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## Sexual Commodification in Beyoncé's Album *Lemonade*

A Theoretical Argument Against the Sexual Commodification in *Lemonade*

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## Introduction:

In her visual album *Lemonade*, Beyoncé consistently promotes black female empowerment, community, and acceptance through a mixture of strong imagery, powerful song lyrics, and intense poetry; however, while Beyoncé draws attention to several negative aspects of being a black female in the United States today, she also inadvertently promotes potentially harmful ideas about sexuality and commodification of that sexuality in the process. By analyzing her album using the theories of Louis Althusser, Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, and Karl Marx, we discuss the potential pitfalls of different aspects of sexual commodification in the songs, “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” “Love Drought,” “Six Inch” and “Formation.” The sexual commodification in Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* is problematic because it perpetuates a racist stereotype in an attempt to liberate women of color from the problem of societal sexual commodification. Whether that sexual commodification manifests itself as women attempting to gain power through adhering to sexually aggressive roles or instead accepting sexually submissive roles, these songs demonstrate very different yet potentially problematic attempts at solutions to the infidelity of the male persona as well as the sexual commodification of women of color in the United States.

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### Black Victimhood, Sexual Commodification, and the Role of the Male Persona

Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* consistently promotes a narrative of black female healing and acceptance through community; however, while Beyoncé promotes this healthy image of black sisterhood, she also inadvertently promotes potentially harmful ideas about sexuality by promoting a glamorized and appealing idea of sexual submission and victimhood using sexualized clothing choices within the album, as well as her celebrity status to promote these ideas and messages. Several songs and poems in *Lemonade* promote either sexual rebellion and healing through sexual dominance (a traditionally male role), or using sex within a relationship to heal from heartbreak; but, this dichotomy does not leave another alternative for women looking for healing after traumatic and victimizing relationships. Beyoncé seems to offer two solutions to being cheated on – reversing the male/female roles and sexually commodify men, or to choose healing through a monogamous sexual relationship with a male persona. Although both options seem to promote sexual freedom, both are problematic due to their commodification of black female bodies within these relationships.

Through examining “Don’t Hurt Yourself” and “Love Drought,” the commodification of female sexuality is addressed by two extremes – however, due to the narrative structure of *Lemonade*, “Love Drought” seems to be specifically answering/ mirroring the Beyoncé persona in “Don’t Hurt Yourself”, suggesting that she chooses and ultimately promotes this mode of sexual healing. Drawing on a deconstructive method of working within ideologies outlined by

Althusser, as well as the works of bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw, examining these songs side by side exposes the problematic sexual commodification of victimhood in *Lemonade*.

According to Crenshaw, “Sexualized images of African Americans go all the way back to Europeans' first engagement with Africans. Blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented. These sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women's sexuality, norms that are used to distinguish good women from bad, the madonnas from the whores” (1271). Using this context to evaluate *Lemonade* allows the viewer to see Beyoncé’s sexual engagement as claiming and owning that sexualized image and then using it to her advantage. Because of this conception of black women being “more sexual, more earthy, [and] more gratification-oriented”, Beyoncé plays with this concept through flipping the roles of traditional black femininity and masculinity in her song to promote a solution to her personas’ heartbreak. However, drawing on Louis Althusser’s notion of the inescapability of ideological systems, these attempts to subvert the system of sexual inequality still promote and reinforce potentially harmful ideas of female sexuality within relationships.

In the first half of the album, this solution seems to engage more heavily with assuming a traditionally male role of sexual empowerment to achieve independence and value in an unfaithful relationship, while the second half then returns to that adherence those relational, sexual roles that the first half of the album seems to be attempting to reject. Specifically, in “Don’t Hurt Yourself”, Beyoncé sells this idea that women are equivalent to their sexual prowess by suggesting that women must embrace that traditionally masculine role in order to have sexual autonomy and power. She wears a tight-fitting bra and leggings and sports an expensive fur coat. She snarls into the camera, proclaiming, “Who the fuck do you think I is?/You ain't married to no average bitch boy/You can watch my fat ass twist boy/As I bounce to the next dick boy/ And

keep your money, I got my own/ Get a bigger smile on my face, being alone” (Beyoncé, “Don’t Hurt Yourself”). Rather than seeking a solution that steps outside of that dichotomy of sexual infidelity or sexual submission, the female persona embraces that role of sexual dominance. Her response to her husband’s infidelity is to hurt him in the same way that he hurt her, specifically, through being sexually unfaithful -- a role that places her in a position of power over the male persona.

As a whole, this song seems to promote sexual rebellion and freedom as an appropriate and empowering response to infidelity. In the video, a variety of black women, dressed in various manner of black lingerie, are sexily draped against the wall. In an obvious way, these bodies are commoditized because they are not only adorned in expensive, sexy clothing; but, the only recourse to infidelity is to respond with more sexual infidelity. However empowering this may seem, this response then commodifies men. This can be seen especially with the lyrics about watching Beyoncé’s character “bounce to the next dick boy”: by taking the humanity out of sex (referring to a potential sexual partner as only a “dick”), Beyoncé employs the stereotypically male lens of sexual objectification to achieve power. Therefore, this song seems to intentionally promote solutions to infidelity through sexual aggression and autonomy; however, that autonomy seems to come at the cost of being anything other than being sexually provocative.

At first, Beyoncé tries flipping the male/female dichotomy of power in the first half of *Lemonade*, especially in “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” but then seems to abandon this tactic and instead accepts the original role of monogamy her persona was so hurt by, as she moves towards forgiveness. Although this theme pervades her album as her personas move from Hurt, Betrayal, and Anger, to Healing, Reformation, and Redemption, either choosing sexual dominance and aggression or choosing sexual submission and compliance within a relationship, are both

unsatisfactory solutions to the male persona's infidelity, because they leave very little room for independent female empowerment unrelated to the male persona's role within that relationship. As Althusser says in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," "... the reproduction of labour power requires... a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression..." (133). With this definition of ideological frames in mind, the sexual culture promoted denies individual sexual freedom and expression outside of sexual commodification of either females or males within these relationships, and indeed reinforces and perpetuates those negative relationships.

In the second half of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé moves from attempting a role of sexual dominance, and instead accepts the role and importance of male sexuality within a relationship to achieve healing; and, this option commodifies a glamorized vision of victimhood. Although this acceptance and forgiveness can indeed be interpreted as a powerful message, (making lemonade out of lemons), the idea that a woman can only achieve this healing through adhering to the more traditional role of female sexual submission commodifies female sexuality within those relationships through Beyoncé's platform, influence, and artistic choices. Beyoncé cannot escape from the system of sexual inequality between black men and women, and promotes this role of sexual submission by suggesting that women achieve freedom and healing when they forgive their men and then continue to sleep with them. Perhaps the narrative of healing and forgiveness is autobiographical and solely refers to Beyoncé's own experiences of finding healing through acceptance, forgiveness, and then a monogamous sexual relationship with the male persona; or, perhaps this narrative critiques unhealthy and abusive relationships between black men and

women. Regardless of the outcome, this album sheds light on the systemic hardships of black relationships; so, if nothing else, this album invites viewers to analyze these relationships more critically, and this awareness is positive in promoting solutions to these systemic problems. However, the female persona does seem to achieve healing at the end of the album; but, it isn't until her man reaffirms her identity as sexually desirable to him that "closure" is achieved. As bell hooks says in her article, "Moving Beyond Pain": "It is only as black women and all women resist patriarchal romanticization of domination in relationships can a healthy self-love emerge that allows every black female, and all females, to refuse to be a victim. Ultimately *Lemonade* glamorizes a world of gendered cultural paradox and contradiction. It does not resolve" (hooks).

The glamorized world of gendered paradox and victimhood is especially prevalent even in one of the most vulnerable songs in the album, "Love Drought". Beyoncé sings softly into the camera, surrounded by other black women, walking in the swampy marshland directly referencing the Igbo Landing in Georgia. Although this song seems to be a stereotypical love song, the relationship between the lyrics and the imagery invites further questioning of the worth the female persona derives from her sexual relationship with the male persona. Beginning with the lyrics of the second verse, "Tell me, what did I do wrong?/ Oh, already asked that, my bad/ But you my lifeline, think you tryna kill me?/ If I wasn't B, would you still feel me? Like on my worst day? Or am I not thirsty, enough?" (Beyoncé, "Love Drought"). These lyrics betray the hurting and questioning woman from the first half of the album – the woman wondering why her husband cheated on her who tries to change to fix those relational problems to no avail. Despite strong images of healing and community in the second half of *Lemonade*, these lyrics reveal the questioning female trying to fix and define the relationship through her sexual prowess and identity.

In one of the most powerful visual aspects of “Love Drought”, a line of women all walk through water in a swampy marshland – a direct reference to the historical account of the Igbo slaves of Georgia. When faced with the prospect of slavery in America, the Igbo slaves revolted against their captors, joined hands, walked into the ocean, and drowned themselves rather than submit to slavery. This image actively resists the oppression of slavery through community, but when the images are applied to the lyrics, those images of resistance suggest opposition to the imbalance of sexual power in the relationship the female persona is attempting to fix. For example, the lyrics, “are you aware you’re my lifeline, are you tryna kill me?” are heard as the viewer sees an image of Beyoncé tied to a large rope that is both imprisoning and supporting her. Supposing then, that this rope is both her lifeline and her bondage, the other images of resistance then become messages of communal empowerment against these unhealthy relationships that the female persona struggles against. However, in both the first and second verses of “Love Drought,” Beyoncé asks, “am I not thirsty, enough?”, suggesting that she believes it is her lack of attention and sexual abilities that caused her male counterpart to cheat on her. The image, then, of the women choosing to join hands and choose freedom through death illustrates the inability of the female persona to break free from that imbalanced sexual dichotomy. Her options are to either be a slave to this broken relationship, or to choose female community and to resist through death, and neither of these options are satisfactory solutions because of their inability to truly solve the problem the female persona faces.

Another facet of this imagery is the clothes the women are wearing -- they are dressed in sheer, full-length dresses, which accentuate the dark undergarments and bodies of the women as they walk through the water. If the image of black female community in opposition to slavery and oppression is meant to be empowering, what is the purpose of displaying these bodies, if not



to try and glamorize the problematic message of either resistance or acceptance of sexual oppression within these relationships? So, even though there are positive images of black women choosing community and freedom through death over slavery, the lyrics and images together betray the female desire for sexual validation from the male persona in order to achieve that acceptance, healing, and female community.

Although this song may not seem like obvious sexual commodification, juxtaposing historically empowering images against speech that indicates an acceptance of the male persona in a position of power within a romantic/sexual relationship sells the idea that women cannot find healing, empowerment, or female community without either accepting the role of sexual dominance (demonstrated in “Don’t Hurt Yourself”) or accepting the role of sexual submission (in “Love Drought”). Outside of these two choices, there are no other options available to the female persona. This commodifies sexuality because it removes the option for an alternate solution to unhappiness – the woman must either accept traditionally male roles of sexual dominance, or wait to be sexually validated; and, both options remove the full personhood of the female because she is reduced to her sexual identity in relation to the male persona. The responsibility falls on the woman to make a change in order to keep her man, rather than assign him any responsibility in fixing the problem. As bell hooks argues, “To truly be free, we must choose beyond simply surviving adversity, we must dare to create lives of sustained optimal well-being and joy. In that world, the making and drinking of lemonade will be a fresh and zestful delight... and not a measure of our capacity to endure pain, but rather a celebration of our moving beyond pain” (hooks).

By displaying black female bodies in sexily clad outfits in both “Don’t Hurt Yourself” and “Love Drought”, these two songs reinforce the narrative that black women are seen as more

sexually driven than their white counterparts, as well as suggesting that these responses to the sexual infidelity of the male persona through either sexual dominance or sexual submission is desirable. By using black bodies to promote community within suffering, both songs reinforce the importance of black, female community; but, both songs are also problematic because they suggest that that community can only be achieved through adherence to this shared suffering through either of these two sexual extremes. However, because of Beyoncé's status as a cultural icon, her album potentially expands the public awareness of these systemic problems that black females face. So, regardless of how problematic these representations may be, they still encourage greater evaluation and discussion of these problems, which is a positive outcome of the album.

Overall, Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* promotes a variety of black women and community, which are positive things. However, different aspects of her album must be examined more critically for the underlying messages that are being sold in relation to sexual behavior. By evaluating the shift between "Don't Hurt Yourself" and "Love Drought", the narrative shifts from a woman attempting to flip the traditional male/female sexual dichotomy, to a woman then waiting for her man to sexually validate her so she can then find healing. Indeed, commodifying men in "Don't Hurt Yourself", she only finds validation through her sexual power and dominance, and then in her later songs such as "Love Drought", she seeks that same validation through her role of sexual submission to the male persona. Images of black female community, although empowering, suggest that this community can only be built through suffering together within these problematic and potentially unhealthy sexual relationships and norms that Beyoncé attempts to address in *Lemonade*.

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“When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster”: Sexual Commodification of Black Men  
in “Formation” from Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*

In her essay “Moving Beyond Pain,” African American feminist scholar bell hooks takes issue with the violent image Beyoncé presents us with in her visual album, *Lemonade*: “Among the many mixed messages embedded in *Lemonade* is this celebration of rage. Smug and smiling in her golden garb, Beyoncé is the embodiment of a fantastical female power, which is just that—pure fantasy. Images of female violence undercut a central message embedded in *Lemonade* that violence in all its forms, especially the violence of lies and betrayal, hurts.” I would like to take hook’s argument one step further: in addition to her troubling promotion of violence, Beyonce chooses to portray the sexual commodification of men as an additional method of combating male domination, and in so doing, Beyonce is arguing for yet another form of violence to be inflicted on people of color. An early example of the sexual commodification of men that appears in *Lemonade* occurs towards the end of “Six Inch,” a song which follows the daily experience of a female prostitute. Beyoncé’s character assumes the role of pimp, looking out from the window of a limousine at men on the street, who have now become sexual objects in this situation. In “Formation,” the final video in the visual album takes the momentary sexual commodification of men in “Six Inch” and makes this commodification explicit. This essay will

examine the way that black men are sexually commodified in “Formation” and how this commodification is problematic.

Many of the striking visual images found in “Formation” suggest the subversion of white authority. A recurring setting in the video is a Southern plantation-style home, occupied by a variety of black women and girls. We are first introduced to this shadowy old house with the image of Beyoncé’s character wearing all white and holding a delicate, impractical umbrella, looking down at us, flexing her bejeweled hand, with painted white fingernails, saying: “I’m so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress.” As the song builds in intensity, we see Beyoncé’s character, dressed now in a scarlet English Riding habit-style leotard, flanked by other identically dressed black female dancers, singing about her racial heritage: “My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana / You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma.” There is a split-second shot of a painting of a black family hanging on the wall of the plantation just after the lyric referring to Beyoncé’s character’s father’s place of origin. Judging from their style of clothing, the subjects of the painting appear to be African, but western influence is apparent, as the patriarch of the family has an umbrella held above his head, linking this image to the previous one with Beyoncé holding a parasol. The presence of this image in the plantation-style house as well as Beyoncé’s character’s sexualized version of a riding habit associated with white imperialism can be argued to represent the subversion of white authority. While this subversion is to be applauded in that Beyoncé is attempting to take back the power that should belong to all races, the ultimate result of this subversion ultimately devolves into imitation rather than innovation. In her attempt to subvert white authority by taking ownership of settings and clothing that act as its symbols, the end result is that Beyoncé’s character holds on to the stereotype that

racist whites in authority have historically pinned on black women and simply applies it to black men instead.

My understanding of this pre-existing stereotype is informed by Kimberlé Crenshaw's essay "Mapping the Margins." In her essay, Crenshaw discusses the way that racial stereotyping of black sexuality negatively affects black women: "Sexualized images of African Americans go all the way back to Europeans' first engagement with Africans. Blacks have long been portrayed as more sexual, more earthy, more gratification-oriented. These sexualized images of race intersect with norms of women's sexuality... Thus Black women are essentially prepackaged as bad women" (1271). Crenshaw is right to shift her focus to addressing how this problem specifically affects black women in her essay given that she is focusing on how feminism needs to better include black women, but she is careful to make it clear that this stereotype affects both genders. Beyoncé would have done well to follow Crenshaw's example. Instead, Beyoncé merely flips the tables on her own race: in sexualizing black men in "Formation," Beyoncé attempts to fight back against the idea of black women being sexually subservient by sexually commodifying black men, thereby perpetuating this "sexualized" stereotype instead of putting a stop to it altogether.

Beyoncé's character sets up a system of exchange based on male sexual labor when she sings: "When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, 'cause I slay / If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, 'cause I slay." As she sings the second line, the camera does a close up of the various black men standing behind her, seemingly acting as her butlers. In doing so, she appears to be inviting us to view them as sexual objects, separating their personal worth as a human being from their sexual performance, their sexual labor. Sounding like a misogynistic man, Beyoncé's character seems to revel in the reversed gender roles: "Drop

him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up, 'cause I slay." In an apparent reference to her business partnership with her husband, or perhaps addressing a wannabe musician or singer Beyoncé tempts them with the possibility of major success: "I might get your song played on the radio station 'cause I slay / You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making cause I slay" before quickly reasserting herself as the ultimate financial success: "I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making." In *Capital*, Karl Marx presents us with the concept of the fetishism of commodities, wherein "the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour" (320). In Beyoncé's "Formation," men are being sexually objectified in that their value is based on sexual performance. Sexual activity (labor) has become separated from the individual and has turned into the vehicle with which the man, if he performs well, can earn "the products of their labour" namely food, money and fame

Obviously, this is not the world we live in, and in portraying the sexual commodification of men in so blatant a way in "Formation," it could be argued that Beyoncé wants us to realize how dehumanizing it is to base a person's value on their ability to provide sexual pleasure. It is jarring for the viewer to watch Beyoncé's character to treat men in this way, and it could be argued that Beyoncé intends us to be disturbed. In disturbing the social order, Beyoncé forces us to consider why are we more bothered by the sexual commodification of men in this video than we are by the way that women of color are victims of sexual commodification every day. In this way, the presence of sexual commodification of men in "Formation" and "Six Inch" is parodic. Unfortunately, Beyoncé chooses to focus her aim on only men of color, rather than men in general. In this way, Beyoncé's efforts to combat the sexual commodification of women of color merely perpetuates an existing stereotype that all black people in the United States face. Judging

from the statistics, there is no denying that sexual commodification of women of color needs to be addressed: “Approximately 40% of Black women report coercive sexual contact by age eighteen” (“Women of Color and Sexual Assault”). Beyoncé’s attempt to combat the sexualization of black women by sexually commodifying black men is problematic in that it merely leads to the prolongation of the stereotype Beyoncé is working so hard to free women of color from.

The setting and choice of costumes in “Formation” help to show that in taking on the power historically granted to whites, Beyoncé is taking on the racist understanding of blacks which was included in that power. Even though Beyoncé is presenting us with a version of society that does not currently exist, and that is beyond her abilities as a popstar to create, her decision to present this vision of the world at the conclusion of her visual album means that this is the final image we are left with as our experience of *Lemonade* comes to a close. Beyoncé’s attempt to raise public awareness in regard to racially-motivated police brutality in “Formation” is jeopardized by her choice to sacrifice the individuality of black men for the sake of black women.

As a black pop star, Beyoncé has cultural clout. When she posits the sexual commodification of black males as the answer to the current oppression of females, she is inadvertently affirming a racist stereotype aimed at black women, and merely moving the barrel of the gun over to instead aim at black men. In doing so, she merely reinforces the stereotype that encourages the sexual commodification of women of color. In presenting the sexual commodification of black men as a viable alternative to the current sexual commodification of women prevalent in our culture, Beyoncé is positing a solution that ultimately perpetuates a racist stereotype.

## Conclusion:

Our examinations of sexual commodification at work in *Lemonade* ultimately show that Beyoncé promotes, perhaps unintentionally, the racist stereotype Crenshaw attempts to dismantle in her essay “Mapping the Margins.” Using the foundational theories of Marx and Althusser, and then drawing on the works of both Crenshaw and bell hooks to evaluate these narrative portrayals of sexuality in *Lemonade* invites deeper questioning and examination of the messages being conveyed through this visual album. By first examining the relationship between the sexually driven narratives in “Don’t Hurt Yourself” and “Love Drought”, and then discussing the role reversal of sexual commodification in “Six Inch” and “Formation”, we suggest that although these songs invite the viewer to examine these unhealthy relationships and stereotypes applied to black females every day, the ultimate message and ending of the album continue to reinforce that oppressive system. By suggesting that continued sexual commodification of black bodies could solve the reality of everyday sexual commodification currently faced by women of color, Beyoncé does both men and women of color a disservice through perpetuating these harmful stereotypes of commodified sexuality.



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