount because, in building their iconic status under the scrutiny of the public, all female black celebrities resort to an articulated cultivation of their image that, in being so different from that of other singers, and also from that previously proposed by the singer herself, thus confirm the comprehensive nature of blackness. Black songstresses both mirror their constant need for validation from the audience and provide essential insights into African American identity, which is no longer seen as a non-relatable monolithic *other*. Rather, black *identities* can be perceived as the result of a dexterous articulation of cultural practices that influence the *performance of blackness* in relation to the historical framework in which the icon operates. In this sense, the image of the feminist black diva becomes one of the many possible means of representation of a composite African American womanhood that the article intends to investigate.

[12] As it is quite well known, her musical genius emerged out of a fond study of classical music, since she was taught to play the piano at five years old and continued her studies at the prestigious Julliard School in New York City. Needless to say, this type of education had quite an impact over scholars of music and sociology since it had a double implication: firstly, it countered the general assumption which identified African Americans as naturally inclined to entertain. Secondly, it introduced for the first time African American women into the debates around jazz and high culture, domains that were historically male gendered. It is true that remarkable women had made history in the decades before Simone’s appearance into a world where jazz was perceived “as an organic art form rooted in black communities, as a commodified mode of mass entertainment and as an elite aesthetic expression” (Feldstein 2005, 1355-1356). Nevertheless, they

By making gender a crucial factor to her racial politics, Simone further problematized issues such as racial progress and power, which were until then discussed only through a predominantly male perspective. An example is provided by a song that she recorded for her 1964 live studio album *In Concert,* titled “Go Limp.” Through the lyrics, Simone mocks the concept of nonviolence as repressed black activism inserting a playful sexual narrative in a text about marching. The song focuses on a young woman who is defending her choice to join the marchers even against her mother’s will. When the old lady tries to warn her against sexual promiscuity, she reassures her, promising self-restraint:

> Oh mother, dear mother, no I’m not afraid
> For I’ll go on the march and return a virgin maid
> With a brick in my handbag and a smile on my face
> And barbed wire in my underwear to shed off disgrace.

Simone's mockery toward the self-imposition of excessive virtue, however, soon prevails and she teases the crowd with the fate of the girl only suggesting the probable outcomes of what is finally a form of disrespect for one’s self:

> One day they were marching, a young man came by
> with a beard on his chin and a gleam in his eye
> and before she had time to remember her brick...

At this point the performer stopped her singing and over the long pause that followed, the laughing and applauding audience jumped to conclusions as for what could have happened to the girl that rhymed with “brick.” Only then, she continued:

> And before she had time to remember her brick
> they were holding a sit down on a neighboring hay rick.

Since activists taught women both to “go perfectly limp” and to “be carried away” without resisting police officers who approached them during the sit-ins, Feldstein has a point in reading Simone’s performance as a bitter satire of the consequences to black people's compliance with the rhetoric of the Movement. Focusing on the position that black women held in it, in fact, Simone questioned gender roles by making the audience complicit in realizing that sexual abuse might take place precisely because of the training to non-violent, passive resistance that the young women were receiving at the time. As a matter of fact: “When this young man suggested it was time she was kissed / She remembered her briefing and did not resist.”

Simone’s bitter irony, however, works at multiple levels in the song, and this includes the possibility to read the girl’s participation in the march as a loophole from the very promise of chastity that 1960s non-emancipated black women were sworn to, and towards sexual enjoyment. In this sense, she would manipulate the rhetoric of the Civil Rights to find a virtuous justification to her loss of virginity, qualifying, however, her agency as faulty because, in order to become sexually active, she must pretend lack of intention, and thus cannot unapologetically embrace her choice.

---

were generally denied the status of authorship and just perceived as popular entertainers whose image and life was associated with sexuality and vice. What alarmed the public when Simone’s fame increased was her strong demand for her artistry to be recognized not only as an African American, but also as an African American woman. More specifically, Simone’s music and self-representation offered a vision of black cultural nationalism within and outside the US that insisted on female power.

In terms of conscious analysis of the gender / race politics that contributed to turning black women into the mules of the world,[13] "Four Women" is another of Simone's songs that deserves an accurate breakdown, for it truly represents a peculiar denunciation of the ideological system that tries to make African American women so powerless. Singing almost matter-of-factly, Simone builds up a four verse-tune, each one introducing a stereotype of black women that has made its way in the collective social memory up from the time of slavery. As a result of the reiteration of such negative narratives and stereotypes, the lyrics suggest that black women still suffer from being perceived and perceiving themselves as a social, political and economic liability, even to the point that all of them introduce themselves by saying "What do they call me?," rather than the more frequent "What's my name?." If, linguistically speaking, the meaning of both sentences is quite the same, the first idiomatic expression is striking because it introduces a *plural referential other* who is bestowed with the power of naming the woman, thus defining her identity.

> My skin is black, my arms are long
> My hair is woolly, my back is strong
> Strong enough to take the pain
> Inflicted again and again.

First comes Aunt Sarah, who fits the archetype of the "Mammy." Such image is rooted in the slavery era, as suggested by the line "her back made strong" – a clear reference to the lashes used on black people. Because of her being depicted as a cheerful, servile slave destined for the kitchen work and baby-nursing in the plantations, she represents an extremely offensive stereotype of black womanhood that still affects modern society. According to Melissa Harris-Perry, "Mammy was not a protector or defender of black children or communities, [...] her love, doting, advise, correction and supervision were reserved exclusively to white women and children. Her loyal affection to white men, women, and children was entirely devoid of sexual desire" (2011, 72-73), which contributed to misrepresenting her as a big, fat, dark-skinned and unfeminine figure, who appears jocund and jolly on the ads of several baking products, such as "Auntie Jamima" still today. Moreover, the term "auntie" constitutes itself a form of racial micro-aggression, for it denies women that right to social distance with a consequential unwanted thinning of the space between the *self* and *others*.

Second is Saffronia, mixed-race, and the outcome of the state-sanctioned practice of rape that slave masters often reserved to black women, as Simone makes explicit in the lines "My father was rich and white / He forced my mother late at night." Far from benefiting from their belonging in two worlds, this was often, in fact, a horrendous burden to live with, not only because of the hatred and fear mixed-race slaves generated in white people,[14] but also for the mixed feelings they triggered in dark-skinned blacks. As a matter of fact, the consolidation of typically white aesthetic codes has led to demonizing dark-skinned women for decades, socially favoring those with a lighter complexion, instead. What is worse, since such parameters constituted the only aesthetic reference system for all black women, their reiteration gave way to a racist categorization from *within* black communities as well, and whereas being light-skinned passes now as synonym for beautiful, being dark-skinned is the ultimate cause for shame and self-hatred. With her signature tongue-incheek phrasing, Simone translated into pop music parlance the myth of the *tragic mulattoes*,[15] making a point of the brutality that surrounds them. In this respect, Simone could be seen as a lasting inspiration, from the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the Civil Rights Era to the more recent re-awakening of many black people who realize that being more white is actually a permanent reminder of the atrocities suffered by their ancestors in the, not so remote, past.

---

[13] The metaphor was famously coined by Zora Neale Hurston in her masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching* God (1937) in which the protagonist Janies is told by her grandmother that "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as ah can see" (14).

[14] In his *Narrative*, Douglass describes their condition as follows: "I know of such cases and it is worthy of remark that such slaves invariably suffer greater hardships, and have more to contend with than others. They are, in the first place, a constant offence to their mistress. She is ever disposed to find fault with them [...] she is never better pleased than when she sees them under the lash, especially when she suspects her husband of showing to his mulatto children favours which he withholds from his black slaves. The master is frequently compelled to sell this class of his slaves [...] and, cruel as the deed may strike anyone to be, for a man to sell his own children [...] it is the dictate of humanity for him to do so; for, unless he does this, for he [...] must stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but few shades darker complexion than himself, and ply the glory lash to his naked back" (1845, 3).

As for the third woman, Sweet Thing, the verses “Whose little girl am I / Anyone who has money to buy” suggest she is a prostitute, which cost Simone the ban of the song from several radios that did not want to play a tune that made reference to a sex worker. By introducing here the opposite archetype of the “Mammy,” the “Jezebel,”[16] and, by abstaining from passing any moral judgment on her, Simone leaves the door open to conjectures about the reasons behind the woman’s life path, making space for stories that do not focus on her morality, but rather on historical and social conditions. Witnessing to the lasting impact of her strategic silence, what is left as an implicit possibility by Simone becomes the main storyline in a rewriting of “Four Women,” by Hip-Hop artist Talib Kweli, who blames the fate of a young prostitute in the 1990s Harlem to the social, political and economic problems that beset the US back then:

> [...] and now it got them generation facin’ deseases
> That don’t kill you they just got problems
> [...] Yo, it’s gettin’ worse, when children hide the fact that they pregnant
> [...] How will I survive, how will this baby shine? Daddy dead from crack in ‘85, mommy dead
> from AIDS in ‘89 At 14 the baby hit the same streets they became her master.

While Simone stages her narrative of Sweet Thing amid the protest movements of the 1960s and stays clear of any moralizing, misogynistic overtone, Kweli fully endorses a reading of the girl’s fate as motivated by social factors. By the end of the 1980s, economic recession, deindustrialization, and backlash against the Civil Rights Era have become a devastating mix for the conditions of the inner cities, where no prospect of decent job and income, coupled with the governmental general tendency to blame black people for their own financial and social difficulties, forced many African Americans to turn to drug dealing and prostitution. As a result, Sweet Thing may have been freed and even desegregated over the decades separating the original song and its rewriting, but she is nonetheless enslaved to a system of oppression that denies her the basic rights for self-determination.[17]

Last, but not least, Peaches, whose name Simone screams vehemently at the end of the song, is introduced as “furious at the conditions she has grown up in” (Cohodas 2010, 179): “I’m awfully bitter these days / because my parents were slaves.” With hurtful openness, the singer connects the history of slavery to the current situation of African American women in the 1960s, picturing a woman, by many listeners perceived as the expression of the author's point of view, who feels the shadow of slavery haunting her all her life. As with Sweet Thing, physical chains and hard labor in the fields may not be what constrains Peaches, but segregation, its state-sanctioned form, was central to preventing African American women from accessing higher education and economic advancement, thus bringing about an unbridgeable divide between them and the rest of society; a divide that Peaches / Simone is not willing to put up with anymore. By presenting four women of different skin tones, in fact, she wanted not so much to educate people about stereotypes as to give other black women a framework to question or reject negative ideas and stereotypes about themselves. Quoting Cohodas:

---

[15] This theme was extensively explored by last century's novelists such as Nella Larsen (1929).

[16] In Jordan-Zachery, *Jezebel* is defined as a provocative woman whose actions are dictated by her libido, and thus she is the counter image of Mammy. In addition, she is often constructed as a seductress. The construction of such image accentuates cultural stereotypes of hypersexual black women and their inability to exercise sexual control, and according to Collins, “is central in this nexus of elite white male images of Black womanhood because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression” (1991, 77).

[17] That of the “crack mother” is another archetype conceived on the basis of the reliance on previous images of black womanhood such as *Mammy* and *Jezebel*, constructed as dangerous to society. As Jordan Zachary argues, this rather recent narrative allowed for the extension of governmental reach into the monitoring of the moral as well as the criminal behavior of black women in a manner that was not comparable across all women regardless of race (2009, 50).

> All the song did was to tell what entered the mind of most black women in America when they thought about themselves: their complexion, their hair – straight, kinky, natural, which? And what other women thought of them. Black women didn't know what the hell they wanted because they were defined by things they didn't control. (186)

3. Lauryn Hill's *Miseducation*: a site of black feminist thoughts in the era of Hip-Hop

Women in Western contemporary popular music culture have been portrayed either as decorative and fragile, or as manipulative, and in need of submission. These sexualized portrayals inevitably shape the realities of women’s experience in the music industry, limiting their genius as lyricists, producers and performers. Veteran artists such as Nina Simone have weighed in on the representations of women in music and have felt the urge to protest women’s subjugation with lyrics that depict rage and insist on the demand of respect. This way of making music constituted a strong legacy with female artists willing “to exhibit a new energy, an explosion of youthful anti-sexist and anti-racist consciousness that creates a stage in popular music poised for a renewal in the surge of women’s militancy in the world” (Weissen 2003, 107-108).

At the same time, there has also been a backlash against women’s autonomy within the US music industry, the latter being constantly involved in the manipulation and construction of women's role in the show business, both when they appear to respond to the market demands for sexualized representations reinforcing gendered and racialized stereotypes, and when individual artists try to negotiate more nuanced performances (Hobson and Bartlow 2008, 3). One of the music spheres specific to black culture where women are regularly downgraded to the mere spectacularization of their body is Hip-Hop.[18] For instance, although women in Hip-Hop have struggled to escape marginalization, their inclusion in such a male-dominated musical culture is always shifting from the perception of them as “emcees and deejays [...] to their relegation to hyper-sexualized roles as music video dancers, models and groupies.” Despite the quite misogynistic focus of market-oriented mainstream Hip-Hop, there is nonetheless an intrinsic relationship between such culture and feminism. The music associated with Hip-Hop culture – rap, R&B, neo soul, and sometimes a complex fusion of all of them – has offered a critical site for feminist, religious and political stances, giving voice to the silent cries of the black community, and therefore continues to carry on and expand the ideas and ideology of the Civil Rights generation (Alridge, 1).[19]

Arguably the most popular representative of socially committed Hip-Hop in her generation is Lauryn Hill, whose radical stances, the way she so fiercely counteracted a trend where the (African American and female) superstar was undergoing a process of *dollification*, made her an icon that people could look up to as a new model for their community. Hill appears to have learnt the lesson of Simone’s extensive body of protest performance, as well as of her association to the politics of Black Power, to the point that Simone’s prophetic persona, her widely recognized musical genius and her “black radical womanist performance praxis” (La Marr 2003, 387), position her as Hill’s most direct foremother. *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, in fact, is an emotional journey of a young woman who, while celebrating her beaming black pride in songs infused with Funk, Rap and R&B, also shows a “clamoring womanist wisdom” (371) that opposes the growing objectification of black women in Hip-Hop by addressing the issue of black women's politics of respectability based on how they decide to carry themselves and how they face the social implications of solo-parenting.

The first single, “Doo Wop (That Thing),” for example, is a socially committed narrative that reproaches both African American women and men for maintaining societal assumptions and stereotypes, such as the exploitation of black female body as a sexual object and the consequences of flaunted/faulty masculinity. More specifically, she admonishes those men who:

---

[18] Largely recognized as the overall setting that gives birth to *rap*, brake dancing, and graffiti. Ripani explains how Hip-Hop is first and foremost a culture, a source of alternative identity formation and a social status providing disenfranchised black youth with peculiar fashions, language, and musical performances (2003, 165).

[19] Alridge argues that since the early years of Hip-Hop many artists have continued to spouse the critical thinking of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Freedom Struggle, but in a language that resonates with many black youth of the post-industrial and post-civil rights integrationist era.

> Need to take care of their three and four kids' men
> They facing a court case when the child's support late
> The sneaky silent men, the punk domestic violence men
> The quick to shoot the semen stop acting like boys and be men.

Plainly, her condemnation is directed at those men who shirk their responsibilities, which they have by not being sexually responsible and respectful in the first place. Here, an enormous issue related to male culture emerges: men always try their hardest to show how tough they are, to prove their masculinity. It is the desire to see their virility validated – or the threat to see it mocked and denied – that pushes them to act selfishly, irresponsibly and even violently. What the singer does is not simply admonishing the actions, but the mind-set, the ideology that prevents men from doing things that their social group would take as emasculating. In other words, Hill is attacking stereotyped forms of gendered behavior, condemning the fact that it is precisely their egotistic fulfillment that makes men place value on power and material things (as expressed in the line "more concerned in his rims and his Timbs than his woman"), rather than on people.

The part dedicated to women, instead, utters a critique towards those who do not treat themselves like they are worthwhile by sleeping with men who never call them back:

> When you give it up so easy you ain't even fooling him
> If you did it then, then you'll probably fuck again
> Taking out your neck sayin' you're a Christian
> [...] Showing off yo' ass 'cause you're thinking it's a trend.

Although the idea of not being entitled to having sex outside of a steady relationship is itself conservative and often used as an anti-feminist argument, here Hill's warning shines light on a further product of perpetuated derogatory assumptions about black women. As scholar Harris-Perry argues, in fact, while intentional misrepresentation and misrecognition "contribute to pervasive experiences of shame for black women and [...] limit their opportunities as political and thought leaders" (55), they also cause the creation of a "specific citizenship imperative of *strong black woman* to which they are expected to conform" (54), lest they fall back in the stereotype of lascivious black womanhood (captured in the images of the *Jezebel*, the *Sapphire*, the *Matriarch*). Because historical myths are kept alive in a people's collective memory regardless of their actuality, they inevitably affect the contemporary portrayals of black women in public discourse, stigmatizing the individual on the basis of assumptions about the group. Therefore, African American women who exercise their citizenship must also try to manage the negative expectations born of this powerful mythology, challenging negative images and resisting humiliating public representations. In this light, Hill's reproach may well function as the attempt to warn women against giving society an excuse to humiliate them, by validating negative narratives of them. The image of the strong black woman, however, is no less damaging because, in its intimate connection with the stereotype of the *angry black woman*, is functional to the denigration of the black female body and character. Not only are her physical features questioned when juxtaposed to standardized (i.e. white) norms of western beauty (her nose is "too big," her shoulders "too wide," and her waist, thighs and buttocks "too thick"), but they also seem to constitute a parameter of moral judgment and qualification for one's social and economic position.[20]

Reading them from the perspective of the entire album, Hill's lines mark the struggle that black women face each time a set of very complex, inconsistent and overlapping stereotypes is projected onto them to the point that both poles in the *chaste woman / whore* dichotomy seem to apply simultaneously to the inevitable detriment of *all* black women. Such struggle, the idea of feeling exposed to the eye of the public and being looked at as a statistic is consistent in the experience of most African American women, [21] and the strength of *The Miseducation* rests precisely in the author's capacity to empathize with those women and provide a space where they could feel understood and empowered. If "Doo Wop" opens up to the fright of being destined for demise, the journey Hill takes on in the album, while emphasizing how painful it is to live up under certain stereotypes (in the album title track "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill," she belts out: "and every time I've tried to be / what someone else thought of me/ so caught up, I wasn't able to breathe"), also brings about a catharsis by showing a woman who lives consuming passions, embraces pain, and ultimately finds self-realization in the conscious choice of motherhood. One of the most soulful ballads on the album, "To Zion," is a song that Hill wrote for her first son and child, Zion. In it, the singer opens up about the uncertainty regarding her pregnancy, as well as the bliss she found in having the child. In her words:

---

[20] Think, for example, how the many racist insults and comments Michelle Obama has been made the object of (she has been variously depicted as an "ape in heels" by Pamela Ransey Taylor, as a killing machine in Afros on *The New Yorker*, or, during her studies at Princeton, as an irrationally angry woman), not only stem from a crooked ideological perspective of her, but in many cases imply how her alleged lack of elegance and cheer qualified her as unfit for the position she held as First Lady.

> I knew his life deserved a chance
> but everybody told me to be smart
> "Look at your career" they said
> "Lauryn baby use your head"
> But instead I chose to use my heart.

When she was pregnant with the child, Hill was about twenty-two and, of course, with the prospect of a terrific career before her, abortion appeared a quite straightforward option to those who surrounded her. Choosing otherwise would have meant being a single young parent, and most importantly, would have exposed her to the pillory of the media, compromising her image as *a* girl with principles that had been so carefully cultivated over the years. Once the money and the music industry are taken out of the equation, however, her case is not different from those of many other African American girls across the nation in any way that counts. At that time, she perfectly fit the archetype of the *urban teen mother*, whose age and social condition allegedly makes her unable to care for herself and the children. Such image of a "baby having other babies" was represented over and over as an unfit parental figure, a perpetuator of poverty in black community, and therefore became central in the welfare reform discourse of the 1990s as people wrongly "assumed that most teen welfare mothers were African American" (Sparks 2003, 180). Moreover, using such myths to support the claims that black women have no work ethic helped justifying several policies that denied them financial assistance, and forced them to take on their responsibilities through governmental discipline (Harris-Perry, 45). Because black solo mothers are not under the control of men and, if receiving welfare, they blur the class and racial border positing that black women cannot play the role of the white stay-at-home lady, they pose a threat to *racialized patriarchy*. Therefore, in sanctioning assumed images of black female solo parenting, the government takes on itself the missing figure of the man as controller / master, not to get women to follow the model of the "good family," but to debase them, to prove them unworthy of recognition within society, and to deprive them of their agency. Likewise, when Hill is told "to be smart" or referred to as a "baby," she is automatically denied her free will on the basis of her assumed incapacity to handle the situation. Regardless of how the song's story arch might be manipulated in terms of pro-life politics, "To Zion" is arguably a feminist anthem since central to it is the fight to have one's right to choose fully recognized.

Another example of how the Hip-Hop superstar moved in the direction of deeper involvement with political statements is that she demanded she be addressed as "Ms. Hill" after 2005. Although many ascribed that will to a symptom of pathological egotism and delusional grandeur (McGee and Tresniowski 2008, 382),[22] Hill's request should be understood within a history of degrading naming practices to which African Americans have long been subjected in the US. By demanding a formal prefix, the singer warns the public against getting disrespectfully close by unconsciously and indirectly reproducing a hegemonic practice where "boy," "gal," ""Uncle," "Auntie" and even one's given first name belonged in the same semantic field as the n-word in typical anti-black speech. As theorized by Hortense Spillers, there are some kinds of interrelations between words and flesh, between naming and touching, between nominative practices and corporeal conditions. Even if the body is no longer physically captive, dominant symbolic activity inscribed in the system of naming remains grounded in the metaphors of captivity and mutilation, so that it is as if neither time nor history showed movement, as the subject were *murdered* over and over again (1987, 261). As is already evident with Simone's characters in "Four Women," violence and captivity have outlasted the institution of slavery and perpetuated a system in which the signification of black bodies is continuously distorted and belittled. Therefore, Hill's self-renaming is tantamount to a process of corporeal defense and reflects a black feminist ethos of self-expression away from the oppression of the hegemonic culture. Contextualizing the young woman within the racist and sexist sociocultural circumstances that still play a major role in the US and reading her behavior in this perspective, what appeared to many as the signs of whimsical diva tantrums, in fact proved to be a resolute counterhegemonic move. In a 2006 interview for *Essence* she expressed her own ideas upon the dangers that may assail black womanhood:

---

[21] Historian Chana Kai Lee's experience is exemplary in this sense. Tenured Professor at the University of Georgia in 2002, Lee had to ask for sick leave due to some complications from lupus who had caused her two strokes in a week and left her with disabled speech. Despite her physician wrote many letters to explain the severity of her condition, Lee's department chair insisted that she resumed teaching immediately because the state was concerned about sick leave abuse. Humiliated by the impossible task of going back to teaching only one week after a stroke, Lee saw herself victimized by stereotypes about black women. As she reported: "Images of a welfare cheat keep playing in my head. Ph.D. or no Ph.D., tenure or no tenure, I was like one of those lazy black folks: I'd do anything for a cheap ride, [...] I'd manipulate good, responsible white folks who played by the rules, all to avoid my responsibilities" (Lee 2008, 212).

> It's really about the black woman falling in love with her own image of beauty. I know that I've been in a fight to love myself and experience reciprocity in a relationship. I thought that a perfectly reciprocal relationship was impossible. That's that "Black woman is the mule of the world" thing. It says she can't get what she deserves, no matter how dope she is. And you know, you have to go through the fear. You do have to do something with the insecurity, ghosts and demons that have been programmed in us for centuries. You have to master your voice, all the insecure and inadequate men who put garbage in woman's mind, soul, spirit and psyche just so they can use her (Morgan).

Hill's statement is rich in womanist and Afro-affirmative insights because, while proving to be fully aware of the century-long history of violence, terror and psychological threat endured by African American women, she strongly rejects the creed that "naturalizes black female abjection and endorses a culture of self-defeat and foregone surrender" (La Marr 2003, 385). Fiercely rebuking the idea that women cannot find political autonomy and spiritual fulfillment, her suggestions are precise: black women must go through the fear and get over those demons instilled in them through sanctioned violence and normalized subjection.

4. Beyoncé: her contribution to the #BlackLivesMatter

Indeed, Simone's and Hill's resonance trespassed the boarders of pop culture and permeated black women's politics, establishing a practice of solidarity between artistic work and social protest that becomes spectacularly visible today in the close connection between the #BlackLivesMatter and artists such as Beyoncé. Had it not been for such pioneers, it is quite unlikely that the current flourishing of protest music so cognizant of what it feels like to be black and female would ever come to exist in a nation where racism and misogyny are still in the way of black women's social and political recognition. It was their conscious womanist approach to music that gave the generations of black female artists following Simone and Hill the space they needed and a chance to contribute to questioning a system still too contaminated by persisting hetero-patriarchal ideologies.

Arguably the most influential female artist in pop music at the moment, Beyoncé single-handedly outdoes any other contemporary fellow singer with her inspired and insurgent assault on the media that, according to Daphne Brook "is elaborate and aesthetically innovative in that it calls on audiences to passionately engage and grapple with pop spectacle." Although Mrs. Knowles may not have been as politically confrontational and as lyrically trenchant in the past, she nowadays is a black icon who causes unparalleled social, cultural, and political uproar to the point that syllabi at several US universities have used her latest album *Lemonade* (2016) in their examination of the most prominent sociocultural issues in contemporary black womanhood. Her “Formation” music video, in particular, anticipates themes on the album that engage black feminist discourses advocated by #BlackLivesMatter, not only by insisting on the governmental neglect of black communities, but also by “reclaim[ing] *all* the aspects of black life that have been rendered as deviant, as waste, as toxic, as destructive” (Hobson 2016) for decades. By making explicit visual reference to the Black Panthers, and by choosing a musical style that is the popular expression of contemporary black youth culture, Knowles ideally inherits Simone’s and Hill’s legacy, respectively.

---

[22] In this respect, another parallel could be traced with Nina Simone because many were, in fact, the times when US critics and media depicted the latter as an unstable, arrogant and temperamental witch rather than as a high standards artist.

Not surprisingly, New Orleans made a suitable location to shoot the video for more than one reason. In the opening scene, Knowles can be seen on the top of a police car partially submerged in the flooded water along with countless shacks and other poor dwellings, clearly evoking the post-Katrina tragedy and, most importantly, the outrageous mismanagement of the emergency and the dearth of effective governmental action to bring the inner-city back to normal.[23] In addition to that, the disaster was seen by many as a confirmation of America's indifference to black people's pain, and was met with a certain degree of racial pessimism supported, among other things, by highly racialized comments addressed to the (black) victims of the hurricane. Stories from that period, in fact, included exaggerated claims of violence and inaccurate reports of crime and disorder that contributed to the reinforcement of negative stereotypes of blackness.[24]

Beyoncé's politicized views on racial injustice meet her reclaiming of marginalized aspects of Southern blackness even before she starts singing, with the inclusion of two local celebrities in the video: the voices of New Orleanian queer sensations Messy Mya and Big Freedia, in fact, are sampled in “Formation” not only to complement the visuals in denouncing the social and economic backlash that followed Katrina (as with Messy Mya's unmistakable “What happened at the New Orleans” line from her YouTube Channel), but also to honor queer culture, African American female Southerness, and their political intersection. In her conversation with the #BlackLivesMatter, Knowles affirms black queer culture and black womanhood by celebrating her roots while also embracing aesthetic artifice as a legitimate performance of identity. In the refrain, in fact, the Texan singer insists on her ancestry and on the pride she takes in typical African American physical features by singing:

> My daddy Alabama
> Momma Louisiana
> You mix that negro with that creole and make a Texas bama
> I like my baby heir with baby hair and Afros
> I like my negro nose with Jackson five nostrils.[25]

Alongside the apparent insistence on biology and lineage, however, considerable footage is devoted to showing cultural heritage as performative and constructed along the axis of gender / sexuality bending. For instance, a group of black girls is showcased inside a weave shop wearing dyed wigs while Knowles herself sports Afros, distinctive blond cornbraids, and other elaborate hairdos throughout the video. Although

---

[23] Due to the catastrophe, in fact, more than 1500 people died, half a million people were permanently displaced, billions of dollars of property were lost, and homes, schools and churches were irremediably damaged.

[24] In his 2015 piece for *Slate.com*, Bouie cites two infamous examples that prove how skewed the coverage was those days: in the first case, a young black man wading through the water while holding on a case of soda and pulling a bag was described by Associated Press as on his way back from “looting a grocery store.” When a white couple was found and pictured in the same circumstance, the caption created by Getty Images is way more empathizing, because it presented them as “after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store.”

[25] According to Connor Martin, the word “bama” was initially black slang for working class African Americans moving up North during the Great Migration. It meant someone who did not know how to behave properly and was not presentable enough for white sensibilities, and therefore is both classist and racist. By appropriating the word, Beyoncé flips off respectability politics and reclaimed it as a positive identity, as well as introducing it to a worldwide audience.

Beyoncé's use of wigs is a staple of her visual persona (at times reminiscent of Diana Ross), the inclusion of a weave shop in the narrative of an inner city bears witness to the deep meaning that hair has in black culture. Through colorful and Afro-inspired wigs, in particular, Beyoncé boasts a certain type of tradition – historically associated with the ghetto – which is not simply ornamental, but becomes functional to the expression of black women's agency, in that she tells and subverts white aesthetic codes that force black women to tame their hair in order to feel socially accepted. In the words of Janell Hobson, Beyoncé "invokes hair as a literal extension of self refashioning and reclaiming of beauty politics while subverting white beauty standards in the service of black aesthetics." This also applies to the use of scanty Victorian-inspired outfits that Beyoncé and other ladies wear while dancing to the song inside of what seems to be a period brothel, thus invoking the image of the "parlor ladies [existing] ambiguously between the respectability of 'the New Negro Womanhood' from the era and the less reputable positioning of creole courtesans that birthed the multiple colors of blackness." Somewhere else on *Lemonade*, Beyoncé insists on conjuring the image of the sex worker in the attempt to embrace disrespectability politics by taking up that role more explicitly. In the "6 Inch" video, the uncensored celebration of sex as a manifestation of the divine preludes the song with a citation from Warsan Shire's poem "Grief Has Its Blue Hands in her Hair":

> Grief sedated by orgasm
> Orgasm heightened by grief
> God was in the room
> when the man said to the woman
> "I love you so
> much wrap your legs around
> me pull me in pull me in pull
> me in pull me in pull me in
> pull me in."
> Sometimes when he had her
> nipple in his bout she'd whisper
> "Allah"
> That too is a form of worship.

Seconds after the poem, as if inspired by it, the singer advocates a side to femininity that mainstream culture is uncomfortable with. Since the beginning of the song, in fact, Knowles acknowledges the power of the club dancer, which is best represented through the metonymic use of the "6 Inch heels" to demand respect for an empowered womanhood which may be provocative and even sexually explicit, but whose ultimate goal is to "work for the money from the start to the finish" as any other professional. Despite (and precisely because of) the widespread social ignominy and abuse that those women face due to the nature of their job, Beyoncé's feminist perspective works on elevating socially marginalized bodies as an example of the respect that women deserve, regardless of their position in the eye of conformist society.

Beyoncé's embracing of disrespectability politics, however, extends beyond the conjuring up of a history of her people, to focus on specific black bodies who had been kept at the margins of society by their own kind. As the inclusion of queer voices such as Big Freedia and Messy Mya signals, marginalization and stigmatization does not apply to (black) women only, but to any racial and sexual dissenting subject who does not comply with the tacit requirements of whitewashed parameters. In sharing with the diva an attitude towards performative extravaganza, in fact, black queer masculinity participates in dismantling forms of hetero-patriarchal normativity, a concept that "Formation" reiterates showing, for example, black queer men bouncing to the track while Big Freedia's lingo explodes in the self-celebratory lines: "I did not come to play with you hoes / I came to slay bitch / I like cornbraids and collar greens, bitch," which, according to the drag queen herself are "an attitude that represents the city: [*to slay*, in particular, expresses] its flavor, fever and fears" (Lockett 2016). In the same way, Knowles even challenges stereotypical gender dynamics by appropriating hip-hop male artists' narratives where power is most visible through the insistence on money and the explicit sexual objectification of women. In the second verse of "Formation," she sings:

> When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster
> If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper
> Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up.

By turning the female narrator into a "sugar mama,"[26] Beyoncé's "Formation" flips off a well-known script that normalizes the imbalance of power between men and women. With the explicit reference to her sexual fulfillment as the necessary condition for her man to be rewarded, in fact, not only does Beyoncé confine masculinity to a decorative role, but also debunks the gendered power relations at the heart of such hetero-patriarchal narrative. Normally accepted as men rappers' legitimate expression of Hip-Hop culture, the same rude and brazen talk causes estrangement and outrage in many listeners as it defies gendered assumptions about (black) women's behavior. Because society maintains that swear words and attitude belong to masculinity, women living by the same – linguistic and behavioral – codes are perceived as less feminine and, as a consequence, less worthy of social recognition. In Knowles' decision, not only to portray such women, but also to appear as their champion, lies the song's irreverence towards a certain portion of the audience which is consciously made uncomfortable by being forced to confront narratives so different from those they have been brought up with. In other words, pushing the boundaries of what is perceived as normal by reversing stereotypes allows Beyoncé to expose gendered racism that is still so pervasive within American society. In a 2016 interview for *Elle* magazine, the singer addressed the angry critique from people who were reportedly appalled at her adherence to the #BlackLivesMatter,[27] and at her references to the Black Panthers. She stated:

> If celebrating my roots and culture during Black History Month made anyone uncomfortable, those feelings were there long before a video and long before me. I'm proud of what we created, and I'm proud to be a part of a conversation that is pushing things forward in a positive way.

If her very participation in the movement seems to be problematic, the reason for that has more to do with her gender, rather than her profession. Despite the ever-present complaints of those suggesting that singers be kept at bay from politics and stack with their roles of *entertaining* the people, in fact, black male artists such as Kendrick Lamar and D' Angelo were not exposed to the same pillory that hit Beyoncé upon the release of "Formation." On the contrary, D' Angelo's *Black Messiah* (2015) and Lamar's *To Pimp a Butterfly* (2015) were acclaimed as timely, while magazines like *Rolling* Stone remarked how both albums made "2015 the year radical Black politics and for-real Black music resurged in tandem to converge on the nation's pop mainstream" (Tate 2015). Even though she is equally applauded by critics and activists, Beyoncé, more than her contemporary fellow singers, is also stigmatized exactly because she dares cross the gendered line that has separated the vocalist from the artist as early as in the post-slavery era. As previously experienced by Simone herself,[28] and again by Hill,[29] it is now Beyoncé's politicized view that struggles to be taken seriously because of the social stigma attached onto black women. Additionally, if many male artists make a music genre (male R&B and Rap) that has long been instrumental to black protest culture, Beyoncé's early career triumph in the realm of pop has certainly made her less politically confrontational in the public eye. For over a decade, in fact, she has been given credit for her amazing voice and entertaining performances, which even made her the most awarded female singer at the Grammys, but when her vocal powers became only a part of a more complex project that centers radical black female politics and aesthetics, she is suddenly perceived as controversial, and this is because her identity narratives clash with what society maintains the right examples of womanhood should be. As pointed out by Johnson (2017):

---

[26] Knowles is not new to the appropriation of a male's perspective, as 2006 videos like "Upgrade U, " "Ring the Alarm," and "Suga Mama" consistently show.

[27] At an early stage, the movement was perceived as a rather divisive one by average Americans, and many were the campaign founded to oppose it, such as the #BlueLivesMatter (in defense of police officers) and #AllLivesMatter.

[28] See the reference to Feldstein in note 10.

[29] See the reference to McGee and Tresniowski in Hill's section of the present article.

> If you are a [black] woman who does not try to make work that is appealing to a [white] male audience, this is also seen as transgressive, [...] "Lemonade" did not translate black womanhood for a white audience. It told a story about a black woman to other black women, and did not explain these experiences to make white people more comfortable.

In an environment where girls are still raised to suffocate their true self in order to be likeable, and taught that "they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are" (Adichie 14), Beyoncé's feminist investment in the #BlackLivesMatter is timely for it elevates black women to a status of independence and self-confidence that, because it insists on the same patriarchal narratives that men use to justify their power, deprives cisgender masculinity of its crucial components, i.e. physical and economic strength. First with "Formation," and more thoroughly with *Lemonade*, Knowles' conjuring multiple images of black womanhood – whether is the case of the hip-hop superstar, the ghetto girl, the sex worker, and even the European Madonna and African goddess Oshun – functions as an elaborate tease to the *status quo*, in that she undermines men's fragile ego, which is predominantly built upon sexual freedom their assumed role of natural providers. With her musical and visual language, Knowles complements the #BlackLivesMatter in expressing the urgency to seek equality, starting precisely from those bodies who have always been an appendix to African American history and that the movement is now giving prominence to. Following in the footsteps of two major black icons who shaped protest music and women's politics at once, Beyoncé's most recent body of work is equally far-reaching, as well as arguably monumental for, in her own words, it aspires:

> [to] give voice to our pain, our struggles, our darkness, and our history [...] to show images to my children that reflect their beauty so that they can grow up in a world where they look in the mirror [...] and see themselves.[30]

Works cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *We Should All Be Feminist*. London: Fourth Estate, 2014.

Anderson Monica and Hitlin Paul. "The Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter emerges: Social Activism on Twitter." *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech,* 2016. http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Bouie, Jamelle. "Where Black Lives Matter Began: Hurrican Katrina Exposed our Nation's Amazing Tolerance for Black Pain." *Slate.com*, 2016. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/08/hurricane_katrina_10th_anniversary_how_the_black_lives_matter_movement_was.html. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Bradley, Regina N. "Getting In Line: Working Through Beyoncé's 'Formation.'" *The Huffington Post,* 2016. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/regina-n-bradley/getting-in-line-working-t_b_9218736.html. Last visited March 12, 2017.

Braswell, Kristine. "#FergusonFridays: Not all of the Black freedom fighters are men: An interview with the black women on the frontline." *The Feminist Wire,* 2014. http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/fergusonfridays-black-freedom-fighters-men-interview-black-women-front-line-ferguson/. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Brooks, Dafne A. "How #BlackLivesMatter Started a Musical Revolution." *The Guardian.com*, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/mar/13/black-lives-matter-beyonce-kendrick-lamar-protest. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Cohen, Cathy J. "Afterwords: When Will Black Lives Matter? Neoliberalism, Democracy, and the Queering of American Activism in the Post-Obama Era." *The Hip-Hop and Obama Reader.* Ed. Travis L. Gosa and Erik Nielson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 280-290.

---. *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

---

[30] Adapted from Knowles' acceptance speech for Best Urban Contemporary Album at the 2016 Grammy Awards.

Cohodas, Nadine. *Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone.* Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

Collins, Patricia H. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.* New York: Routledge, 1990.

---. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Connor Martin, Katherine. “Release Notes: Bama and Shaka: How Two Local Words Went Global.” *Oxford English Dictionaries: The Definite Record of the English Language.* http://public.oed.com/the-oed-today/recent-updates-to-the-oed/december-2016-update/release-notes-bama-and-shaka-how-two-local-words-went-global/. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South: by a Black Woman of the South.* Xenia: Aldine Printing House, 1892. https://archive.org/details/voicefromsouth00coop

Crenshaw, Kimberle. “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1242-1299.

---. “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989.1 (2000): 139-167.

Douglass, Frederick. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.* Boston: the Anti-Slavery Office, 1845. https://archive.org/details/narrativeoflifeo1846doug

Eisenstein, Zillah. *The Color of Gender: Reimagining Democracy*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.

Feldstein, Ruth. “I Don’t Trust You Anymore: Nina Simone, Culture and Black Activism in the 1960s.” *The Journal of American History* 91.4 (2005): 1349-1379.

Fleetwood, Nicole R. *On Racial Icon: Blackness and the Public Imagination*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

Fried, Joseph P. “In Surprise, Witness Says Officer Bragged About Louima Torture.” *The New York Times*, 1999. http://www.nytimes.com/1999/05/20/nyregion/in-surprise-witness-says-officer-bragged-about-louima-torture.html. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Garza, Alicia. “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.” *Black Lives Matter: Freedom and Justice for All Black Lives*, 2014. http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/. Last visited March 14, 2017.

Gottesman, Tamar. “Beyoncé Wants to Change the Conversation: These days the superstar-turned-mogul is slaying – pop charts, music industry standards, societal labels, and now, athleticwear biz – all on her own.” *Elle magazine*, 2016. http://www.elle.com/fashion/a35286/beyonce-elle-cover-photos/. Last visited March 14, 2017.

Harris-Perry, Melissa V. *Sister Citizens: Shame, Stereotypes and Black Women in America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Hobson Janell and Bartlow R. Dianne. “Introduction: Representin’: Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music.” *Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 8.1 (2008): 1-14.

Hobson, Janell. “Beyoncé as a Conjure Woman: Reclaiming the Magic of Black Lives (That) Matter.” *Ms. Blog*, 2016. http://msmagazine.com/blog/2016/02/08/beyonce-as-conjure-woman-reclaiming-the-magic-of-black-lives-that-matter/. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Johnson, Myles E. “What Beyoncé Won Was Bigger than a Grammy.” *The New York Times*, February 14, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/14/opinion/what-beyonce-won-was-bigger-than-a-grammy.html?_r=0. Last visited March 14, 2017.

Johnson, Patrick E. *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Jordan-Zachery, Julia S. *Black Women, Cultural Images and Social Policy*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

La Marr, Jurelle Bruce. “The People Inside my Head, too: Madness, Black Womanhood, and the Racial Performance of Lauryn Hill.” *African American Review* 45.3 (2003): 371-389.

Larsen, Nella. *Passing.* New York and London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1929. https://archive.org/details/passing00lars

Lee, Chana Kai. "Journey toward a Different Self: the defining power of illness, race, and gender." *Telling Histories: Black Women Historians in the Ivory Tower*. Ed. Deborah Gray White. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 200-214.

Lockett, Dee. "Big Freedia on Slayin' Beyoncé's 'Formation' – and Being Surprised by Its Release." *Vulture. com,* 2016 http://www.vulture.com/2016/02/big-freedia-on-slaying-beyonces-formation.html. Last visited March 3, 2017.

McGee Tiffany and Tresniowski Alexander. "What Ever Happened to...Lauryn Hill?" *People*, 2008. http://people.com/archive/whatever-happened-to-lauryn-hill-vol-70-no-7/. Last visited 14/03/2017.

Morgan, Joan. "They Call Me Ms. Hill." *Essence,* 2006. http://www.essence.com/2006/01/16/they-call-me-ms-hill. Last visited March 13, 2017.

Ripani, Richard J. *The New Blue Music: Changes in Rythm & Blues 1950-1999*. Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2006.

Smith, Mychal Denzel. "The Black Boy Literary Survival Kit: 'You Need Black Women More than You Know.'" *Literary Hub*, 2016. http://lithub.com/the-black-boy-literary-survival-kit/. Last visited March 14, 2017.

Sparks, Holloway. "Queens, teens, and model mothers." *Race and Politics of Welfare Reform*. Ed. Sanford F. Schram, Joes Soss, and Richard C. Fordy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2003. 171-195.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's baby, papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Culture and Countermemory: The 'American' Connection."* Special Issue of *diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.

Swaine, John, et al. "Young Black Men Killed by White US Police at Highest Rate in Year of 1,134 Deaths." *The Guardian.com*, 2015. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/dec/31/the-counted-police-killings-2015-young-black-men. Last visited 11/03/2017.

Tate, Greg. "Kendrick Lamar: To Pimp a Butterfly (2015)." *Rolling Stone.* http://www.rollingstone.com/music/albumreviews/kendrick-lamar-to-pimp-a-butterfly-20150319. Last visited March 14, 2017.

Taylor, Keeanga-Yamahtta. *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation.* Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016.

Van Dijk, Teun A. *Prejudice in Discourse: An Analysis of Ethnic Prejudice in Cognition and Conversation.* Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985.

---. *Racism and the press.* London: Routledge, 1991.

Shire, Warsan. "Grief Has Its Blue Hands in Her Hair." *Her Blue Body.* London: Flipped Eye, 2015.

Weissen, Naomi. "Mutineers in Mainstream Music: heralds of a New Feminist Wave?" *Women, Images and Realities: A Multicultural Anthology.* Ed. Keselman, McNair, and Schniedewind. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003.