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# Beyonce Feminism: Feminist Messages' Impact on African American Female Identity

Laura-Ashley Taylor

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BEYONCE FEMINISM: FEMINIST MESSAGES' IMPACT ON AFRICAN AMERICAN  
FEMALE IDENTITY

A NARRATIVE APPROACH RESEARCH STUDY

by

LAURA-ASHLEY TAYLOR

Under the Direction of Sarita Davis, PhD

ABSTRACT

This study examines the influence of Beyoncé's brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making and agency among African American female millennials. This study explores how young African American women interpret and are influence by Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, and gender as sites of power and privilege. The study targets fourteen (14) Black women ages 18 to 25 who are attending Georgia State University. Narrative inquiry was used to capture participants' stories via structured interviews. The study's findings have implications for several arenas of research including sexual communication studies, African American male-female relationships, and gender studies.

INDEX WORDS: Beyoncé, Black Feminism, Womanism, Millennials, African American  
Female Performances

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LAURA-ASHLEY TAYLOR

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2017

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2017

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May 2017

## **DEDICATION**

To my father and super hero: Not a day goes by that I do not feel your spirit. I know that everything I am is because of you. I try to find comfort in that and live for you. Thank you for letting me stand on your shoulders. To my mother: Thank you for allowing me to become the woman the world needed me to be and believing in my dreams. To my brother: We can make it, “Little Lion,” we just must fight a little harder.

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## PROLOGUE

As a young child growing up in the 1990s, I was afforded a special opportunity that my mother and her mother were not: to turn on the television and watch my idol, Janet Jackson perform. I remember stealing my mother's bustier and my father's church hat to imitate one of her music video performances. I think as a child, I wanted to be Janet Jackson. She was beautiful, talented, independent, respected, an icon on the world stage. From my childhood and teenage perspective, she did not have to rely on the traditional standards of African American femininity that I was being held to and was struggling with, or so I thought. Jackson made me embrace my own beauty, body, and sexuality. Her openness and physicality in her performances spoke to me of liberation and acceptance of how I looked and who I was as something to be proud of and not ashamed of. Thinking about the way that Jackson allowed me to look at myself as beautiful and someone worthy of desire and love and a full multidimensional sexuality heavily influenced the ideas that I had going into this research study. I wanted to analyze the power of an autonomous, empowering, uplifting performance of a proud African American woman.

In 2004, Janet Jackson performed with Justin Timberlake during the Super Bowl. During the performance, Timberlake removed a piece of her costume and exposed her breast. Both performers maintained that it was a wardrobe malfunction and an accident; however, the public did not value their apologies equally. Janet Jackson was banned from the Grammy's that year, whereas Timberlake, was not only able to perform, he went home with some trophies. Jackson went on national news circuits to apologize and went on a two-year hiatus from performing, "to focus on what is most important." The budding 15-year-old feminist I was becoming, was hurt for her. Why did the world think that it was appropriate for Jackson to be excommunicated and Timberlake to be the man of the hour? Jackson had been the African American communities'

sweetheart since she was Penny on *Good Times*, in the 1970s; yet her community showed no loyalty to her. Few spoke out in Jackson's defense, and some African American male performers, like Chris Rock, pinned the incident on Jackson to hold on to her fame and in some ways, shame her audacity to be African American, female, and sexually self-determining.

I remember writing a letter to the teacher, a young African American man, who oversaw my high school year book to express that Jackson needed support from her fans now more than ever and if we could invite her to perform for prom to encourage her to keep performing. I was met with a blank stare as I asked an African American man to advocate for African American woman. Granted there was no chance that Jackson would ever perform at my high school, I did not know that. He said, "I don't support old hos." That was the first time I realized that some African American men perceived African American women differently. Not as partners, or equal participants in struggles for equality, but as something as coconspirators with white oppressors. Looking back on *Nipplegate*, as the incident came to be called, it was very clear that as an African American woman, there is no level of fame, wealth or success that sexism, racism, and misogyny cannot reach you.

I saw my idol attacked, demeaned, and belittle regardless of her apology. She was ostracized by the celebrity community, regardless of her twenty-year career of success. A part of me wanted Jackson to stand up for herself and stop apologizing; I wanted her female African American fans to rally for her and defend her; I wanted her iconography and the image that she gave African American girls as beautiful, talented and worthy of love and praise to ameliorate the situation. I wanted the confidence that Jackson gave me as being one of the most successful African American women of my generation to count for something. I knew that she inspired other little girls to put on their mother's bras, take control over their lives and decisions, and seek

pleasure and happiness in themselves, but being a feminist wasn't trendy then. So, I suppose I sat silent with Jackson about the value of her work.

More than a decade later, this generation's icon, Beyoncé is unapologetic, even defiant about embodying African American female sexuality whether it is straight, gay, single, or married. The most valuable piece of Beyoncé's work is that she is unapologetically tied to her culture and women. Her fans can identify with her experience as an African American woman and be empowered by her example as identifying with her community and speaking out about the injustices that African American women commonly experience, such as wage gaps, domestic violence, sexual harassment, and being undervalued in their communities. Currently, young African American women can look to their idol who is expressing the same reality of injustices that they are experiencing. There is validation in the shared experience of suffering and oppression for African American women and for the first time in history, the injustices and suffering of communities are gaining exposure on a global stage.

Both Janet and Beyoncé, invoke affirming images of African American female bodies that the world has not seen since the heyday of African American female blues singers like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Clara Smith, Sara Martin, and Victoria Spivey. The difference is that the blues singers were exclusively marketed towards African American audiences, while Janet Jackson and now Beyoncé have diverse audiences around the globe.

Reflecting on the way that seeing a powerful African American woman express her desires, dreams, and disappointments influenced how I thought of myself, my sexuality, and what I believed was possible for African American women to achieve. With the help of Jackson's example, I believed that I could be beautiful, sexual, and have control over my body

and decisions. My experience in admiration and idolizing Janet Jackson makes me think of the growing influence of Beyoncé on the sexual agency of African American millennials today.

Thinking about the emotions I felt when Jackson accepted awards for being one of the greatest performers of all time, including Grammy's and other accolades; I remember feeling like she was winning for me and all the other little African American girls who were stealing their parents' clothes to imitate her. I felt like she knew my hardships and knew the ones that I would face in the future, and she had faced them too and had prevailed. I felt like she was winning for little African American girls around the world. She was winning for us because so many people would tell us that we would fail, that we were not beautiful, and that we were not worthy. Jackson proved everyone wrong, and showed me that I could do the same. I applaud Beyoncé for being the voice of this generation and reminding them that they are capable of their wildest dreams.

Performers like Beyoncé's and other Fourth Wave feminist performers have influence and sexual implications for how young African American women view their agency and sexual decision making. For an African American woman to have autonomy in her public and private life and to openly declare that her choices as an African American woman are hers to make is a wholly political identity that is not often seen, nor praised. Beyoncé's agency, and declaration of feminist beliefs can be used as a model of what is possible for African American women when they tap into their power and take their lives into their own hands. I personally believe that there is power in seeing a positive image of your culture and community reflected to you. I want to use this study to measure and assess that power. The purpose of the study is to explore the influence of Fourth Wave Black Feminism on the agency and sexual decision making of African American female millennials. Specifically, the current study explores how young African

American women understand, interpret, and act on the Black Feminist messages found in the lyrics and images of the musical artist, Beyoncé.

## 1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*“We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are. Feminist: a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes.”*

*- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from Beyoncé’s song Flawless*

*(Beyoncé, 2013).*

### 1.1 OVERVIEW

Historically, the narrative about African American women’s sexuality has been defined by white supremacy, Black patriarchy, and a disembodied Black Feminism. Only, recently, have African American female popular musical artists and entertainers given voice and performance to a fourth wave of Black Feminism that is wholly Black, political, and sexual. This fourth wave of Black Feminism has sexual implications for how young African American women view their agency and sexual decision making.

Prior to the development of the fourth wave of Black Feminism, similar messages of empowerment, sexuality, and political awareness were expressed by the African American Female Blues singers of the 1920s and 1930s. Within the Blues singer tradition, African American women, like Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, sought equality in pay from record labels and economic independence; both of which were relatively uncommon for African American men to achieve, and almost impossible for African American women to achieve. Rainey, Smith, and Holiday all composed, managed, and arranged their own bands for their performances. They also addressed of the injustices that the middle class African American communities were experiencing through their performances and lyrics.

The quote used to introduce this chapter is from African Feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie when she was a guest on TED (Technology, Entertainment, and Design) Talk. The

speech that she gives outlines the double standards, inequities, and ceilings of potential that are put engrained into the identities of young women and men as children. She speaks to the differences in socialization during childhood that girls experience in contrast to what boys' experience.

“We are all currently a product of a society that has taught us that men are more important than women... We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, “You can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you would threaten the man. If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, you should pretend that you're not, especially in public,” (Adichie, 2013, December 30).

Most importantly, Adichie speaks to the problems with the gender binary. “The problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are,” (Adichie, 2013, December 30).

When Beyoncé referenced pieces of this speech for her song *Flawless*, she uses Adichie's own voice as an interlude to her performance, in addition to another arguably feminist performer, Nicki Minaj. The song is a women's anthem, promoting self-love, and self-value. The lyrics, “I woke up like this,” (Knowles, 2013) and “I'm flawless,” (Knowles, 2013) became pop culture catch phrases almost overnight, and were so popular that designers incorporated the phrases into their clothing and began printing the phrases on hats and shirts. Throughout the song Beyoncé references what her family taught her and how they have helped her with her success. By incorporating two other African American female artists, she creates a community collective of African American female support, as if she personally wants to rectify and encourage other women to preserve through the gender issues and differences Adichie refers to in her speech.

The purpose of the study is to explore the influence of the fourth wave of Black Feminism on the agency and sexual decision making of African American female millennials. Specifically, the current study explores how young African American women understand, interpret, and act on the Black Feminist messages found in the lyrics and images of the musical artist Beyoncé. The researcher is interested in a qualitative study to analyze how Beyoncé's Black Feminist performances are interpreted by her audience and what kind of influences does her performances create. Currently, the author is arguing that Beyoncé is performing an embodied Black Feminism, where she openly is vocal about her autonomy, power in her relationships, sexuality and is purposefully aligning herself with the political issues of the African American community.

This study is designed to analyze and investigate the factors of sexual decision making of African American women between the ages of 18 to 25. Currently, research supports that positive correlation relationship between high risk sexual behavior and other risky behaviors, such as substance abuse (Tieu, Spikes, Patterson, Bonner and, Egan, etc., 2012). If more information can be acquired that will shed light on the correlations and justifications of high risk sexual behavior from those who engage in them, there can be interventions designed to combat it in the future. Since the largest consumers of television and film media are currently young people, who may not fully understand neither the reproduction cycle nor their bodies, there has been a recent increase in unplanned and unwanted pregnancy (Biggs, Karasek, and Foster, 2012). Per the Neilson Company of Communications, women over the age of two years old watch nearly 16 hours of traditional television more per month than men. African Americans tune in nearly 213 hours per month, more than twice as much as Asians and roughly 57 hours more than

whites. African-Americans also watch the most mobile video though less time shifted television than the public (Nelson Communication Group, 2011).

## **1.2 BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM**

### ***1.2.1 THE AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE BODY***

Some Black Feminist scholars suggest that African American women's sexuality has rarely been self-defined, but rather exists under the 'gaze' of others (Collins, 1991; Davis, 1998; Miller-Young, 2014). The concept of the gaze for many feminist scholars, serves as a paradigm of the relationship of power or lack thereof for African American women. Examples of the 'gaze' can be found in relationships where 'power' dynamics are unequal, such as the domination of the slave owner over the slave, the colonizer over the colonized, or the man over the woman. (Miller-Young, 2014). The power relationship between the enslaved and the enslaver is where the gaze is situated. Birthed in a history of not owning or being able to protect their own bodies, African American women have had to view themselves from the perspective of the dominant power structure of racist, patriarchal, and capitalistic supremacy and have had their bodies imbued with sexual meanings that have been perpetuated via media culture (Davis, 2007). Throughout the modern world, when Black bodies were the focus of human display, there tended to be a special emphasis on the gaze as an institutional micro strategy and on the body as an ideological effect. Understanding the function of the gaze in the lives of young African American women is critical to comprehending the past and present effects of racialized and gendered visuals of Black female bodies on sexual agency and decision-making (Willis, 2010).

Nigerian scholar, Oyeronke, Oyewumi, denies that gender is a fundamental social category in all cultures and rejects the Western notion of the primacy of vision as a way of knowing. She determines that in European cultures and intellectual history, participation in

social and cultural significance is determined by the meaning ascribed to the body. By this determination, she argues that the concept that we know of as “woman,” had to have been invented for the advantage of the concept that we know of as “man.” Furthermore, she argues that the oppression of woman is in the meanings assigned to have a woman’s body by male oppressors and the oppression of Black people has been linked to the meanings assigned to have a Black body by white oppressors (Oyewumi, 1997). Finally, it is also important to understand the influence of the gaze on notions of erotic sovereignty and power among African American women as an assertion of contested sexuality and potential site of political power.

Erotic sovereignty is a term coined by Mireille Miller-Young in her book *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*. She uses the term to explore the idea that individuals all aspire to an autonomous, just, and free erotic life but still face many challenges in living erotic freedom. These challenges can include stifling gender roles, sexism, misogyny, classism, and the traumatic histories of the sexual exploitation and violence (Miller-Young, 2014). The spectacle that the enslaved or colonized Black body presented for a dominant “imperial gaze” is an important starting point to think about how Black bodies have historically been imbued with sexual meaning that come to be reiterated in the powerful legacies of United States’ media culture today (Miller-Young, 2014). It is under the racist, patriarchal, and supremacist gaze across cultures there is a very specific narrative that is expected, anticipated, and perpetuated about African American women’s bodies and sexualities (Kaplan, 1997).

Angela Davis says this about African Americans participation in popular culture after reconstruction, “For the first time in the history of the African presence in North America, masses of African American women and men were able to make autonomous decisions regarding the sexual partnerships into which they entered” (Davis, 1998). Sexuality was thus

one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which its meanings were expressed. Power in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation. During slavery, enslaved bodies were subject to sexual assault violence to ensure the growth of a slave population, forced partnerships for breeding, and use of their bodies for scientific reproductive sciences (Washington, 2006). The historical experiences of enslaved people and their narratives is the basis of many stereotypes about African American women's sexuality. From those stereotypes, evolved legislation and social mandates that further reinforced the narrative about Black life and Black bodies being inherently pathological. This notion of sexual deviance is the root of the pathology around African American women's sexuality (Roberts, 1997).

Davis particularly looks at the performances of African American women in music to convey emotions, assert their humanity, and demand political recognition alongside the systematic racism and abuse that have dominated the African American narrative since colonialism. Blues gave musical expression to the new social and sexual realities encountered by African Americans as free men and women. Their status of being able to decide the status of their personal relationships was revolutionary (Davis, 1998).

Stereotypical notions and ideas of hyper sexuality, sexual deviancy, moral irresponsibility, a lack of ability to control sexual desires, and an inability to maintain agency over one's sexual decisions and physical choices have all become a part of the myth and cultural stereotype about African American women's sexuality. This narrative about African American women, their bodies, and their sexuality has been situated to maintain the patriarchal power structure, the very sense of self can be tied to the look of others and the profound forces of social control they experience is linked to the imagery of their bodies (Miller-Young, 2014). The

media produces and circulates images that determine society's beliefs and attitudes which lead to the justifications of behaviors. For example, from local news story accounts, the images of criminals are typically Black people, which gives credence to the stereotype that Black people are not law abiding (Roberts, 2006). Per Littlefield, the current representations of African American women in the media are almost identical to stereotypical images of the past. Research shows that media functions as a tool to shape, process, and deconstruct the self-worth of young viewers. The effects of which can have lasting effects on the self-images of African American women and girls across the life-span (Littlefield, 2008; Wallace, 2011).

The narrative of the stereotype of African American women's sexuality is rooted in colonialism, sexism, and patriarchy. This can be analyzed in the cases of Saartjie Baartman, Sapphire Stevens. In the case of Saartjie Baartman, her body became the foundation upon which racist science was built. Baartman was taken from Africa in the 1700s, given the name Sarah and sold to a Dutch animal trainer, who charged people to see Baartman naked and exposed. The animal trainer then sold her to a popular European circus. Her large buttocks, full lips, wide hips, and full bosom was considered evidence to her sexual primitivism, and savage carnal urges and desires (Willis, 2010). From her being displayed in the venues of London and France, the physical differences between the African woman and the European were preyed upon to develop the foundation of racist science. Sciences like Darwinism, and others that are predicated on a hierarchy of superiority based on racial characteristics, where the European male is always on top.

Even in death, Baartman was subjected to unimaginable racism and bigotry as her body was dissected and her remains were displayed in museums as examples of the savagery of the African female body. Baartman was stripped of her humanity and only reduced to her sexual

organs, which remained to be displayed well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her body would not be released and returned to Africa until 2002, some 200 years after her birth (Willis, 2010). It is in Baartman's story and legacy that the power, impact, and influence of the gaze can truly be analyzed. "The gaze has been and is a site of resistance for colonized Black people globally. Subordinates in relation to power learn experientially that there is one critical gaze, one that "looks" to document, and one that is oppositional. In resistance struggle, the power of the dominated to assent agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations- one learns to look a certain way to resist," (hooks, 1992).

In the case of *Sapphire Stevens*, her character was created by white actors who performed an auditory minstrel, *The Amos and Andy Show*, to mock the common dialect of the African American community. Sapphire is mean and angry and seeks to emasculate the African American man in cohort with white supremacy. She blames the African American man for the conditions of his poverty and lack of opportunity, but never questions the systems of oppression that have led him to his fate. Sapphire is typically used to explain that white women are clearly the most desirable as they represent the antithesis of Sapphire. With African American women like Sapphire, it is only natural for the African American man to long for a white woman. This stereotype about the anger and bitterness African American women could have is a "social control mechanism that is employed to punish African American women who violate the societal norms that encourage them to be passive, servile, nonthreatening, and unseen and to promote the African American male into positions of power and authority," (Yarbrough, 2000).

In a modern application, Michelle Obama was accused of being an angry Black woman with Sapphire characteristics. Before the Wisconsin primary in 2008, Michelle Obama remarked that, "For the first time in my adult life, I am proud of my country because it feels like hope is

finally make a comeback,” (Thomas, 2008). She immediately became ridiculed in the public and media as unpatriotic and anti-American. Some white conservative commentators were offended that Michelle Obama did not seem to recognize her privilege as the first Black First Lady, but they also do not recognize the systems of oppression that maintained African Americans in permanent second class citizenship status.

Feminist Blogger, Erin Kaplan, felt that this moment demanded attention from the African American community. “Michelle was admired as long as she filled the prescription of a successful Black woman- college educated, married to an equally successful Black man, a working but attentive mother, financially secure, and immaculately dressed. But as soon as she began revealing herself as a person and airing her views, she became an angry Black woman in the public eye,” (Kaplan, 2008). More offensively, conservatives like Bill O’Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, and Sean Hannity, wondered what Michelle Obama, arguably one of the most powerful and privileged women in America, had to be angry about. As if her experience in the White House was to erase her memories and her ancestors’ experience of struggle, oppression, and sacrifice.

In Audre Lorde’s canonical piece, *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, she seems to speak directly to the myth of angry Black women and to the myth of Black women being martyrs for their community. “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation and that is an act of political warfare,” (Lorde, 1985). Demanding to be viewed as human first regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation is a political practice that is not commonly expressed by women of color. It is even less common for a Black woman to declare that she will make herself a priority and in that action, there is political awareness.

The prevalence of representations of African American women as Sapphires and the reduction of only sexual beings are the legacies of stereotypes. Therefore, it is important to analyze the performance and images of artists like Beyoncé, because her recent performances appear to empower her audience to claim their identity, embrace their sexuality, and act with agency in their intimate relationships to prevent sexually transmitted infection contagion. These emerging affirming messages about African American female agency and sexuality have implications for how young African American women engage in sexual decision-making.

### ***1.2.2 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S SEXUAL HEALTH***

The sexual health of African American women is of great concern per the Center for Disease Control. In a recent study the CDC reported alarming rates of Gonorrhea and Chlamydia. In 2014 the rate of reported cases of Chlamydia among African American women was 5.7 times the rate among white women (Center for Disease Control, 2014). Rates of reported cases of Chlamydia were highest for African American women ages 15-19 and was 4.9 times the rate of white females in the same age group (Center for Disease Control, 2014). The rate among African American women ages 20-24 years of age was 4.1 times the rate among white women (Center for Disease Control, 2014). The rate of Gonorrhea among African American women is 10.6 times the rate of white women (Center for Disease Control, 2014). Gonorrhea rates were the highest for African American women ages 15-19, 20-24, and 25-29 (Center for Disease Control, 2014). African American women ages 20-24 had Gonorrhea 9.5 times higher than that of white women (Center for Disease Control, 2014). African American women ages 15-19 were 12.7 times the rate of white (Center for Disease Control, 2014).

African American women ages 18 to 25 are the fastest growing group of new HIV diagnosis in the United States (Center for Disease Control, 2014). Furthermore, African

American women contract Chlamydia and Gonorrhea 19 times more frequently than that of their white counterparts. African American women have higher rates of human papillomavirus (HPV) and cervical cancer, with mortality rates doubling those of their white counterparts (Center for Disease Control, 2014). African American women represent 65 percent of new AIDS diagnosis amongst women. African American women experience unintended or unplanned pregnancy three times higher than their white counterparts (Center for Disease Control, 2014).

This study explores how the fourth wave of Black Feminism, expressed in the lyrics and images of Beyoncé, and affects the sexual decision-making among African American women ages 18-25. This age range is especially important to study because this sub-population is the fastest growing group of newly HIV diagnosis cases in the United States. If information can be attained as to why African American women engage in high risk sexual behavior, there can be cultural programs implemented to curtail the behaviors. The researcher is interested in long term social and cultural standard of risky sexual decision making among young African American women.

Focusing the research question on African American women ages 18 to 25 underscores a significant need in the African American community. While poor sexual decision-making and its negative health effects is an American epidemic, African Americans only count for about 12.3 percent of the American population, yet they are disproportionately affected (Kayne, 2013). Research shows that the frequency of unintended pregnancy and teen pregnancy can be a direct cause of long term poverty (Akella and Jordan, 2015). The high rate of sexually transmitted contagion shows high risk sexual behavior and poor sexual decisions making skills that place young African American women at increased risk of contracting an SDI or HIV.

Research has sought to determine the effects of positive and negative imagery on African American women. The foci of such research are typically the viewers' self-esteem, self-image and behaviors. The work that influenced the author the most on the correlation between images and behaviors was Melissa Harris Perry's development of the Crooked Room Theory. The Crooked Room Theory takes its name from field cognition studies, and how individuals locate the upright direction in a space. Initially, following the Vietnam War, cognitive studies were conducted to ensure that soldiers would be able to adapt with the surroundings of war and maintain a sense of equilibrium and direction. A scientist by the name of H.A. Witkin wanted to determine how soldiers would locate the upright space. In his study, soldiers were placed in a crooked chair in a crooked room and then asked to align themselves vertically. Some perceived themselves to be straight only in relation to their surroundings. To Witkin's surprise, some of the participants could be tilted by as much as 35 degrees and report that they were perfectly straight, simple because they were aligned with images and an environment that were equally tilted (Witkin, 1977). Witkin found that most of the soldiers would align themselves with the crooked images in the room and feel themselves to be sitting in an upright position (Witkin, 1977). The cultural expectations of African American women and personal wants and desires maintains to be a consistent struggle that can be mirrored in cognitive psychology on field dependence.

Much like the soldiers in Witkin's study, African American women can either align themselves with the crooked images of themselves in the media or become less field dependent and find their own upright position (Harris-Perry, 2011). African American women are constantly bombarded with warped images of their physical bodies and sexuality. Some women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortions they see. To understand why African American

women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior (Harris-Perry, 2011). These structural constraints include the conditions of underemployment, poverty, racism, sexism and other forms of systemic violence that Black and Brown communities face daily. Based on the Crooked Room Theory, and based on mainstream hegemonic definitions, in this context African American women have internalized the negative stereotypes about African American women being hypersexual and devoid of social value beyond their bodies. (Harris-Perry, 2011).

In a speech to Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties in 2009, Melissa Harris-Perry suggested that African American women are bombarded with crooked images of their sexuality based on racist stereotypes (Harris-Perry, 2009). Thus, African American women may feel the need to 'tilt' their behaviors to align with the distorted images of themselves in popular culture.

### ***1.2.3 BEYONCE FEMINISM***

Beyoncé is a popular African American female singer, songwriter, and performer. She is considered a sexually dynamic and woman-affirming musician. Her music speaks directly to the issues facing young African American women and the African American community. Her songs broadly encourage women to be strong, competent, and embrace their sexual and professional agency. Throughout her 19-year career, she has sold over 100 million records as a solo artist, and 60 million with Destiny's Child, making her one of the best-selling music artist of all time (Kot, 2013). She has won 20 Grammy Awards and is the most nominated woman in the award's history (Hamlin, 2010). Beyoncé's record sells and award history underscore her general popularity and influence in the world.

In 2013, Beyoncé stated in an interview with *Vogue* that she considered herself to be “a modern-day feminist,” (O’Connor, 2016). She would later align herself more publicly with the movement, sampling, “We should all be feminists,” a speech delivered by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at a *TEDx* talk in April 2013, in her song “*Flawless*,” released late that year (Bury, 2013). She has also contributed to the Ban Bossy campaign, which uses television and social media to encourage leadership in girls (Lee, 2014). Beyoncé publicly endorsed same sex marriage on March 26, 2013, after the Supreme Court debate on California’s Proposition 8 (Vibe.com, 2013).

In recent years, Beyoncé has spoken publicly about police brutality against African Americans. For example, Beyoncé’ and her husband Jay-Z, attended a rally in 2013 in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the shooting of Trayvon Martin (Monde, 2013). The video of her sixth album *Lemonade* included the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, holding pictures of their murdered sons in the video for “*Freedom*,” (Bacle, 2016). In a 2016 interview with *Elle*, she responded to the controversy surrounding her song “*Formation*” which was perceived to be critical of the police. She clarified, “I am against police brutality and injustice. Those are two separate things. 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,” (Gottesman, 2016).

### **1.3 PURPOSE STATEMENT**

This study examines the influences of Beyoncé’s brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explore how the lyrical content and sexual imagery of Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influence the perspective of millennials on Black female sexuality, Black female identity, and

agency juxtaposed against white supremacy, Black male patriarchy, and disembodied Black Feminism. In this study, the author using the term disembodied feminism, to identify ideologies that have been crafted by non-Black women of what Black women should be. Typically disembodied feminism comes from ideas of Black patriarchy, and white supremacy, and argues that the Black woman should put herself last and least for the betterment of her community and culture. Furthermore, from the ideas of respectability politics, there are notions of good Black womanhood, where she must be as pristine as her white counterparts regardless of common Black circumstances.

The current study targets African American women ages 18-25 living and attending colleges and universities in the Metropolitan Atlanta area that self-identify as Beyoncé fans. The study will look at students enrolled in college exclusively. A qualitative research approach is used for this study and semi structured interviews are used to collect data. The researcher uses a narrative approach to contextualize the inquiry. The findings have implications for several arenas of research including sexual communication studies, Black male female sexuality, relationships and gender studies.

#### **1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The sexual health of African American women has rarely been examined from a position of self-determination. Often framed by outsiders looking in or under ‘the gaze’, African American women’s sexuality has been viewed as pathological, problematic, or something to be repressed (Willis, 2010). Miller-Young describes how Black women represent a raw body in need of refinement and prone to manipulation. The lewdness and raw quality associated with African American women in popular discourse today shows how ideas about how African American women are naturally savage, super sexual beings (Miller-Young, 2014). As the fourth

wave of feminism is performance driven, African American female artists are emerging and speaking about their autonomy, their feminism, and tying their performances to their sexuality (Munroe, 2013). Beyoncé has a decidedly Black Womanist way of expressing her sexuality, although she uses the term feminist. She presents sensuality as power; she is in full control over the men who appear on stage with her as well as her own erotic energy and prowess. Her performances exude eroticism, social autonomy, and political momentum (Lee, 2010).

Janet Mock is an American writer, television host, transgender rights activist, and author of the New York Times bestseller, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More* who proposes that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's quote of the definition of feminism gave room for Beyoncé to say, "yes, I can be a happily-married, bootylicious mama who believes in equality, yearns to be successful and sexy and calls herself a feminist," (Mock, 2014). The embodiment of financial success, commercial fame, romantic happiness, and ownership of one's sexuality, Beyoncé's feminist performances speak to her audience as someone who has achieved success in every arena of her life and an icon to emulate. Furthermore, the current trends in female sexuality in the digital era that are displayed in popular culture may have serious implications on the millennial generations that look to performances to model behavior after.

Not every Black feminist scholar feels empowered by Beyoncé's declaration as a feminist or consider it true feminism. Scholar bell hooks develops such an argument. Beyoncé's expression in her music is not calling for a mutual change for men and women of color to end physical and emotional violence against each other. She, per hooks, is capitalizing on the power that men typically wield in capitalistic and patriarchal society using it to inflict pain, and revenge

against the men who have wronged her, which creates more friction and tension within the African American community (hooks, 2016).

In October of 2016, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke in support of Beyoncé's declaration, but also pointed to a clear distinction in their beliefs.

'Still, her type of feminism is not mine, as it is the kind that, at the same time, gives quite a lot of space to the necessity of men. I think men are lovely, but I don't think that women should relate everything they do to men: did he hurt me, do I forgive him, and did he put a ring on my finger? We women are so conditioned to relate everything to men. Put a group of women together and the conversation will eventually be about men. Put a group of men together and they will not talk about women at all, they will just talk about their own stuff. We women should spend about 20 per cent of our time on men, because it's fun, but otherwise we should also be talking about our own stuff.' (Dandridge-Lemco, 2016).

Based on both Adichie and hook's critique of Beyoncé's brand of Feminism it can be argued that Beyoncé is more womanist than feminist insofar as she has a more communal reciprocal stance toward the needs of the Black woman, family, and community. The question at the center of this study is simply, "Does Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?"

## **1.5 NATURE OF THE STUDY**

The research design chosen for this study was decidedly qualitative. A qualitative approach ensures that questions about the culture and context surrounding the sexual decision-making of African American millennials can be explored in ways that yield rich and illustrative information. The nature of the inquiry also calls for a conversational approach. The participants will be asked to reflect on issues of white supremacy, patriarchy, and Black female sexuality as

they are experienced in their lived experience and the music of Beyoncé'. Responses to these questions require deep thought, context, and extrapolation of meaning. Since the researcher wants to ensure that, the study remains grounded in the experiences of the participants and their interpretation it is important that space is created to explore these meanings.

The innovation within the study depends on the participants' ability to be recognized and identify with the findings, and not vilified for belonging to an open and sexually expressive culture. A qualitative method is the design that is most appropriate to understand the factors that influence African American women's sexual decision making. The researcher is interested in the contributing factors of sexual decisions and not in the sexual decisions themselves. This design approach allows the researcher to learn more about the lived experiences of the participants, as well as how the germinal and seminal constructs of Black Feminism influence their perspectives and actions.

The specific qualitative approach selected for this study is a narrative study. A narrative approach is the best option for exploring perspectives, identities, and lived experiences of Beyoncé fans. African American women, between the ages 18-25 who consider themselves to be a part of Beyoncé's fan base are likely to share similar values, perspectives, and actions in relationship to Beyoncé's influence. There are several characteristics of a culture sharing group that could distinguish participants as members of Beyoncé's fan base, including length of affinity with the artist, ethnicity, and age range. Further characteristics could also include location of the group, attendance at the same university, and even a shared field of study (Creswell, 2006). Beyoncé is an international artist with broad fan appeal. While her fan base is large, this study is only focusing on young African American women who reside in the United States

## **1.6 THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The nature and design of the study are qualitative and exploratory. The overarching questions attempt to understand how young African American women navigate white supremacy, Black male patriarchy, and feminism in general. More specifically, the study will explore if young African American women feel a greater sense of agency and empowerment from Beyoncé's brand of Black Feminism than previous iterations. The broader thematic research questions will be as follows:

1. Does Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?
2. How does Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy, and Black male patriarchy influence her audience's awareness of Black female identity?
3. How do young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism?

The researcher will also use several other specific questions regarding, race, class and gender to unpack the various dimensions of the questions to ensure that all the participants have a clear understanding of the questions being asked.

## **1.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The theoretical framework that the researcher uses to ground the research and perspective of the study is Black Feminist thought with a specific interest in Womanist theory to examine and analyze typical, gender, class, and racial biases that could be associated with Black Feminist Thought. Womanism was selected as the theoretical framework because it is grounded in social change, and allows for there to be an equal treatment of race, class, gender, and other sights of oppression within the research study. Womanism focus on community, ground level problem

solving, and the everyday experiences of the oppressed will allow the researcher to focus on the interpretation of feminist messages, based on their lived experiences (Walker, 1983).

Womanism is a theory that can explain the experiences of African American women in the context of self, in relationship to Black men, and within the community. Womanist scholars argue that much of African American women's everyday experiences in the United States are often overlooked and considered commonplace (Phillips, 2006). Whereas in fact, due to the historical experiences of chattel slavery, domestic servitude, and not having authority over their own bodies, African American women's work in their communities and society has been highly political. When scholars argue that African American women's work was political, necessary, or nuclear to social movements and political struggles, these arguments validate African American women's roles as American citizens (Harris-Perry, 2011).

The five overarching tenants of Womanism are that the theory is anti-oppressionist, vernacular, non-ideological, communitarian, and spirituality (Phillips, 2006). Womanism is focused around the liberation of all people. These tenants recognize that the oppression experience under the lenses of gender, class, and race are not separate for women. That one's identity as Black or white, man or woman, poor elite, should not be given a hierarchy of importance, because they are all experienced at the same time. For African American women, in the United States, there is an argument that one must choose which lens she identifies with. If she identifies first with being African American, then she is more concerned about the advancement and liberation of her race, and not of her gender. In terms of intra racial relationships, there has been the argument that sexism is a bourgeoisie experience. If a woman is poor, and has no resources, it is assumed that her oppression is class and not the intersection of race, class, and gender under capitalist patriarchy.

Black Feminist Thought is a social and political theory that stipulates that African American women's experiences with both racial and gender oppression result in needs and problems that are distinct from white women and African American men, and that African American women must struggle for equality both as women and as African Americans (Sheftall, 1995). Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in African American women and other women of color's everyday experiences and their everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces. These everyday strategies of organizing are then extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression of all people, restoring the balance between people and the natural environment and reconciling life with a spiritual dimension (Phillips, 2006). Unlike its less modern sisters of feminism and Black Feminism, it does not prefer a focus on gender or sexism, but rather attempts to elevate all sites and forms of oppression. These forms of oppression are typically socially addressed issues of race, gender, or class, on equal levels of importance.

Although, Black Feminist Thought is the larger theory that encompasses Womanism, there are some critical points of tension that allows for Womanism to be more inclusive. One of those tensions is the reliance on biology: to be Black and to be a woman. Although Sheftall argues that prolific Black men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. DuBois, were Black feminists, the argument has weak footing given the specific social and political issues of their times. Another point of tension is what does Black Feminism do. Black Feminism is directly linked to freeing Black women from sites of oppression. The sites of oppression are multiple, including race, class, gender, sex, economic status. These sites of oppression require different tactics, for liberation, and often there is not a clear consensus on how to combat these issues. These tensions between who can be a Black Feminist and what can

be considered Black Feminism, made the author choose Womanism as a more inclusionary, practical theory.

In summary, Chapter One includes a brief introduction of the research interest as well as the implication of the research and the projection of how the research could impact and have significance within the African American community, specifically African American women as the target population. In Chapter Two, the researcher addresses notions of Black Feminist Thought and Womanist theories and the contemporary discussions around performance, gender, and sexuality. The discussion of past, and present discourses on African American women and how they live their lives and the impact that has, speaks directly to the nature of the study and the impact of feminist or womanist performances on the millennial generation. In Chapter Three there is a discussion of the means, modes, and methods that are used to collect rich, and useful qualitative data. In Chapter Four, I will discuss findings and the codes that were used to transcribe the data. In Chapter Five, I will conclude findings, limitations, areas of opportunity, in addition to where the findings of the study fall in the current body of literature.

## **2 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

The media produces and circulates images that determine society's beliefs and attitudes which lead to the justification of behaviors, policies, and practices. The fact that media is a tool used to shape, process and define self-identity for young viewers, media's images and the portrayal of African American women can impact young girls' self-image (Littlefield, 2008). In review of current and contemporary literature regarding Black Feminism, sexual decision making, and representations of African American women it is important to outline the history and emergence of new theories and ideas and what they contribute to the research. In addition to the contributions of previous and contemporary scholars, it is important to understand also how new theories and performances have influenced how African American women see themselves in representations by feminist musical artist and self-identify their sexuality. It is also important to understand how previous and contemporary images of African American female sexuality influenced self-perceptions of agency. This chapter includes an analysis of common African American women's representation in current musical performances, and a discussion of critiques of feminist musical performers by canonical Black Feminist thinkers.

### **2.2 HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL IN MAINSTRAM MEDIA**

African American women have been consistently portrayed negatively in the media, including in music, film, and television. This trend can be seen historically over time in such eras such as antebellum and post abolition minstrels, Blaxploitation films during the 1970s, and currently through the commercialism of African Americans through film, television, and music (Sinclair, 2006). Images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social

power to which both individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature determines not only how other people think about us, but how we think about ourselves (Parmar, 1990). Much of antebellum and post abolition minstrels were produced by white crews, and cast that were creating entertainment often for white only audiences (Bogle, 2000). A white only production for a white only audience on the depiction of white life, is a lens that cultivates the cycle of stereotyping (Elkins, 1976).

### **2.3 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S PORTRAYAL DURING THE ANTEBELLUM AND CIVIL WAR PERIOD (1789-1865)**

During the antebellum and post abolition period, African American women were represented in two characters: Mammie, and Jezebel. Mammie was a gentle ignorant servant who loved her master's family more than her own. There are several images of Mammie being a loving, concerned, and maternal figure to the children she is charged with the care of; however, she is violent and often abusive to her own children (Littlefield, 2008). These images usually involve an African American woman as a maid, housekeeper, nanny, or perpetual domestic worker who must be nothing but obedient, loyal, faithful, and nurturing, to the white family that she works for and is devoted. This portrayal can be seen in iconic canonized African American literature, such as *The Bluest Eye*, by Toni Morrison. In Morrison's novel, the mammie character is represented by Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother (Morrison, 1970). The second representation of African American womanhood was the oversexed, promiscuous, whore: The Jezebel. This representation embodied the primal savage urge and lust that white society believed was innate in both African American men and women. The portrayal often justified the separation of white woman as ladies and African American women as anything but (Franklin, 2001). This representation allowed for white society to dismiss the rampant sexual abuse of

African American women because this hot-blooded slave seeks only to satiate her carnal desires (Harris-Perry, 2011).

The political issue of the time revolved around emancipation and what to do after. Another primary issue was keeping power over the enslaved to ensure a labor force that the South could afford after the devastation of the Civil War. The portrayal of African American women as happy, nurturing workers provides justification to keep African American women in domestic and menial labor. The portrayal of the Jezebel provides justification to the rampant sexual abuse, experimentation, and the violation of their bodies that African American women experienced. Now, there was no theory of feminism that was to encompass and liberate the experience of the enslaved woman.

As Black women's participation in the media grew, African American women's portrayal as common servants or domestic workers, like Mammie, slowly became less common; however, the depiction of sexualized African American women only grew. The Blaxploitation film genre was a reaction to the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s respectively (Roberts, 2006). These films portrayed African Americans as heroes and vigilantes. This film genre allowed African Americans to metaphorically take back all the power that had been stripped from them throughout the political struggles preceding the genre on film. African American women however throughout the films were commonly sexually objectified and their power is directly related to their physical sexuality. In many of the Blaxploitation films, female characters used the expectations of their sexuality to assert their dominance and subvert their enemies. Despite these films' attempt at positive imagery, the women characters in these films could be described as Jezebels because they often have uncontrollably excessive sexual appetites (Givens and Monahan, 2009).

What is less than frequently discussed is the opportunity of power for African American women in sexual or erotic positions in which they are in control of. During the peak of Blaxploitation films, actresses like Pam Grier became household names for their erotic performances. Grier and others were ridiculed by potentially fulfilling the myth of hyper sexuality among African American women, however the author finds strength and power in Grier's characterization in many of her films. She can be a wholly sexual being; to choose her partners and other decisions, and her sexuality was not perceived as a burden but as a source of strength and power. Grier and performers like her paved the way for there to be a more multidimensional portrayal of African American sexuality (Nash, 2014).

#### **2.4 MEDIA PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN DURING THE JIM CROW SEGREGATION (1800-1965)**

One of the most detrimental portrayal of African American women, is the Jezebel. This characterization stems from the lack of the opportunity to encompass womanhood for African American women. During the Victorian Era, the social image of the True Woman, began to circulate (hooks, 1981). The True Woman was refined, delicate, educated, well-spoken and dressed, chaste, maternal and most importantly white (hooks, 1981). This picturesque image of American womanhood represented the assumed moral superiority of the free class of women, because they could choose their fate. Furthermore, they had the autonomy to make sexual decisions and have authority and control over what happened to their children (Roberts, 1997). As the slave populations began to grow, Black women were also negated the position of motherhood. This is problematic because much of the foundation of the True Woman came from her ability to be a mother, and not a breeder.

The myth of the hyper sexuality of African American women is a narrative that has been used to justify the destruction and criminalization of African American communities. In 1889, a historian by the name of Phillip Bruce published, *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman*. In this book, he argues that the plantation class cannot function in society without a heightened sense of danger for white people. He argued that because the Negress was so lascivious and hypersexual, the enslaved male has never had to use sexual control. Therefore, the Black woman's sexuality was linked to the cause of the rape of the virtuous white woman. Furthermore, the children of the enslaved were doomed to inherit the immoral practices of their parents (Bruce, 1889). The Black woman became the catalyst for the cause and creation of the downfall of her people.

In praxis, the Jezebel stereotype has serious implications for African American women. As young African American women are exposed to promiscuous, and subservient roles of women through images and video, they are more likely to associate other African American women with negative and sexualized characteristics (Givens and Monahan, 2009). The images of African American women that are more frequently perpetuated through the media does have a significant impact on African American women's perception of themselves (Littlefield, 2008).

The antithesis of the Jezebel is Mammy. Mammy is a happy servant of white patriarchy. The nurturing nature of this characterization is pivotal to the narrative of racial inferiority, which is why this depiction is still able to be frequently seen. She is happy to raise white children and neglect her own because she knows that hers were doomed from conceptions. She is happy to be near the white home and community of validity and legitimacy and not her community of despair, squalor, and crime (Roberts, 1997). She is happy in her powerlessness as the white children she raised do not regard her a mother or even a woman. Mammy supports the systems of white authoritative power and in exchange for her total devotion, she gets to be in the

domestic house and not in the fields. Mammy was both the perfect slave and mother for white families, regardless of her own family and personal responsibilities. Whites saw her as a passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them (Jones, 1985).

Mammy is stripped of sexual allure to maintain the balance of white society. She is often depicted as a critical foundation that white society was to be built upon. She values and protects the white family as if it were her own. It is critical that she have no sexuality to fulfill her role. If Mammy were to have been allotted a feminine sexuality, she would pose a threat to the lady of the house and the system of white virtue of at large. Mammy is the first character where the ideas of the female and the woman were detached. Mammy is a female and her duties are nurturing and matronly, but in no regard, is she to be perceived as a woman, with human qualities and desires.

Mammy also introduces a pivotal arrangement of gender in African American society: Black women have agency and not dependent on Black men. In fact, Mammy's strength and power to interact in relative perceived comfort with white society is typically the antithesis of the common stereotype of African American men (*Ethnic Notions*, 1986). Mammy is the dominant figure in her culture and not a submissive character which is the juxtaposition of this to white society where white women are fragile and dependent on their men, was a mark of innate inferiority.

Sherri Parks, discusses how Mammy was created and how she was necessary to develop nostalgia over the recently destroyed south. "Mammy, who was created as a piece of nostalgic propaganda to reconstruct the slaveholding south into a peaceful loving place with contented slaves and wise Mammies who loved white children more than anything or anyone else. The

mystical stories built about her were used to transform slaver and more: Her wisdom and comfort would help the country through the social and economic upheavals of the Great Depression. The myth grew so familiar that it left little room to see that the lives that slave women actually lived,” (Parks, 2013). Parks goes on to concentrate on the lies that were necessary to maintain the system of oppression that America was economically dependent on. “The guilty white lie that sought to portray African women as willing participants in their own oppression, the patriarchal lie that caged all women, the racist lie that slandered and demeaned African people and dumped a host of neurotic desires and beliefs about female sexuality, power, and womanhood on the backs of Black women. Through the belief of these lies, the needs of others, have been superimposed on Black women,” (Parks, 2013).

The political issue of the time was the violence that Black people were experiencing. The largest migration of African Americans from the south following reconstruction was in reaction to the terrorist methods of the Ku Klux Klan, lynching mobs, and the Jim Crow laws that criminalized Black life (Harrison, 1992). While white women were fighting for the right to vote and to attend universities, Black women were literally fighting for their lives and the lives of their families. During the first wave of feminism, there was little discussion of how African American women’s struggles could be addressed outside of the vote. Even the right to vote is situated in a very particular opportunity that people of color may not experience, because of the legacy of segregation. A short-term alliance was formed between white and Black feminist activists as educated suffrage supporters, but it was short lived after the passing of the 15<sup>Th</sup> Amendment. After the African American male was given the right to vote with the passing of the Amendment, many white women suffrage groups felt betrayed by white male politicians for

giving a Black man, someone who was not typically of the means to practice their opportunity, to vote before them (Collins, 1996).

There seems to be little done to thoroughly analyze the character and tease out the differences of the real women who lived them. The recovering south, after losing the Civil War, needed to create a figure that would speak of the nostalgia of Dixie for white men and women. Mammy, who often cared for her masters' children before her own, and always through force could take care of her white family, was that figure. She would often be depicted in a large, tattered dress with a kerchief on her head, like the one that Aunt Jemima wears in commercials. This kerchief has become synonymous with labor and subordinate positions of authority. The head dress that women wore during slavery were to show their status in their African communities. These head dresses, in their bright colors were staples of pride for enslaved women, only to have them turned into a sign of oppression (Parks, 2013).

## **2.5 THE PORTRAYAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA (1954-1968)**

In the 1960s, *The Moynihan Report* was published under President Johnson's administration. In his report, Senator Moynihan blamed his analysis of the social problems within the Black community on the Black woman. Instead addressing the social, political, and economic conditions that create the culture of poverty, Moynihan contended that the issues that the inner-city ghettos are dealing with can all be traced to the Black broken home. In the broken home, the Black woman cripples her men, by nagging on his lack of ability to be a sole breadwinner. If a man cannot be a man in his home, his leaving his family is justified. Therefore, the Matriarch is left to be the head of her house, a condition that will bring about the downfall of the entire community.

As Black men fled the home, Black women had to find means and resources to help provide for their children. The social reform program of Welfare has created a stereotype of the Welfare queen: a woman who breeds herself intentionally to have children to live in poverty to live off and maintain a responsibility to the state. This characterization has roots in Jezebel and Mammy in regards that Black women cannot control their reproductive bodies responsibly and the devious nature of Black womanhood and never actually being able to create and foster environments of healthy lifestyles for their children (Roberts, 1997).

The political issues of the time stemmed from the Vietnam War, and racial tensions from the newly passed Civil Rights Legislation and from the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X. These major timelines in American history reinforced the idea of racial essentialism, and called for African American women to be Black first and to align their identity to the needs of their communities, and not their genders. The white women who were fighting for equal pay and paid maternity leave, would not understand the class barriers that their movements created and excluded many women of color from.

## **2.6 BRANCHES AND SECTS OF AMERICAN FEMINISM**

Despite the historical patterns of representation of African American women in the mainstream visual media, there has been an emerging of Black female artists that display a physical, social, and economical autonomy and power that has become synonymous with the fourth wave of feminism (Durham, Cooper, Morris, 2013). Some of these artists that are performing the fourth wave of feminism are Beyoncé, Rhianna, Janelle Monae, and Nicki Minaj. These performers often use lyrics, and imagery to convey a self-determined and self-defined sexuality that often reflects their autonomy and control economically and socially. These highly consumed global icons are millionaires well over, and are celebrated in the media for their

success. The publicity that these celebrities experience, also makes it extremely tangible for audiences to keep up with their personal lives. With the rise of social media, images and correspondence regarding these women's lifestyles, love lives and personal relationships are only a click away. This trend in female sexuality that are displayed in popular culture may have serious implications on the millennial generations that consider performances of African American sexuality to immolate (Richardson, 2013).

### ***2.6.1 FIRST WAVE OF FEMINISM (1809-1920)***

When explaining, and detailing the fourth wave of feminism, it is important to understand what the previous waves of Black Feminism did for American society. During the first wave of Black Feminism, racial oppression was the primary catalyst for change (Davis, 1981). Closely following abolition, white women, outraged because former slaves and other African American men being granted the right to vote. Many suffragettes allied with Black female activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Church Terrell to gain the momentum that ensured women were granted a right to vote. This alliance was very short lived. Many of the white activists were not interested in civil rights or promoting equality but rather promoting whites as the clear dominant class. Many of the white suffragettes were unwilling to advocate for racial equality issues (Taylor 1998).

Activists like Ida B. Wells-Barnett made every effort to publicize the injustices that African American communities were faced with. She founded, edited, and published her own newspapers to serve as a political and social pulse of the African American community. After several mob lynchings in her Memphis neighborhood, Wells-Barnett developed an anti-lynching campaign that gained international notoriety that called for lynching to be considered a crime of murder and for President William McKinley to sign reform into legislation. In addition to her

spearheading an anti-lynching campaign, she also developed the first kindergarten program in her community, and rallied for women's equality as well as racial equality (Hull, Scott, and Smith, 1982). Wells-Barnett dedicated her life exercising as many freedoms as she could but also ensuring that her community was better because of it. All her activism was rooted in the communal experience of African American oppression.

During this wave, Black Feminism was oriented toward Black female empowerment per certain pressing issues. African American women were not in control of their place or movement in this phase but were rather reacting to the oppression around them, but also putting forth a vision of a world without racial terror. The first wave is important to recognize because it is through this wave that African American women are demonstrating public political activity in reaction to their treatment. The historical narrative of enslavement and the sexual abuse that many enslaved women experienced created many of the stereotypes that are still pervasive today. These stereotypes include the mammy, and the jezebel. It can be argued that African American women's role in suffrage was in retaliation to these stereotypes and the sexual abuse that African American women suffered (Wallace, 1998).

In addition to the suffrage movement that many white women were fighting for, there were other issues that were impacting them in the political realm. White women were interested in being full participatory equals in the legal system. They wanted to be able to execute their husband's wills, have authority over their children in case of divorce and separation, and they wanted not to be considered their husband's property. These issues bring about an important argument on class and race. African American women, although free would have years to go before they gained equality in the legal system, and many of them lived in poverty after Reconstruction, so there

was very little means for them to have equality or protection from the state or federal governments.

### **2.6.2 THE SECOND WAVE OF FEMINISM (1945-1968)**

The second wave of feminism comes to a head during the Civil Rights Movement, where African American women were expected to stand behind African American men in secondary roles and not roles of power. While white women could take advantage of their opportunities to education, and social status to maintain their domestic lives, African American women were often working full days, caring for their families in addition to organizing political activities like boycotts and sit-ins (Taylor 1998). African American women were equal participants with African American men in the political and social movements that lead up the Civil Rights Act of 1964, however many of them received no notoriety and since their roles have been minimized to only perform in support of men like Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King (Tucker-Brown, 2001). During the second wave of feminism, it became clear that Black women's liberation had very few allies. In the cases of both African American men and white women, Black women's liberation seems to pose a threat to their political and social power (Collins, 1996).

Following the end of World War II, there was an expectation for white women to go back into their homes and give their jobs, which they had been working during the war, back to the soldiers. Women's resistance to give their jobs up for men, inspired the first draft of the Equal Pay Act, and women having paid maternity leave, and the Affordable Child Care Act. Once again issues of class and race left many African American women out of this legislation. Many of the jobs that African American woman occupied at the time were domestic, and because they did not work for major corporations, whatever benefits they had, including wage, was at the

discretion of their employer. African American women being left out of the mainstream feminist movement of the time, encouraged their participation in the Civil Rights Movement, hoping that African American men would be an ally and voice African American women's grievances with their oppression. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Many of the African American women who were as active as any of the men, would never have their story told or their oppression recognized.

### ***2.6.3 THE THIRD WAVE OF FEMINISM: WOMANISM (1980-2000)***

This is the period in which Womanism as a theory emerged. In previous waves, the term feminism was often discouraged for African American women, because it confused and conflicted the issues of race and sexism. Layli Philips contends that, "Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in African American women and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment and nature and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension," (Philips, 2006). Unlike its less contemporary sisters of feminism and Black Feminist Thought, it does not focus on gender of sexism, but rather attempts to alleviate all sites and forms of oppression. These forms of oppression are typically the socially addressed issues of race, gender, or class, on equal levels of importance (Cole, Guy-Sheftall, 2003). Scholars like Philips develops argue that although the theories of Womanism, Black feminism, and feminism, involve the biological evidence of womanhood, they are not the same. The theories and the political hardships that acted as their catalyst are not rooted in the same struggles, in the same experiences, nor garner an audience over the same issues.

The staunch differences between the interests and values of feminism, and Black Feminist Thought, proves the need for a more comprehensive political theory that would speak to the issues of the modern and every changing political climate. Womanism has become that theory because during this time, Black Feminist Thought and feminism, coexist without creating a dichotomy. It effectively advocates for the elimination of all oppressive institutions and rallies all oppressed, subjugated, and marginalized people to lobby and encourage equality and recognition. Womanism has a sense of ethics and speaks to the nurturing, caring, and loving spirit that mothers have towards their families and their communities (Walker, 1983).

The tenant of spiritualism involves the social justice activism and practices that are rooted in spiritual conviction and consideration. This concept is grounded in the mantra of treating others how one wants to be treated. The cyclical nature of life, death, and spirit are heavily expressed in the theory. The acknowledgement of ancestors and others who are no longer living, watching and interceding in their world is a very controversial concept for politics in the academy. The importance of the spiritual world as well as physical reality is often not openly discussed. It can be argued that this makes Womanism more inviting because practicing it brings diversity in faiths. This tenant makes Womanism more dimensional and interdisciplinary and able to reach more arenas in academia.

#### ***2.6.4 HIP HOP FEMINISM***

Hip hop feminism is a critique of hip hop culture that argues against the sexism and homophobia that are perpetuated in mainstream hip hop music. Its artists and lyrics call for a uniting of people of color across the sexes and gender norms. The major tenet of this form of feminism is that it advocates for the empowerment of women in their public, personal, and private lives (Pough, Richardson, Durham, and Raimist, 2007). The evolution and emergence of

new spaces in which African American women can participate, has called for new theories to be developed and assess to understand the changes that African American women as a culture are experiencing. The binaries of ideologies that America as a nation use to identify its citizens have never truly worked (Murnro, 2013). The rigid lines of demarcations that have been drawn for African American women have created tension among the genders of African Americans. Hip hop feminism does not conform to any binary behaviors and welcomes to the new freedoms of sexual expression African American women are experiencing (Morgan, 1999).

Much of hip hop feminist artists are advocating for autonomy in women's sexual choices, and respect of all women. Like Womanism, Hip Hop Feminism has more of an inclusionary nature. In Queen Latifah's *U.N.I.T.Y* in 1993 she demands respect, recognition of value, and calls on the community to defend African American women. "Who you callin' a bitch...Every time I hear a brother call a girl a bitch or a hoe. Trying to make a sister feel low. You know all of that gots to go," (Queen Latifah, 1993). In Salt-N-Pepa's 1994 song, *None of Your Business*, the group advocated for women's sexual autonomy. "If I want to take a guy home with me tonight, it's none of your business. And she wanna be a freak and sell it on the weekend, it's none of your business. Now you shouldn't even get into who I'm givin' skins to, it's none of your business," (Salt-N-Pepa, 1994). Lauryn Hill also speaks on the respect that woman need to have for themselves before being able to demand it from a partner in *Du-Wop (That Thing)*. "Baby girl, respect is just a minimum. Niggas fucked up and you still defending them. Now Lauryn is only human. Don't think I haven't been through the same predicament. Let it sit inside your head like a million women in Philly, Penn. It's silly when girls sell their soul because it's in," (Hill, 1998).

This nonconforming concept can be argued as both helpful and harmful. It could be a beneficial that African American women are displaying agency for themselves in regards to their sexual decision making, and having autonomy over their own bodies. However, there cannot be such a disconnection to the pillars of African American feminism that struggled to maintain the rights of humanity. The portrayal of African American women's sexuality cannot negate the efforts of the foremothers whose struggle was not rooted in being able to choose sexual practices, but to perform human American rights.

The foremother's struggle can be articulated in understanding the political of respectability. The phrase was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham as a range of strategies largely including notions of honor, self-respect, piety, propriety deployed by progressive African American women to promote racial uplift and women's rights all to secure a broader access to the public sphere (Durnham, Cooper, and Morris, 2013). Hip hop feminism is a tempering of a contextualization of respectability politics and the argument that respectability politics is no longer valid, necessary, or relevant for African American women today. This can be applied to Beyoncé's *Lemonade* in her construction of Black female autonomy. "The scope of *Lemonade*'s visual landscape is what makes it so distinctive. It constructs a powerfully symbolic Black female sisterhood that resists invisibility, that refuses to be silent," (hooks, 2016).

Within Beyoncé's most current work, so identified what the fairy tale looks like for African American women after the wedding. Living and loving, hurting and surviving is not enough. Being able to give testimony to the burden, to "spin gold out of this hard life" and "conjure beauty from the things left behind," is the fairy tale for the Black woman. This testimony provides blueprints that free us and the sisters, daughters, and mothers who come after us (Mock, 2016). Speaking our truth of how we know the world and have processed the burdens

of our existence allows Black women to go forth with reality openly (Mock, 2016).

Furthermore, African American women being able to give their testimony of experiences, especially in terms of their sexual experiences will allow so many young women to fully understand how they identify themselves, and not how they are identified.

## **2.7 RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTS OF BLACK FEMALE SEXUAL REPRESENTATION ON SEXUAL DECISION MAKING**

Currently, through mainstream film and television media, African American women are commodified, and are only valued if they can represent the most primal and carnal urges of womanhood, which seems to be physically pleasing a man (Fasula, Carry, and Miller, 2014). The sexualizing of African American women is fluid through film, television, and musical lyrics (Wallace, Townsend, Glasgow, and Ojie, 2011). What is more interesting is that the current state of African American women's objectification is often at the hand of other African Americans. The tradition of misrepresenting and stereotyping African American woman has only continued to be more pervasive and more destructive because the reach of the media has had a dramatic boom since the rise of social media companies such as Twitter and Instagram (Harris-Perry, 2011). Studies have shown that when there are consistent messages of high achievement and standards presented to women, they will be older when they decide to engage in sexual behavior and it will typically be protected and healthy (Beattie, 2015). The images that are presented to African American women of African American women are typically negative and therefore may result in negative behaviors (Gollub, Morrow, Mayer and, Koblin, etc. 2010).

## **2.8 BEHAVIORAL FACTORS IN SEXUAL DECISION MAKING**

In regards to high risk sexual behavior there are specific factors that constitute sexual decision making among African American women (Harawa, Wilton, Wang, Mao and, Kuo, etc.

2014). These factors include peer perceptions, expectations among authority and guardian figures, and the imitation of media and popular culture characters (Voisin, Hotton, and Neilands, 2014). In terms of peer perceptions and expectations, African American women respond to the themes about sex promoted by their friends and family, more so than what they are taught in a formal school environment (Fletcher, Ward, Thomas, Foust, Levin, and Trinh, 2015). Parental attitudes on sexual behavior and sexual attitudes heavily impact the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of adolescents (Annang, Lian, Fletcher, and Jackson, 2014). The lack of informed advice from friends and family about sexual behavior, this could correlate to an increase in high risk sexual behavior (Foster, Biggs, McCain, Holtby, and Brindis, 2012).

African American women who grow up in environments where healthy sexual decisions are encouraged, they will model the desirable behavior (Wallace and Fisher, 2007). Conversely, research supports that when stereotypical and shaming images of African American women are witnessed, it has a negative effect on the cultural identity of other African American women (Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad, 2010; Woertman and Van den Brink, 2012) as well as perceptions of body image (Zhang, Dixon, and Conrad, 2009) and psychological health (Akella, 2015).

## **2.9 AGENCY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION**

There has been discourse about African American women's participation in the imagery of hip hop music and the contradictory nature of their participation. Although African American women are frequently referred to in derogatory terms, like *bitches* and *hoes*, there is still agency in their participation in the images. By defining sexuality through imagery, some African American female performers could reach a level of success, where their bodies are deified. African American women are still actively participating in the common stereotypical roles in music videos, television, and in movies (Morgan, 1999). These images are important because

frequently they are the only characterizations in which African American women can participate in their own imagery. African American women can reaffirm their independence, sexuality, and sense of power through their bodies by participating in these images. Furthermore, these sexualized depictions can allow women access to protection, material wealth, and other benefits of power (Morgan, 1999).

Beyoncé's *Lemonade* offers viewers a display of Black female bodies as powerful and transgress all boundaries. "It's all about the bodies, and the body as a commodity...to seduce, celebrate, and delight, to challenge the ongoing present day devaluation of the Black female body. The voice that Beyoncé unapologetically gives to Black female pain is exposed and revealed in this album. The given voice is a vital and essential stage of the freedom struggle (hooks, 2016). The album is Beyoncé's testimony of being Black, beautiful, and burdened. (Mock, 2016).

Understanding the relationship between media objectification of African American women's bodies, agency in intimate relationships and the influence of contemporary performances of African American women's sexuality, may have important implications of media literacy and sexual education. Qualitative inquiry that allows for the examination of the magnitude and depth of this relationship is particularly useful in understanding the intersection of African American women's understanding of feminist messages and how they apply them to their intimate, social and personal lives. The purpose of this study is to understand how young African American women interpret, internalize, and act upon messages expressed in womanist performances. The following chapter explains the methodology used in executing this study.

## **2.10 AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN BLUES TRADITION**

In the author's analysis of the characteristics and impact of sects of American feminism and Black Feminist Thought, there is a key component that is typically ignored in mainstream popular discussion. That component is class. Traditionally, Black Feminist Thought traditions tend to exclude ideas produced by and within poor and working class communities, where women historically have not had the means or access to publish written text or oral text (Davis, 1998). In regards to blues women (circa the turn of the century and through the 1940s-1950s), there are three major differences that set them apart from other musicians of their times: the way they speak and used their voices in performances; their themes; and how they recognized the new opportunities for the highly elusive concept of freedom.

Blues women performers often spoke in the African American Vernacular English (AAVE), which made them more relatable to their audiences. Furthermore, using African American Vernacular English, united the audience of newly emancipated African Americans and further solidified the development of an African American culture. The African American Vernacular English that is used in Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, speaks to the African American woman without the opportunity for social mobility and without formal education, as many women were experiencing at that time. These performers often spoke to the under belly of Black upward mobility. These women spoke of poverty, abuse, alcohol, drugs, and the stress of manual labor that was the climate of the culture of the time. However, they also spoke of longing to be loved and feeling free from the constraints of domestic work, of dependence on men for necessities, and of being free from the cultural expectations and standards of mothering and nurturing that African American women are burdened to be (Parks, 2013).

Recognizing the class differences from someone like Ana Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells, and Mary McCleod Bethune, compared to Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday allows for a more nuanced way to look at Black Feminist messages among African American women. Black Feminist messages do not always have to come from academia. Many African American women might not identify with Cooper, Wells, and Bethune in terms of education and class, and therefore might feel judged by their ideas about African American women and “pushing the race forward,” (Thompson, 2012). The way Rainey, Smith, and Holiday articulated their messages of independence, freedom, and sexuality in the vernacular and language of their audiences, might have resonated with Black women of that era and inspired them to immortalize their versions of Black womanhood.

In Smith’s *Young Woman’s Blues* her lyrics resonate with the reality that marriage and other aspects of respectability politics may not apply to her audience. “I ain’t no high yella, I’m a deep killer brown...I ain’t gon’ marry, ain’t gon’ settle down...I’m gon’ drink good moonshine and run these browns down...See that long lonesome road, Lord, you know it’s gotta end...And I’m a good woman and can get plenty men,” (Davis, 1998). Smith speaks about how the threat of being single as an African American woman does not frighten her because, in the author’s opinion, she knows respectability politics does not apply to her. She is not fair skinned, but a dark brown and instead of feeling undesirable, she asserts that she is not going to settle down but affirms her sexuality and knowing that she is deserving of love and can develop a relationship if she chooses. Smith’s lyrics are all about the choice for African American women to be whoever they want to be regardless of societal norms.

In regards to the themes that explored by early Black blues women, they were very much exploring the notions of womanhood for African American women in contrast to that of white

women. Often in their discussion of marriage, love, and relationships; Rainey, Smith, and Holiday situate their lyrics from the perspective of African American working class women. That is, they offer warnings to women who are encouraged to marry to gain status, but gain the burden of being responsible for the household. The performers often discuss the absence of men. This is critical to analyze because for African Americans, especially African American men, following Reconstruction, found that a key benefit of freedom was being able to physically move from one place to another. Rainey, Smith, and Holiday specifically mention trains, and busses in their lyrics as a means for lovers and partners to enter and leave their lives.

In the discussion of liberty and freedom, blues women included themselves in the migration to seek “freedom.” Their freedom could be an escape from an abusive partner, seeking better opportunities for employment, or just seeking refuge from their environment. The fact that blues women included their own experiences, and that of their audiences to explore notions of tangible freedoms that African American women could identify with speaks to the solidarity that although liberty could mean different things, Black women were just as entitled to it as any other American.

The last important characteristic of Black blues women performers that must be discussed, is their perspective of sex and sexuality. In Blues performances, sex was a sight of pleasure and an opportunity for privilege for Black women. One of the earliest and few interpretations of sexual prowess as an opportunity of power for African American women is in Blues lyrics and performances. Despite the generally conservative climate of the times, Smith and Rainey performed about sexual love, and in so doing, they articulated a collective experience of freedom, giving voice to the most powerful evidence there was for many Black people that slavery no longer existed (Davis, 1998). Declaring sexuality to explore the reality of freedom and the emancipation of former slaves, spoke to the humanity of Black women, many of whom had either barred witness

or experienced some form of abuse. Speaking to that reality further strengthened the solidarity of working class Black women, and further mobilized their audience.

Another important facet to recognize in Blues women traditions is that none of the performers mentioned speak on motherhood in their lyrics. This was an intentional strategy to take African American women out of the socially acceptable roles of mothers and nurturers of their communities and employers' communities, and to put them in charge of their own circumstances. In the Blues tradition, motherhood was only a component of one's life; not a lifelong aspiration or a characterization of societal expectations. Often the reality of motherhood and the image of a nurturer privileged white lives over Black, men over women, and rich over the poor. By neglecting to mention motherhood in literal terms and not sexual, Blues women acknowledged the personhood of their audiences and not their biological potential. This is critical because for generations before, African American women were only valued for their biological production.

Furthermore, early blues artists speak to a gendered consciousness very much like DuBois' double consciousness. In DuBois' article in *Darkwater*, he emphasized the extent to which working class African American women's relative economic independence summoned various modes of female consciousness that emphasized strength, resilience, and autonomy (Davis, 1998). From this female consciousness, there seems to be a collective memory of slavery, an acknowledgment that men and women performed similar roles, and that there was no need to aspire to "True Womanhood," as many middle class African American women were, because that title was not necessary for working class African American women to have. What good is the myth of social mobility in the face of abject poverty? What good are the arguably constrictive and controlling measures of white supremacy, Black male patriarchy, and sexism,

which can be seen in certain structures like turn of the century ideas on institutions like marriage, church, and higher education?

It can be argued that respectability politics for African American women were encouraged to challenge white supremacy, assert full citizenship and grasp the humanity that chattel slavery and repercussions of it stripped away. However, for African American women who were not in positions of upward mobility, respectability politics only further marginalized them into a class of the Black underbelly in what would be called urban ghettos and government housing projects, where Black elites do not acknowledge the class, but further more extend no hand to help their circumstances. Blues women performers spoke to this marginal population, understood their lived experiences, and used their lyrics as a way to motivate their audiences despite the trials and tribulations that were a part of their daily lives.

### 3 CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This study examines the influences of the musical artist Beyoncé and her brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explore how the lyrics, and images position Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influences the perspective of millennials perception of Black femininity, Black female identity, agency, and sexual decision making. The current study includes African American women ages 18-25 living and attending colleges and universities in the Metropolitan Atlanta area. Data is collected using structured and informal interviews. A narrative research design is used to contextualize the inquiry. The study's finding has implications for several arenas of research including sexual communication studies, Black male female sexuality and relationships and gender studies. The participants will be asking what their favorite Beyoncé performance is; the researcher will access the performance and watch it with the participant, prior to beginning the interview questions.

The broader thematic research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. Does Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?
2. How does Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy and Black male patriarchy influence her audiences' awareness of Black female identity?
3. How do young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism?

### 3.2 DESIGN OF STUDY

The study research design is decidedly qualitative to ensure that questions about the influence Beyonce's brand of feminism on agency and sexual decision making among young African American women inspires reflexivity. The nature of the overarching research question demands an approach that seeks to interrogate how the intersections of history, race, class, and gender influence how young African American women make meaning of Beyonce's lyrics, images, and performances. A qualitative approach allows for the stories of African American women's sexuality to be deconstructed by understanding the values participants attach to the words, images, and performances of Beyonce and re-storied through the theoretical connections that emerge in the data. The trustworthiness of the data is addressed by using an array of validation procedures in data collection, interpretation, and analysis.

The innovation within the study depends on the participants' ability to be recognized and identify with the findings, and not vilified for belonging to an open and sexually expressive culture. A qualitative method is the design that is most appropriate to understand the factors that influence African American women's sexual decision making. The researcher is interested in the contributing factors of sexual decisions and not in the sexual decisions themselves. This design approach also allows the researcher to learn more about the lived experience of the participants and how certain factors and influences impact them.

Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to capture personal and human experiences over time, and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Narrative research also allows for the systematic gathering and analysis of participants' stories, which challenges traditional and modernist views of truth, reality, knowledge, and personhood (Creswell, 2006). There are also two theories that are

paramount in contextualizing the data: constructivism, and feminism. Constructivism is based on the idea that reality is a product of one's own creation; that is everyone sees and interprets the world and their experiences through personal belief systems. Narrative inquiry allows us to hear how individuals construct meaning from within these systems of belief; their attitudes, values and ideas that shape the sense of self identity (Meter and Stevens, 2000). Feminism is a theory that examines power issues within research relationships with a view to groups. It seeks to create a sense of power and autonomy, especially for marginalized groups by providing a platform from which those voices can be heard (Frye, 1983).

### **3.3 SAMPLE POPULATION**

The target population of this study are African American women, ages 18 to 25, living in Metropolitan Atlanta, and enrolled in introductory undergraduate classes in the departments of African American Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexualities Studies at Georgia State University. Additionally, participants must be familiar with Beyonce's musical catalog, and the evolution in her artistry.

### **3.4 SAMPLE SELECTION**

To gain access, because there is not a true gate keeper in regards to this study, a level of trust must be developed between the researcher and the participants (Creswell, 2006). To adhere to selective sampling procedures and to minimize common data collection issues, the study uses a representative sample. A representative sample is a form of purposeful sampling, in which a small quantity of participants is used to accurately reflect the larger entity (Patton, 2001). For example, the researcher will use a selective representation of Beyoncé fans or to accurately reflect the shared values, ideas, beliefs, and cultural practices of portions of Beyoncé's fan base demographic population. The participants will serve to represent a portion of the population that

the researcher is focusing on. Also, in maintain participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' real names.

Using this sampling procedure, the researcher intentionally seeks and select fans of Beyoncé and self-proclaiming members of Beyoncé's fan base if they fit the demographic profile. The researcher will select participants who show interest in the study as well as those who have an extensive knowledge of Beyoncé's music, images, and lyrics. Maintaining the demographic profile is important to ensure that the research is grounded in the experiences of those most familiar with the artist's body of work. Participants who met the following criteria were recruited for the study:

- Identified as African American women
- Ranged from age 18 to 25
- Enrolled as a student at Georgia State University
- Identified as Beyonce fans
- Were willing to speak freely about their sexual experiences and decision making

Young African American women were targeted in this study because of their increases risk of exposure to HIV and Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). In 2014, African American women aged 18 to 25 years has a 77% HIV diagnosis rate compared to their White female counterparts at 20% and 21% for Latinas (CDC, 2014). Focusing on women within this age range also increases the likelihood that they are experiencing similar life state experiences such as increasing autonomy, independence, and sexual exploration. These life stage experiences and their perceptions of them could be analyzed differently under the lens of the feminism that Beyonce embodies. In terms of the participants' sexual experiences, it is important that the sample population feel comfortable in disclosing and discussing their sexuality, how they

embody it, and how it influences their decisions. These women will be recruited from undergraduate courses in African American Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State University. The participants will be offered extra credit on a class assignment in addition to provided lunch for their participation in the study. The participants' participation will strictly be on a voluntary basis.

### **3.5 DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUE**

The data for this study were gathered through face-to-face interviews. A brief screening tool was used to ensure that participants met the inclusionary criteria. Further information about their perceptions and sexual decision-making will be gathered through face-to-face interviews, then transcribed, and coded for analysis. The participants were recruited from undergraduate courses in African American Studies (AAS) and Women, Gender, and Sexualities Studies (WGSS) at Georgia State University. The researcher asked AAS and WGSS professors who consistently teach undergraduate classes to allow the researcher to come into their classes to explain the study and distribute the recruitment flyer.

After the flyer, was disseminated, the initial pool of students who expressed interest were asked to complete the screening form to ensure that they meet the inclusionary criteria of the study. After completion of the screening form, the researcher verified that all selection criteria were satisfied. Ultimately, fourteen students were selected as the study sample. The researcher asked the participants to identify a day, time, and location to conduct the face-to-face interview. In exchange for their participation, each woman was given a \$5 gift card to Subway and five extra-credit points for the class.

### **3.6 DATA ANALYSIS**

Data for the study were analyzed using two cycles of coding. First cycle coding is a way to initially summarize segments of the data. Values coding was used for the first cycle of data analysis. Values coding is the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflects the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing their perspectives and worldview. The layers of values, attitudes, and beliefs are essential in understanding the cultural significance of the research topic (Creswell, 2013). The researcher selected this coding strategy to understand how messages about sexual decision making, feminism, and self-identification are interpreted by young African American women. The goal of second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categories, themes, and concepts identified from the first cycle codes (Saldana, 2016). For this more conceptual level of analysis, theoretical coding was used. Theoretical coding allowed the researcher to integrate and synthesize the concepts from the first cycle coding.

### **3.7 VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY**

Qualitative inquiry uses an array of rigorous methods to establish validity, reliability, and authenticity (Merriam, 2002). Researcher bias was constantly examined throughout the implementation of the study to ensure that the participants' lived experiences were privileged in the conceptualization to analysis. Since the participants' narrative is the cornerstone of this study, it was imperative that the study use multiple forms of validation to ensure the trustworthiness of the data.

### **3.8 INTERNAL VALIDITY**

There are several strategies that experts recommend to establish accuracy and rigor of qualitative inquiry. The first strategy that the researcher utilized was an audit trail. An audit trail is a detailed account of the steps taken in the research, and is also a great method of analyzing

research bias throughout the study (Merriam, 2002). At every stage of the research study, the researcher kept a journal log of preliminary findings, recruitment strategies, nuances in literature, and focal points for consideration, data collection, and analysis to ensure that every precaution was taken to allow for an accurate valid study conduction. The notes the researcher took daily in regards to the progress of the study, were reflected on by the researcher but were also presented to the thesis advisor to ensure that the study was being conducted properly, and the finding as well as the analysis were being handled with care and that the confidentiality of the participants was not breached. The notes also included nonverbal cues and dialect that the participants used that could bear meaning in the findings.

Qualitative research experts agree that it is imperative for the researcher to state personal biases prior to beginning the study. In an effort to maintain transparency from the researcher's perspective, the researcher offered her perspective on the subject matter in the prologue at the beginning of this document. In addition to the daily journal of notes the researcher took regarding the study, she also kept a secondary journal of quotes from participants, sections of transcripts, and preliminary codes that the researcher found important. In this secondary journal, the researcher kept personal thoughts, ideas, and comments related to the study throughout each portion of the study. This was done as a means to recognizing any biases the researcher may have had at any point during the research study. The researcher also had active and ongoing conversations with her thesis committee chair about the data, identifying patterns, themes, and preliminary findings. This was done without compromising the participants' identities and confidentiality.

### **3.9 CODING STRATEGIES**

A values coding approach was deemed the most appropriate to analyze the first review of the transcribed data. Values coding is the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflects the participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing their perspectives and worldview and was used as a first cycle strategy. The layers of values, attitudes, beliefs are essential in understanding the cultural significance of the research topic (Creswell, 2013). The researcher selected this coding strategy to analyze the implications of how messages about sexual decision making are interpreted by young African American women. The second cycle coding strategy was theoretical as to assess what the larger themes and patterns emerged during the study which gave more insight as to how and why particular behaviors were so prevalent amongst the participants. The five overarching themes that emerged from the study are African American cultural expectations, Beyoncé's messages' influences on African American cultural expectations, empowering Feminist messages, embracing racial identities in various aspects of the participants' lives, and influence on sexual decision making and sexual embodiment. Out of these five themes, three sub domains were pervasive parts of the conversations as well: prioritizing cultural expectations, effects of iconic media portrayal of African American life, and a positive impact on social acceptability of Black female sexuality.

### **3.10 INTER RATER RELIABILITY**

One fellow student in the same graduate program was asked to help establish inter-rater reliability for this study. The rater was given a transcript to review. The transcript totaled ten (10) pages. The rater was asked to assess the accuracy of the assigned codes. If the rater questioned the accuracy of a code, the researcher revised the formal definition until consensus was reached.

### **3.11 EXTERNAL VALIDITY**

Validity speaks to the ability to have a research study duplicated and the findings are similar or close in proximity to the original study. However, qualitative research is exploratory and uses naturalist approaches. The goal of qualitative inquiry is not to generalize, but rather understand phenomenon. Qualitative research begins with the assumptions and the use of interpretive and theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To understand feminist messages and their influence on sexual decision making among young Black women, the researcher focused on the meaning the women assigned to the lyrics, images, and performances of Beyoncé. To facilitate this process the researcher intentionally provided rich and detailed profiles of each participant. It is the researcher's intention that these descriptions not only humanize the participants in the study but offer a form of validation about the study sample population.

### **3.12 RELIABILITY**

The nature and design of this study makes reliability an issue than cannot be easily addressed. An exploratory inquiry based research study may not be able to be duplicated for identical findings. Therefore, the qualitative nature of the study makes the issue of reliability something more of a baseline for other scholars to pursue to see if the researcher's findings make sense. The qualitative approach to the study does not necessarily mean that reliability is not possible, it just means that the reliability will be measured on how reasonable the findings are versus statistical data that is typically present in quantitative research findings.

The ways that the researcher designed her study and conducted her procedures actually improved the internal validity of the study, but also helped to lay the foundation of its reliability.

An audit trail, inter rater reliability and detailed copious notes all helped to maintain and ensure that the study's findings are reliable and help accurately convey the depth of the research but more importantly, convey the accurate narrative of the participant's real life experience. The inclusion of these steps in the design of the study, the data collection technique, and the analysis of the data, all helped to ensure that the study was conducted with rigor and that the participant's narrative maintained the cornerstone of the study.

### **3.13 RESEARCHER BIAS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

As mentioned in the prologue of this document, the researcher has always had an interest in iconography of Black celebrities and entertainers and its impact on Black identity. The way that popular culture displays and depicts Black life, in many ways determines what reality in African American communities becomes. The researcher wrote about her bias and her experience as a young girl and being enamored with Janet Jackson, and how she identified with her not only because of her talent, but because she looked like the researcher. She was a Black woman like the researcher would become, and watching the world try to destroy her for being a sexual being; for having a woman's body; for having the audacity to have autonomy on her stage, was heartbreaking.

The researcher has also spent the last six years of her life working in the beauty industry as a make-up artist for a highly reputable company. As a make-up artist whose clients are primarily young African American women, I observe first-hand how popular images influence the beauty trends of the target population. The researcher's clients often request new looks, new trends, new colors, but in doing so, they are subconsciously asking the researcher to help them achieve an 'acceptable' beauty standard promoted by the dominant society. This is not an easy task, especially when there have been centuries of media messages that tell Black women in

particular that they are not beautiful, unworthy of recognition, and are the cause of the issues that plague the African American community.

After reading *The Moynihan Report* in undergrad, I recall being angry, and filled with rage as tears ran down my cheeks. I eventually came across Michelle Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. I was impressed at Wallace's defense of both Black manhood and womanhood and outlined that the true issue in African American communities is white supremacy and the attempt to ascribe to white patriarchal heteronormative roles. I kept reading, but I wasn't only reading about my heroes. I was reading about my family. My grandmother maintained a household of 13 children on a farmer's salary and all of her daughters are college educated. My great grandmother was the first woman of color to be allowed to teach in Coweta County, Georgia. My grandfather donated an entire harvest to Hosea Williams to help feed those wrongfully imprisoned for protesting in the bus boycotts. My father, orphaned as a child, eventually earned two master's degrees, a doctorate and taught his children to aspire to the same, if not greater. My mother would drive an hour out of her way to make sure than her children could be educated in the best schools that Atlanta had to offer. The researcher comes from a long line of fighters, of where's there's no way, make one. In the researcher's academic heroes' books, her people weren't damaged genetically by the evils and repercussions of slavery, they were not helpless or hopeless. In those books, and in others, her people are fighters, survivors, revolutionaries. People are only as powerful as their ideas, and in those books, I the researcher found her power. She only wants to help other Black people and, in particular, Black women find theirs.

Author, Lamonda Horton-Stallings argued that *The Moynihan Report* would produce generations of crusaders and activists who would seek to redeem the Black woman from this

white man's critique (Horton-Stallings, 2015). As the author of this study, I tried to be transparent about my scholar-activist position and how it influences my approach to this research question. As a scholar, I am acutely aware of how the contested disembodied sexual images of Black women have created ideological-opponents among some Black female scholars. As an activists, I also see the vital importance of suspending ideologically driven conversations about Black feminism to explore how a new generation of African American women are affected by self-generated, empowering, images of their Black sexuality.

Finally, the last bias I bring to this study is that of a Black Feminist public health advocate. I acknowledge that the sexual health of Black women is an issue that occupies multiple and overlapping spaces (e.g., social work, public health, parental sexual communication, history, etc.). As a result, there needs to be contextually-driven and culturally relevant sexual communication messages disseminated in our communities. Understanding how the contemporary iconography of Beyoncé is critical to understanding how we address HIV and STI risk among young African American women.

#### 4 CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study sought to examine the influences of Beyoncé's brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explored how the lyrical content and sexual imagery of Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influenced the perspective of millennials on Black female sexuality, Black female identity, and agency juxtaposed against white supremacy, Black male patriarchy, and disembodied Black Feminism. The participants were asked what their favorite Beyoncé performance is; the researcher accessed the performance and watched it with the participant, prior to beginning the interview questions.

The broader thematic research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. Does Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?
2. How does Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy and Black male patriarchy influence her audiences' awareness of Black female identity?
3. How do young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism?

This study utilized a qualitative design and was conducted from January 2017 to February 2017. During this time, African American women were recruited from introductory undergraduate courses in African American Studies and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Georgia State University. The researcher went to several classes and briefly spoke about the research she intended to conduct, and circulated the abstract and encouraged students who were interested in participating in the study to contact her. From those recruited, fourteen young women were interviewed for 30 minutes to 60 minutes. These face-to-face interviews took place

in a variety of settings including two participant's homes, private library study rooms, and the African American Studies department graduate lab. For their participation, after the interview, participants were given a \$5 Subway gift card to conclude the interview. All of the interviews were tape recorded with the participants' permission and professionally transcribed.

The participants agreed to individual interviews and were shortly briefed on the nature of the study, verification of the favorite performance, and the line of questioning. The researcher reiterated to each participant that their participation was solely voluntary and at any point, if they no longer felt comfortable with the line of questioning or for any reason, they could withdraw from the study and decline the interview. Participants who agreed to participate in the interviews were asked if they could be contacted later to either review their transcription, or in the case that questions needed to be clarified. All of the participants granted permission to be contacted on a later date in regards to the research study. The participants were extremely helpful and receptive to communication prior to and after the study in regards to other questions that helped the researcher build the participant profile.

This chapter has three sections. The first presents individual profiles of participants in the order in which they were interviewed. Pseudonyms were chosen by the researcher and used in order to keep the participants true identities confidential. The second section presents data from the individual interviews to support the codes and the themes correlated to the research question. Lastly, the final section provides a summary of the chapter.

#### **4.1 THE PARTICIPANTS**

Fourteen women who self-identified as African American, who live in Atlanta, Georgia and attend Georgia State University participated in this study. All of the participants pre-disclosed their favorite Beyoncé performance, prior to the interview. Each participant watched

the performance with the researcher prior to the interview. The target age of the population was ages 18 to 25 and of the participants recruited, the average age was roughly 21 years old. Ten of the participants were born and raised in the south, and two were from New Orleans, Louisiana. Every participant had graduated from high school, and they were all pursuing degrees of higher education. Half of the participants are graduating seniors, and the other half were in various other spectrums of classifications. All of the participants self-identified as coming from middle class and working class backgrounds. Appendix E provides a summary of the individual interview participants. Below is a detailed description of the individual interview participants. Their own words have been used wherever appropriate to provide a better sense of their individual personas.

*Alexis.* Alexis is a 23-year-old, single woman who recently graduated with a Bachelor's degree in political science from a historically Black college. She completed her degree in four years and is currently pursuing her Master's degree in Atlanta, Georgia. She hopes to complete divinity school and become a youth minister and a life coach. Her age, experience, and her educational background in political science, made her perspective and interview extremely valuable. She was able to articulate themes, ideas, and points of view that the younger, less experienced participants were not able to. She was able to identify a feminist message in *Formation*: "I slay, we slay, you gon' slay." She believes Beyoncé's use of the word 'we' in her lyrics is an intersectional rallying cry to speak to the African American community at large on issues that celebrities typically would not give attention to, such as police brutality, health and resource disparities in and poor communities.

Alexis was also able to articulate why she thinks Beyoncé's version of feminism is more compelling for young African American women. In her interview, she tied many of the themes and messages in Beyoncé's video, *Formation*, to racial consciousness.

"...She was not only Black but she was a Black woman owning her Blackness...For instance, let's say her Afro. There was a while where I was still kind of struggling wearing my hair natural and it's just like if Beyoncé can wear an Afro, I can wear an Afro. So, it was kind of one of those things like I can be myself because I see a performer who is being herself."

*Sharla.* Sharla is a 21-year-old college junior at Georgia State University, pursuing her bachelor's degree in journalism. She was able to tie the imagery used in Beyoncé's *Formation* video into current disparity issues that affect African American communities.

"So I was noticing in the *Formation* video and- I don't know. I've always noticed it like how the water was up high or whatever, but I didn't think about it until just now like I don't know if that was kind of like a reference back to when Katrina happened and everything and I think that's really important. Because a lot of times-like Katrina is done, but like there are still very significant issues surrounding that that affected Black people that needs to be talked about and those some issues is kind of like similar to like what's happening with Flint, you know."

When asked how Beyoncé's portrayal of race makes her feel, Sharla said,

"Great, I like I think more people need to do that- more Black people. She's an iconic figure. Like if she were out here just doing whatever and not really caring... she's so careful with how she puts herself out to the world and I feel like that's very important. A lot of people criticize her for it, but if she weren't so careful, like it -it could be really

detrimental to use as Black people. It's the same thing as like Obama or Michelle. They have to be careful and intricate about how they put themselves out."

Sharla and I had a discussion about why Beyoncé's version of feminism resonates with her.

"Beyoncé's expression of feminism is very compelling...Feminism is about being equal and being ok with being equal and what I think she pushes and I think some people question her feminism because she is married, because she does have kids, because she's still fitting into those normal roles, but like the biggest thing that sets her apart is that she has her own empire, but I think people don't realize that feminism-with feminism the whole point of a feminist is being allowed to make your own choice about what you want to do. The whole point of feminism is being able to have the choice and Beyoncé constantly pushes that... she can humble herself enough to be whoever she wants to be and I think that's really important."

*Nina.* Nina is a 22-year-old college senior, graduating in the spring. She is from Oakland, California. When asked about how Beyoncé and her messages influences how she sees herself, Nina said, "It gives me a chance to see myself and it shows that not all Black women are the same." I asked if she was referring to stereotypes she responded, "Yeah! We're not all hyper sexual, aversive, bitter, or angry. She shows relatable and realistic Black women. Beyoncé's messages are uplifting and give me a burst of energy to be happy. They motivated me to be happy and try and conquer the world and all of my dreams."

When asked about Black female identity, Nina said, "I love the way she shows the emotions of Black women, because like we're always shown as being really hard or really crazy. There's not middle for normal human emotion. It's normal to feel heartache, heart break and

disappointment in relationship. Just don't let it mess with your paper.” She seems to believe that Beyoncé genuinely wants to uplift women in the African American community and produces music with a Black feminist message to empower, motivate, and uplift her audiences.

*Jasmine.* Jasmine is a 22-year-old senior graduating from Georgia State University this coming spring. Her undergraduate minor was a specialization in media marketing, and public relations. From her academic background, she was able to describe Beyoncé's artistic aesthetic and how her art form resonates with her audiences. Jasmine also articulated how regardless of song choice, Beyoncé's elaborate set design, her back up dancers, and her band speak to female unity, empowerment, and Black female motivation. She was one of my earlier interviews and was able to speak to the visual aesthetics and artistic symbolism she uses in her performances and why the nuances of symbolism resonated with her. She also articulated how there are things that Beyoncé does as a part of her artistry that could be considered politically conscious. Jasmine said, “Beyoncé's visually cohesive choreography, her all female band, and her all female back up dancers, promotes unity, equality, and the validation of struggle for African American women.” Jasmine went on to say,

“I know that she originally had walked up to the Grammy's with the mothers of like the fallen children of like Trayvon Martin and Eric Garner and things like that... When your favorite musicians agree and promotes equality and promotes, you know, like togetherness and like healing in the Black community and like healing for Black women, it's really dope that she actually did speak out on it because it's something that I agree with.”

Jasmine was the first of the participants to articulate a pattern that I saw with many of my participants. She actually knew of some little-known facts about Beyoncé's career that speaks to

Black feminism. Jasmine knew that Beyoncé performed with an all-female band and all female back up dancers. She also knew that Beyoncé had donated money to the mothers of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. She became a fan of Beyoncé during her time with Destiny's Child. Seeing Beyoncé in her girl group helped solidify the message of Black female unity for Jasmine at an early age. Jasmine feels as though she has grown up with Beyoncé's music, and because of this she has been able to see Beyoncé evolve as an artist and in the messages, that Beyoncé is able to convey through her lyrics and performances.

*Jenise.* Jenise is a 21-year-old college junior from New Orleans, Louisiana. Much of her identification with Beyoncé's latest album, *Lemonade*, came from Beyoncé's performance of *Formation*. Jenise feels as though Beyoncé is a symbol of Black womanhood and has been for some time, however her performance in *Formation* solidified Beyoncé as a symbol of Black women's liberation.

“Beyoncé addresses the issues of police brutality. She's trying to get like the Black community together to operate in different ways to like over power with more intelligent stuff, I think. Because the way the world is going now, like we need more successful Black people being successful and educated and unity and love, so that's really big. People have been seeing that in the past years and now that it's coming forward, this is a really good thing.”

In regards to Black female sexuality, Jenise mentioned her traditional southern upbringing as something that helped ground her understanding of her own sexuality. Her mother raised Jenise and her four other siblings as a single mother. Despite the contradictions that could be evident in her upbringing, Jenise said, “Because I feel like sexuality is kind of like a suppressed thing. Like people are scared to talk about it and then when Beyoncé was so open

about it, they were like, oh, okay, then maybe it's ok to do this and maybe it's ok to talk about it." She went on to describe Beyoncé' as a type of fearless leader that can act as a catalyst for political and social change for African American women.

"Beyoncé is like a symbol for the Black women community. Like whatever we're thinking, she's probably saying in a song or in an interview or something of that sort. And she's really strong and open minded. She talks about different things. Like she's not just suppressed to certain things or I have to be this way or that way, I have to say this or that."

As we discussed how Black female sexuality could be evolving into a topic where people do not feel like it is a taboo subject, Jenise began to discuss how Beyoncé's portrayal of race made her feel more beautiful. When asked for more insight into that Jenise said,

"Because some people be like, oh, you're darker, you're lighter, like you're not as cuter as that person and you're not as cute as that person. Mostly by the music that we're listening to today like the Black women are hoes, and this, that, and the third. But Beyoncé embraces Black beauty and make you see that like you're beautiful regardless of your skin color and how you look. Like all women are beautiful."

*Leslie.* Leslie is a 23-year-old college senior, graduating in the spring. She is from New Orleans, Louisiana. She is the middle child of 5. She grew up in a traditional, southern, Christian home. Her parents divorced at the age of seven, and she saw both of her parents struggle to maintain a since of unity for their family and struggle to be the breadwinners in their respective homes. "There's been stereotypes about, you know, Black single moms being like welfare queens and this-this is an issue that jut hits homes for me, you know. It's what I grew up in." She went on to say,

“...as someone who was raised mostly in two separate households, I can look at Beyoncé and be inspired. She was raised in a two-parent home with both parents working and her daughter is raised in the same type of home. She inspires other women. She embraces her culture and who she is and Beyoncé is one of her kind. She represents a lot of what the African-American- the women in the African American community want to voice and there is not- there are not many like Beyoncé in our culture. She is a light that reflects off of you, white in the same industry as her. So, I think that she advocates not just for women’s rights, but she advocates for African Americans and she’s proud-very proud of who she is and despite, you know, the instances where the people said she tried to bleach her skin and all of these things, I think at the end of the day, she’s true to herself and she understands what it means or at least tries to understand what it means to be African American and to be in the middle-class gateway.”

Leslie was one of my few participants that was able to express the contradicting dichotomy that can be seen in Beyoncé’s portrayal of class. Leslie said,

“I think it influences in a way that Black women-every woman wants to feel sexy, but for Black women there is a sense of like having to do more to feel that way. Society has made us feel as though out raw, authentic, beautiful, true beings are not enough and so I think through Beyoncé’s career she influences Black women to love who they -love who they are despite the money, the power, the fame, but I think it’s hard because she’s privileged among many and I think that has an effect and an impact on how women see themselves because she can enhance her body, you know because she has the means to do so and she has the resources. She’s portraying a message to do that and she has those

resources and the majority of her audience does not, then that can be almost degrading rather than uplifting.”

*Ashley.* Ashley is a 21-year-old college senior, graduating in the spring. She is from Decatur, Georgia. She has been dating her boyfriend for a little over a year. She articulated a complex relationship between her fandom and Beyoncé’s performances and the messages that she conveys. When asked about how Beyoncé’s portrays race, she said, “Her lyrics represent a strong Black woman, but her image doesn’t. She doesn’t look like me and has no features of a Black woman. She could be influencing Black women to be white washed.” Despite her reading of colorism and a lack of acknowledgement of colorism on Beyoncé’s behalf, she still felt empowered and uplifted by other Beyoncé messages.

Her romantic relationship leads the researcher to believe that it heavily impacted her perspective on questions related to Black male patriarchy and feminism. Her favorite Beyoncé performance is *XO*, which is a love ballad in which Ashley is able to related

“... to only seeing the man she loves, and focusing 100% on the relationship.” She went on to say that, “If you’re not in Beyoncé’s socioeconomic class, you less worthy and less deserving of love.” When asked about sexual choices she said, “Beyoncé is the ultimate wifey type: someone who would be a great wife, and she is sexually liberated within the scope of her marriage.”

Ashley was able to pragmatize the issue of female empowerment messages in light of the perception of dependence of a man in a romantic relationship. Despite recognizing the potential for Beyoncé’s messages to uplift and empower women, she takes a moment to mention the impact that messages of Black patriarchy have had on her in her personal relationships.

“Even if he is doing dirt, like just because he’s a guy like he has the control and power to say I’m not doing it and you have to accept that I’m not doing it period...I think it can be empowering for women that want to married, for women that, you know, actually-that’s like, you know their main goal. They want to work on being a really good wife. I feel like Beyoncé is a good role model for women who want that.”

*Jaime.* Jaime is a 22-year-old undergraduate senior graduating in the spring. She is majoring in psychology. She is from Cheyenne, Wyoming and has already received an associate’s degree. The development of her ideas about feminism came from authors such as bell hooks and the course she took in gender studies. It could be from this classical understanding of feminism that she is able to articulate the oppression that she has experienced as sexism and male patriarchy. She volunteers to mentor middle school aged girls from high risk environments. From her personal experience and from mentoring young girls, she has been able to see how the oppression of sexism has pervasive consequences for young girls. When asked about her experience with sexism, she said,

“I guess me being a female I’ve felt the oppression, so I feel like it’s important because I feel like the reason why people are against female empowerment, it doesn’t make sense to me. It’s not validated. There’s like no real evidence, so I feel like it’s important to uplift girls because of how they feel less than because they are female. Maybe because I volunteer with young girls and I’ve seen like it being a problem early off. Like young girls feeling incapable because I hear it in schools, oh you run like a girl or that’s a girl’s color. It’s like they’re four and five, so I feel like I see it affecting young generations very young.”

When asked about Beyoncé being a role model for Black girls around the world, Leslie said, “She is a very popular role model and a lot of times, I guess, people might look up to her and compare themselves. When she did the Super Bowl and she did the whole performance with Black Lives Matter and the fist up and I feel like she challenges the race and retro stereotypes and supports being comfortable being Black.” It can be argued that Jaime’s background in psychology allows for her reading of the impact of suggestive messages for the demonization of Black women in mainstream society.

*Deja.* Deja is a 22-year-old college senior, graduating this spring. She is a political science major with aspirations of going to law school and concentrating in criminal law. She considers herself a hopeless romantic and finds meaning in the messages in Beyoncé’s lyrics such as, “craving love, and aspiring to a pure form of love and the hopeless romantic in me would like to have something of the such.” When asked about her romantic aspiration, she said that, “Beyoncé has made something to look forward to or like a standard-she created a standard in relationships that I want to have.”

In addition to maintaining the standard of heteronormative romantic relationships, Deja also explained to me how Beyoncé is changing the perspectives of Black female sexuality. When asked about these changing perspectives, she said,

“Like I think people felt more comfortable with embracing their sexuality how like it’s kind of forbidden sometimes for women to, you know, talk about their desires sexually, or their needs sexually or what they do sexually. As a guy, can casually like, you know it’s comfortable-it’s cool for them to say, you know, what you did or what you’re doing or how you feel about it. So, I think a lot of people can take it as empowering like, you know, she helps them embrace their sexuality more comfortably.”

When asked about Beyoncé's portrayal of race, Deja connected her understanding of that to certain political activity that aligns itself with Black Lives Matter.

"I think in this present time-in this present with her doing that, it-you know, it kind of makes it feel, you know, like we have support with the issues of people dying and, you know, people being killed by the police. It makes you feel like celebrities-she more supportive and then it makes me feel like my actions are not being in vain because, you know, we little people on the ground we do need help sometimes from celebrities. So, it does like, you know, give me an easier feeling, a more comfortable feeling I guess."

Somehow Deja was able to connect her recent political activity to Beyoncé's actions and messages in her performances. Furthermore, the rest of her interview had a political perspective to her experiences.

*Vanessa.* Vanessa is a 21-year-old college junior from Atlanta. She is majoring in sociology and was able to align her interview to ideas and messages regarding women's empowerment. Vanessa grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood and was consistently one of the few Black students that attended her high school. I asked Vanessa about that experience and she said that it grounded her to some degree to feminism. I inquired about where Vanessa got her ideas and information about feminism from. She responded, "Everyday experiences in white America as an African American woman." When asked about Beyoncé's portrayal of gender, Vanessa said,

"She teaches me how to separate the hyper sexuality from real sexuality and it gives me permission to be bolder with my sexuality... Well, feminism obviously like she's one of the symbols for it and being comfortable with sexuality and things like that. And I think she did as far as gender issues, like she just gave women a more powerful voice and just

empowered them with her music and her performances...I think she literally just highlights to power that a lot of women don't know that they have, I guess, or she kind of brings it forth-or because I-I don't know how to like properly explain it, but she just definite gives them a voice to something that they thought was impossible to have. So, for example like with people saying like you're a mom or why do you do those things, like why are you sexual. She was like it's okay to be a parent and to also like explore your sexuality and stuff."

*Lynn.* Lynn was the second youngest participant with the second least amount of academic experience. As a sophomore in college, she disclosed that most of the information she got about feminism was from the internet. She is from the south, which further solidifies her allegiance with Beyoncé because they are both, "southern Black women." Lynn selected the *Get Me Bodied* video as her favorite. Lynn was only 6 years old when the album that features *Get Me Bodied* was released. Lynn speaks favorably about her family and her background and physically got excited when watching the ten-year-old video clip together. She gave an anecdote and the researcher was able to see how this performance conveyed feminist messages to a young girl. "Honestly, I just have so many memories of being a child and performing this video with my two brothers. We knew all the choreography and had the *B'Day* experience cd/dvd combo... and she has all her best friends in the video. I have so many good memories with my family and that album." When asked about the feminist messages in the performance, Lynn said, "The video is more woman centered, and men are the dancers and are kind of like the props for the powerful women in the video."

She went on to articulate how viewing the video as a child and watching it as an adult, her perspective had changed. "Watching the video now gives me more perspective to what she

was doing back then. I see more representation in there. She had some bigger, more plus-sized women in her video. She has some references to the LGBT community, talking about, you know, snapping for the kids. And I think she really knows her fan base and that's why she has that there." Lynn was most expressive about the Black female unity that Beyoncé's represents in her albums, videos, and performances.

"So when you're like at a Beyoncé concert and you're getting that full Beyoncé experience, it's all women everywhere. All the women are in power...So when you're in her concert, you get that experience of like the power comes through in her songs more. She's always in a power stance. Even if the lyrics don't call women to power, the video or her performance of the song will."

*Lisa.* Lisa is a 20-year-old college junior. She has been dating her boyfriend for a little over a year. She currently volunteers for a student organization that specializes in managing student based performances. She also sits on several student activity committees at Georgia State University. She looks forward to completing her degree in marketing, and wants to focus on music media and advertising. When asked about how Beyoncé's portrayal of race makes her feel, Lisa said,

"It definitely makes me more proud to be a Black woman. I guess it's kind of like a relief. For me it's kind of like a breath of fresh air because we've had several multifaceted and talented artists, you know, that are Black women. Jill Scott, Lauryn Hill, Diana Ross, but we haven't really had one like Beyoncé, who people really refer to as like the greatest performer of this time that could reach so many different people and different demographics and her being a Black woman it makes me very proud. I don't know. Like I just love her. I feel like she's basically a representative of us in many ways

and we don't realize it because we don't-you know, we don't select that, but considering the fact that she's what some people who have no idea about Black culture see repeatedly and constantly and she's kind of, you know, representing us a little bit better now than maybe before."

*Tayla.* Tayla is the youngest of the participants with the least academic experience at 18 years old. She is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in sociology. Her age is an element that really gave more insight into the influence of pop iconography. Beyoncé was already well on her way to being a global superstar by the time Tayla was born. It can be argued that through much of Tayla's experiences, Beyoncé's lyrics have served as a soundtrack through Tayla's trials and tribulations. Tayla said,

"You know, being in college is kind of difficult to motivate yourself alone, like by yourself just to be solely self-motivated. So, the song, *Freedom*, like it helps me like sometimes, I'll not want to go to class or something and I'm just thinking about like, okay, you know, I have to go and then that song just like makes me want to get out of bed. I'm an African-American and I'm a girl, so for me it makes sense to want to be free, but then you have to think about all of the chains and how the society has you in bondage, how you're supposed to amount to certain things, but Beyoncé is basically saying, you know, you can go past that and be free in society."

Tayla's age can explain how susceptible youth can be to iconic influences. When asked about how Beyoncé portrays Black womanhood, she said, "Beyoncé expresses a classy side of being Black, and she gives other women permission to be Black like me... She is basically telling you like, you know, live your life the way you want to. Occupy your own space, however you want. If anybody has a problem with it, they don't, have to be around you." I found it very

interesting that Tayla felt like she needed permission to live in her skin and embraces Beyoncé's race commentary. She comes from a middle-class family and briefly spoke of the rare occasions that she would receive encouragement from other Black women. When asked about how Beyoncé's portrayal of race makes her feel as a Black woman, Tayla said,

“It makes me feel like I can do anything I want. Not so much anything I want, but like anything that I set my mind as a woman I know that I can achieve it because growing up you never really had women in your life-Black women in your face telling you, you know, can do whatever you want, you can be whatever you want. It's certain jobs that we're supposed to stick to and Beyoncé is like, no, you can achieve whatever goals you have set for yourself.”

*Kia.* Kia is a 23-year-old senior and is graduating in the spring. She has already earned her associates degree and is looking forward to applying to a master's program in the fall. When asked about how Beyoncé's messages make her feel empowered, Kia said, “I feel empowered, especially for the fact that I think a lot of women are kind of scared to show or like previously were scared to show their sexuality, so they had like a figure in the public that isn't afraid to and does in in a classy way and isn't victimized for her sexiness.” When asked about Beyoncé's messages impact on Black female sexual identity, Kia, said, “I guess it makes me feel good like we talked about empowerment, so as a Black woman it does make me feel very good to see, you know, one of my own out there putting on a show that the world is mesmerized by and she's absolutely beautiful, so it definitely makes me feel good about myself.”

*Table 4.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND CATEGORIES*

Research Questions	Categories
<p>Does Beyoncé’s brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• IDEAL BLACK WOMANHOOD</li> <li>• BLACK FEMINIST MESSAGES IN LYRICS</li> </ul>
<p>How does Beyoncé’s treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy, and Black male patriarchy influence her audience’s awareness of Black female identity?</p>	<p>Race</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ACTION BASED</li> <li>• SELF-EVIDENT</li> </ul> <p>Class</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ASPIRE TO BE UPPER CLASS</li> </ul> <p>Gender</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SUPPORT EQUALITY REGARDLESS OF GENDER OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION</li> </ul> <p>White Supremacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SUPPORT ISSUES, IDEAS, AND PEOPLE WHO REFLECT THE NEEDS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY</li> </ul> <p>Black Male Patriarchy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BLACK WOMEN ARE NECESSARY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY AND TO BLACK MEN</li> </ul>
<p>How do young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism?</p>	<p>Beyoncé</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ICON</li> <li>• ROLE MODEL</li> </ul> <p>Black Male Patriarchy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• WORTHY OF LOVE, EQUALITY, AND APPRECIATION</li> <li>• SELF RELIANT, SELF SUFFICIENT, AND INDEPENDENT</li> </ul> <p>Feminism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• BLACK FEMALE UNITY</li> </ul>

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|--|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PERFORMANCE BASED FEMINISM</li> </ul> |
|--|--|

## 4.2 OVERVIEW OF CATEGORIES AND THEMES

The purpose of this study sought to examine the influences of Beyoncé's brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explored how the lyrical content and sexual imagery of Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influences the perspective of millennials on Black female sexuality, Black female identity, and agency juxtaposed against white supremacy, Black male patriarchy, and disembodied Black Feminism. In this study, the author used the term "disembodied feminism," to identify ideologies, characteristics, and ways of existing that have been crafted by non-Black women of what Black women should be. Typically, disembodied feminism comes from ideas of Black patriarchy, and white supremacy, and argues that the Black woman should put herself last and least for the betterment of her community and culture. Furthermore, from the ideas of respectability politics, there are notions of good Black womanhood, where she must be as pristine as her white counterparts regardless of common Black circumstances of oppression such as poverty.

The study targets African American women ages 18-25 living and attending colleges and universities in the Metropolitan Atlanta area that self-identified as Beyoncé fans. The study exclusively focused on students enrolled in college. A qualitative research approach was used for this study and semi structured interviews were used to collect data. The researcher used a narrative approach to contextualize the inquiry. The findings have implications for several

arenas of research including sexual communication studies, Black male female sexuality, relationships and gender studies.

#### **4.2.1 BEYONCE'S BRAND OF FEMINISM**

It was clear in the study's findings that Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonated more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism. The researcher had hypothesized early on in the study that young African American women would be able to identify with positive and affirming messages from a celebrated African American popular icon. Data analysis revealed two categories in regards to participant's understanding Beyoncé's brand of feminism and how it could resonate more with African American women over previous iterations of feminism. Of the two categories, one is very much rooted in Beyoncé' as the icon and the other is rooted in the experience of the participants. The findings suggest and indicate that Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonates more with African American women because Beyoncé herself has come to represent Ideal Black Womanhood; or because Beyoncé, in her lyrics and performances, speaks to issues, experiences, and emotions with which only other African American women would understand and identify with. These were the most common responses from the participants in regards to how Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonated with them.

When asked about how Beyoncé's brand of feminism impacts her Tayla said,

“I respect everything Beyoncé does like as far as expressing her sexuality, but I choose to express mine in a different way. I'm not so much going to sit here and sing songs like *Partition*. That's just not me, but it does tell me to, you know, like express yourself as who you are and if you want to express yourself as a woman, then you do that and you do it in whatever way you want.”

When asked the same question and Beyoncé's brand of feminism, Ashley said, "I kind of agree with her points. Even if I never thought about them until she brought them up, she actually brought them to my attention. I really was never interested in feminism, so when I, you know listened to Beyoncé and what she was saying, you know we can be equal to me and why do-why do parents teach their daughters to aspire to marry but don't teach their sons the same thing. So, it just opened my mind and made me think more about it."

#### ***4.2.1.1 IDEAL BLACK WOMANHOOD***

The concept of ideal Black womanhood is something that is briefly discussed in the literature review. In the literature review, the researcher gives a brief description of the social dimensions that were expected of White women. African American women sought out this virtue of true womanhood, although the circumstances were expressly different between races but also between classes. During the turn of the century, African American women were never able to achieve the legal and social protection that white women were given. Although white women rallied for abolition and suffrage, it was not done with the intent to elevate the African American women to the status of the White woman.

In regards to Beyoncé's brand of feminism, the first category is what the researcher considers Black female unity. The fact the Beyoncé invests in an all-female band when she tours, employs all female dancers and her lyrics about Black female unity speaks to her ability to walk in her own feminism. Beyoncé's ability to walk in her feminism as a model for her audience to walk in their own feminism in nuanced ways. If that means patronizing woman owned businesses, supporting other women in their ventures, or using words of encouragement

to support other women, that can be considered a practical, pragmatic way of walking and developing feminist practices.

As African American women and other women of color were denied equal access to the means of equality, such as education, employment, and healthcare; it became clear that there would have to be an evolution of womanhood in order for African American and other women of color to be included. At the turn of the century, the definition of womanhood was an upper class white woman, typically born into a socioeconomic status where work outside the home was not a requirement and was usually frowned upon. True women were to be wives and mothers only. They were the charges of their fathers, brothers or husbands. Their very identity was tied to the man in their life. As political change began to cultivate in America, minority and lower class women, banded together to demand equality not only for themselves, but also for their community. Women of color have typically been a part of two income households, have maintained their nuclear and extended family networks, and have maintained and persevered through adversity to nurture their community to do the same.

As the participants discussed Beyoncé as the representation of ideal Black womanhood, they were recognizing her characteristics that have always been evident in African American women and African American communities. The researcher interpreted the findings to speak to not necessarily, Beyoncé the person as the ideal Black woman, but Beyoncé the icon. More importantly, the researcher found that the participants were able to see themselves in Beyoncé's messages and are able to see themselves as being capable of being the ideal Black woman. Participants felt motivated, inspired, and encouraged through her imagery, lyrics, and messages to achieve their dreams, build an empire, and demand authority and respect in their lives. When asked about how Beyoncé's makes her feel about the participant's womanhood, Tayla said this,

“It makes me feel like I can do anything I want like. Not so much as anything I want, but like anything that I set my mind as a woman I know that I can achieve it because growing up you never really have like -- well, I had my grandma, but growing up you never really had women in your life -- Black women in your face telling you, you know, can do whatever you want, you can be whatever you want. It's certain jobs that we're supposed to stick to and Beyoncé is like, no, you can achieve whatever goals you have set for yourself.”

The power in Tayla's statement that it is rare for a Black woman to encourage other young Black women and instill in them that they are capable, is only a testament to the strength of patriarchal norms that Black women have been fighting since abolition. If an 18-year-old like Tayla, is only hearing affirming and encouraging messages through lyrics, performances and imagery, it is clear how Beyoncé is coming to be deified and referred as the ideal Black woman by the African American community, and especially to female millennials.

When asked about Beyoncé's portrayal of womanhood, Deja encompassed her ideas about race in her response.

“I guess you could say that it empowers me. It gives me positive feelings. I don't-it doesn't make me feel like less of a woman. It makes me feel-embrace my womanhood and my being Black and a woman, I guess, because with her wearing braids and stuff like that that it's okay to do that and it's okay to look that way and feel comfortable looking that way. It influences the way Black women look at themselves because a lot of people had an issue with Beyoncé initially with colorism. They felt like she was-you know, she was, you know, this light-skinned woman with nice eyes and wore extensions and got her-dyed her hair blonde to look more white, but when she started, you know, wearing

the braids and starting to identify more as a Black woman, it made Black women identify with her better because initially they felt like they couldn't identify with—some felt like they couldn't identify with Beyoncé because she tried to have a more European look, but after she started embracing, you know, more African American looks like with the braids and like the performances with the braided hair like a mind of her own and was twirling around. It made people feel more comfortable with how they are because everybody does have that hair texture that she has and stuff like that. So, it's like yea, like she identifies with me being able to wear braids and wearing braids.”

#### ***4.2.1.2 BLACK FEMINIST MESSAGES IN LYRICS***

The second category regarding Beyoncé's brand of feminism, speaks directly to her lyrics. The researcher considers this to be performance based feminism. Many of the researcher's participants actively identified with Beyoncé's lyrics in several of her songs at any given time. The high level of consumption of Beyoncé's music speaks to her ability to reach and resonate with the participants. Beyoncé's lyrics are written from a Black woman's perspective, therefore, some of my participants assumed that regardless of the song's subject matter, Beyoncé' is performing from a Black woman's perspective. This perspective allows her to sing of love, longing, betrayal, hardships, and joy. This is the same perspective that the early Blues women would use in their performances to convey solidarity and validation to their audiences. Performance based feminism will allow Beyoncé to always resonate with her fan base because the researcher assumes that she will always perform, write lyrics, and produce albums from a Black woman's perspective.

The second category of reoccurring patterns in the findings was the participants' alignment with Beyoncé's messages. Beyoncé's perspective of being a Black woman is a

constant factor in her lyrics, performances, and imagery. Therefore, her messages will always speak to the needs and experiences of African American women. Although the African American community is not monolithic by any means, there is commonality in the certain experiences of racism, and sexism. This commonality speaks to the everyday reality of trials and tribulations of African American women and other women of color. Participants agreed that Beyoncé's expression of longing, love, and joy resonates with them because she is expressing her experience as a Black woman.

When asked how Beyoncé's performances resonate with her, Nina said,

“I guess because for the conservative people I think Beyoncé is very -- when she's performing or in her videos, she's very -- she kind of takes on a different like personality as opposed to like when you see her in interviews or when you see her, you know, just talking on camera and so I think that some mothers might see her performance and not really want their daughter to see it because they might think that their daughter would go out and, you know, want to dress the way that Beyoncé dresses or try and, you know, reenact the way Beyoncé acts. I personally don't think it's negative. I think she -- I think she's very empowering because she likes to bring women together. Like, for example, her band is an all-female band and I can appreciate that because she's empowering women and showing women that -- showing that women can come together and work together and be successful together, so.”

In the findings, none of my participant's felt that Beyoncé's sexuality or the way that she performs it has any negative implications for the African American community. In fact, Beyoncé's performance seems to encourage an embracing of all.

## 4.2.2 TREATMENT OF SITES OF OPPRESSION

Concerning Beyoncé's treatment of sites of oppression, such as race, class, gender, white supremacy, and Black male patriarchy, several multitier themes began to emerge. It became clear that what the participants focused on during their favorite Beyoncé performance, was just as important as what they did not notice or chose to ignore or excuse. Therefore, the researcher tried to ask probing questions after viewing the clip to see how participants reconciled their fanaticism with messages and ideas that were conveyed that could show Beyoncé in an unfavorable light. Many participants refused to say anything negative about their idol, but there was detailed, and rich data found in the discomfort in addressing issues that Beyoncé may not recognize in her lyrics of performances. In regards to the exploration of the differences in power in relationships between men and women, Deja said, "Like yeah, in *If I Were a Boy*, how men get away with doing a lot more than necessarily the woman could, so like if the gender roles could be reversed, she would have that power that they have in relationships that women don't normally don't per se." Tayla said,

"The way that she explains the oppression of women in the relationship. How, you know, women are supposed to sit back and be pretty and not do too much and not think too much are not be too much. So, she kind of like pushes that envelope and is like, you know what, we can do everything y'all can do and probably do it better and we're going to do it better."

### 4.2.2.1 RACE

#### 4.2.2.1.1 ACTION BASED RACIAL RECOGNITION

In regards to race, two categories emerged: one is that raced based recognition is action based, the second is that race is self-evident. The action based category speaks to Beyoncé's

charitable donations to the mothers of children murdered unlawfully, and her speaking out against police brutality, and other actions that automatically aligned her to the Black Lives Matter Movement Organization. It is through these actions that the participants assume that she is portraying race. The topic of race provided very in depth data and raised questions on Blackness as a performance and how do we identify it and how do we expect it to be portrayed. How do we anticipate Black womanhood to be performed and how do we identify it? Is Blackness something that is inherited in birth or is it something that must be performed in order to be recognized? These were some of the lingering questions that the researcher made notations of in her secondary journal.

Jasmine mentioned that her favorite Beyoncé performance was of her most recent Video Music Awards performance on the MTV network. Jasmine said that Beyoncé arrived to the awards show with the mothers of slain children, Trayvon Martin, and Michael Brown. As she was speaking it was clear to the researcher that Beyoncé's actions spoke to a political solidarity that is very valuable to Jasmine. She said,

“It's important to me because in general I really don't care about like how celebrities feel. Like I don't care about celebrities being politically charged because sometimes they might not agree with you and that's something that you don't always necessarily want to hear or see, but when, you know, one of your favorite musicians agrees and promotes equality and promotes, you know, like togetherness and like healing in the Black community and like healing for Black women and things like that, it's just like, okay, that's really dope that she actually did speak out on it because it's something that I agree with... I think it's one of those things where if I can relate to something that an artist says

or does and they pretty much give me feedback through their art that that's something that they also relate to, it makes it more relatable.”

When asked about the impact of Beyoncé’s portrayal of race and what actions Beyoncé takes to align herself with the African American community, Deja said,

“I mean she-recently-I didn’t-I wasn’t there physically, but I seen some videos where she put like all the names of the people who were killed by copses and that was pretty powerful because, you know, she does have fans who aren’t Black. So, she kind of exposes that to people who may not care about the issue by doing things like that or, you know coming out and saying that she supports Black Lives Matter or ever with *Formation*. She said the thing about the nose and the hot sauces and she had Hilary Clinton talking about she got hot sauce in her bag and we know she don’t got no hot sauce in her bag, but it’s just the fact that it kind of makes people want to relate to, you know, Black people or Black issues more so.”

#### 4.2.2.1.2 SELF EVIDENT

The second category was that Beyoncé was born an African American woman so her very existence, how she dances, and how she carries herself in her personal and private life, and how she interacts with the world solidifies her as unquestionably Black. This was very surprising to me because in 2011, Beyoncé did an ad for L’Oréal Cosmetics and in the ad, she declared that she is of African American, Native American, and French ancestry. The researcher never understood the need for Beyoncé to purposefully declare mixed race ancestry, when many of the other celebrities, such as Jennifer Lopez, and Eva Longoria, that were advertising the exact same product usually only spoke of their dominant heritage, such as Mexican, or Puerto Rican.

With that being said, many of my participants were very young in 2011 and probably do not remember the campaign with the same vividness that the researcher has.

The concept of race was a very interesting topic for discussion with the participants because for the participants who listed *Formation* as their favorite performance identified Beyoncé's most recent album with her "coming out" into her blackness.

Both Leslie and Alexis commented, "Beyoncé has never been as Black as she is now." When asked about how participants perceived Beyoncé's portrayal of race prior to the release of the *Lemonade* album, Nina, Jasmine, Deja, Lisa, Kia, and Lynn associated her performing for the Obama's inaugural activities with the alignment to the African American communities. Other participants considered her an amazing pop artist whose talent and fame allowed her to surpass the physical properties of race and achieve whiteness. The researcher is using the term, "whiteness," to describe not the physical perception of what it means to be Black, but rather the opportunity to be immune to issues that often plague African American communities and also the luxury of not having to be aware, cognizant, or affected by the problems that average African Americans face on a daily basis.

Many participants gave Beyoncé racial immunity prior to the release of *Formation* and the *Lemonade* album because of her celebrity and their relationship with her as her fans. It was very interesting to hear the arguments that participants used to justify Beyoncé's previously less political work,

"Beyoncé couldn't talk about Black issues when she was in Destiny's Child, because she was under the control of her father...She couldn't march during any of the protests because it was too dangerous...She never mentioned her blackness because it could backlash and ruin her career... I don't care why she wasn't doing it before, but I'm glad

she is now,” was Jenise’s response as the researcher tried to complicate their fidelity to Beyoncé as a fan and their alignment to their race. Sharla feels as though, “she’s always embraced her race to a certain degree, but I think recently in *Lemonade* she really embraced it and she -- and it was just kind of in your face like she didn’t care, especially in *Formation* like she didn’t care. She’s like, yeah, I’m Black, you know, and what -- like this is who I am.”

#### 4.2.2.2 CLASS

##### 4.2.2.2.1 ASPIRE TO BE UPPER CLASS

In regards to race, many of the researcher’s participants were not able to articulate a specific instance where Beyoncé references various strata of class. It is clear that Beyoncé has experienced unimaginable financial success. In 2016, Beyoncé and her husband, Jay-Z were listed as Forbes highest paid couple, having combined earnings of over 1 billion dollars. She also reportedly earned 3 million dollars a day during the release and tour of her most recent album *Lemonade*. With her successful career during her time with Destiny’s Child, in addition to her solo tours and production after the separation of the group, it is clear that Beyoncé belongs to the class of the elite. This could be why she rarely discusses issues regarding class and wealth disparities. The pattern that the researcher saw most frequently among her participants were the reasons why they understood why Beyoncé does not need to address issues of class. The findings show that because Beyoncé is in an elite class, and she is such an iconic figure, the participants do not think that she needs to speak to issues of class because she is a part of the class that most people aspire to be in. Furthermore, Beyoncé’s generosity and philanthropy speak to her class status. Deja said,

“She opens doors for so many females-Black females at that. You know, she gives a lot of people opportunity, not to mention that she donated all that money to, you know,

Black Lives Matter families. That's significant because you have a lot of celebrities who just stand up and say that they support them, but where are the finances, you know.

That's a big part of, you know, supporting somebody is the finances that come behind you. She supports them and then she's not always-she didn't come out and say I gave this person this amount of money. It got leaked. So, it's not like she's, you know, one of those celebrities who just using it, you know for her benefit. It actually seems genuine and it makes her more relatable as a Black person, especially in these times where everything seems really divided. It lets you know that she stands with you."

Although, Jasmine does not recall Beyoncé speaking to class directly, she does pay attention to the differences in scenery in her videos that could speak to class. When asked how Beyoncé portrays class she said,

"Not unless she's talking about how to climb up in like socioeconomic status. So, you know, in *Diva* when she's talking about, hey, let me get my money type thing, you know, take it to another level, no passengers on my plane. Like she doesn't really touch on, hey, like -- hey, I know that I'm privileged because I'm here and I know that the people who listen to me are I guess -- over there, you know what I'm saying. I think she just talks about how to climb the ladder and maintain your way and like be hardworking, but in terms like -- I don't know. I don't -- I don't think she directly touches on it. I definitely think that she showcases people in different classes. I think that she showcases that -- she -- you know, a lot of like the ratchet and the hood and, you know, like being in the slums in Brazil obviously is one of them, but even like being in New Orleans and walking past like wig stores and seeing girls with blue hair and bright red lipstick, like it's just that kind of like hood culture that she's showcasing like, hey, this is where I came from."

Sharla on the other hand thinks Beyoncé leaves much to be desired in regards to her treatment of class. She said, “Maybe she should portray class more because -- because like if you watch her when she's talking about different things, I mean, I guess the topics that she talks about could be for any class, but at the same time what does she know about being poor? How can she speak about something that she doesn't have to worry about?” As Sharla's question resonated with the researcher, she had to adjust her line of questioning. The researcher understood that the participants' loyalty was to Beyoncé first, however it was very interesting as she adjusted her line of questioning. As it became clear that Beyoncé's messages of class many not be as purposeful as her messages of race, there are other aspects of class that are within Beyoncé's control. For example, Beyoncé's most recent concert tour tickets for her *Lemonade* album started at \$200 each. One would think that because Beyoncé's success and her wide fan base would ensure that the ticket pricing would reflect an opportunity for all classes to see her performance.

As the researcher probed about the idea that Beyoncé could lower her ticket prices to accommodate more of her fans financial situations, many participants pushed back to ensure that their loyalty to Beyoncé was not compromised. Lisa said, “She still has to make money... she has a family to support.” However, Lisa was well aware of the success of Beyoncé, her husband, sister and other family members and close business partners, like her former Destiny's Child band members. Yet she still believed that Beyoncé was somehow susceptible in the same cycle of employer and employee that average African American women are susceptible to.

#### **4.2.2.3 GENDER**

In regards to gender, findings indicate that Beyoncé primarily performs from the perspective of an African American woman. However, from the findings, the participants

identified that Beyoncé encourages the support of equality amongst the sexes, and genders regardless of sexual orientation. This is the only category that speaks directly to Beyoncé's portrayal of gender and was a universal category from the participants for the findings.

#### 4.2.2.3.1 SUPPORT EQUALITY REGARDLESS OF GENDER OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION

When Deja was asked about how Beyoncé portrays gender, she said,

“She recognizes that men get away with certain things like in the song *Yes* how this guy basically was talking to her, he was trying to approach her and then as soon as she didn't want to consent to sex, he was upset with it and that the first time that she said yes, it was like she never said no and girls can't-as if girls can't do that. That we're only meant to consent to things but not necessarily disagree...and that men are okay-like, you know, it's up to them if we consent or disagree on how they act and basically like-or *If I Were a Boy* how they can get away with being out all night and drinking with their friends and girls can't necessarily get away with that like that's a gender bias maybe.

When asked how Sharla feels about how Beyoncé's portrayal of gender, she said,

“I think she acknowledges that there are differences and then sometimes she like says like -- you know, she acknowledges them and she lets it be known she's okay with, you know, there being a little power in certain areas, I think, but then she also makes it known that... I guess, still look at me as like a woman, you know. Still -- I'm still a queen. I'm still -- I still reserve the right to have an opinion and do the same things as you. I think she -- I think she knows that we're seen as very sexual beings, you know, but I think she kind of takes -- she kind of is like reclaiming it, I guess, in a sense because it's like she decides

when she wants to be -- when she wants to bring that side out of herself or when she wants other women to bring that side out of themselves.”

The fact that many of the participants felt that Beyoncé’s messages on gender are empowering, motivating and speak to the push towards universal equality, that includes, all races, genders, and sexes, further motivates the author to argue that Beyoncé is speaking more from a womanist perspective than a feminist. The inclusion of different genders, and sexes further gives an intersectional perception of Beyoncé’s treatment of gender.

When asked about her interpretation of Beyoncé’s sexuality, Deja said, “I think her sexuality does influence me. I mean, personally I’m not going to say it sways me dramatically. I think that it does- it can make me feel, you know, more comfortable if I ever did feel uncomfortable about it. I think she probably could make me feel more comfortable. I’m a big fan of hers, so I trust her judgement to a certain extent.”

#### **4.2.2.4 WHITE SUPREMACY**

##### **4.2.2.4.1 SUPPORT ISSUES, IDEAS, AND PEOPLE WHO REFLECT THE NEEDS OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY**

In regards to white supremacy, the primary category that emerged was the need to support issues, ideas, and people who reflect the needs of the African American community. This category often came out of a response to Beyoncé’s speaking out against police brutality, donating money to the mothers of unlawfully slain children, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown, being present with Al Sharpton during George Zimmerman’s trial acquittal (Trayvon Martin’s murderer), inviting them to awards shows with her, having the mothers in her *Formation* video, and performing in militaristic attire. These points do not necessarily speak

directly to the issues of white supremacy, but they can be interpreted as messages in response to white supremacy.

When asked about the importance of police brutality as a political issue, Sharla responded,

“I mean, police brutality is going on throughout every day, you know, but especially during that time it just seemed like we were getting hit with it back to back to back on any media outlet. And then with women I think it's really important that a lot of women know to come together because a lot of times we may not talk to a woman because we may think oh, she's so pretty or, you know, we may have like these hidden agendas or insecurities, but for her to push for us to come together, I think that's really, really important.”

When Nina was asked about the political messages that Beyoncé conveys, she responded, “I think she does a really good job of focusing on current issues. I think just recent -- like her recent Super Bowl performance she did where she did *Formation* and they were like wearing the Black Panther outfits, I think that like -- I think that is what really caught my eye, too, about her -- I mean, her second Super Bowl performance. She does a really, really good job in her videos whether it's her lyrics, whether it's her visual or whether it's somebody in her performance or videos representing like a certain movement or a certain feeling or a certain -- like anything that's current. I think she does a really good job about doing that. Police brutality is a really big one. Feminism, women empowerment, women's rights, women's movement, Black Lives Matter, just -- just all of that. Like the most -- the more current things are some of the things that she represents really well that I like.”

#### 4.2.2.5 *BLACK MALE PATRIARCHY*

##### 4.2.2.5.1 BLACK WOMEN ARE NECESSARY IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY AND TO BLACK MEN

In regards to Black male patriarchy, the conversation with the researcher's participants circulated around being in relationships with Black men and the hardships that one could encounter in the relationship. As the discussion progressed, it was very insightful because many of the participants spoke about their relationship experiences. Many of them argued that the primary messages in Beyoncé's lyrics and imagery are positive love and of positive romantic interactions. However, even if the lyrics, video, and performance circulate around a negative romantic experience, there is still the message of Black women knowing their worth, forgiving, and rebuilding of relationships in the African American community. From these discussions, the researcher identified this category as the recognition that African American women are necessary not only to the African American community, but also to African American men.

When asked about Beyoncé's treatment of Black male patriarchy, Sharla said, "She's very blunt. She -- most of the time it's just -- a lot of her songs, like I said before, *Lemonade* and even in *Lemonade* it was a lot about men and women and how women are treated by men and things like that, you know. I think before *Lemonade* she was a little -- like you could tell she was like aggressive, you know, like in her stance against men and how they treat women badly, but I think after *Lemonade* it was -- it was just like -- I think the reason why I like *Lemonade* is because with *Lemonade* and gender roles she said these are the problems. I see them clearly, but I'm not giving up on you as a man, you know what I'm saying, and I think that was really important. but I think what's really important is that after *Lemonade* it was forgive guys and I think it not only -- I think a lot

of times in the Black community we're so broken up and we're so like fuck everyone and we shut down and that's what we're taught to do, but I think at some point she transitioned into showing everyone like there's also forgiveness and I think that was important.”

When asked the same question, Nina responded,

“I think as an African-American woman I like that -- I mean, I think that I can appreciate that like feminist empowerment and -- I'm more for it than against it absolutely. I feel like Beyoncé doesn't definitely represent me, but I think she does, you know, bring up a lot of issues and a lot of problems that a lot of people aren't aware of. Like a lot of Beyoncé fans who aren't Black women don't really realize a lot of things that Black women face or Black people in general face. So, I think it's good to kind of bring that out and show -- because Beyoncé is universal. I mean, you can go to any country and people know who Beyoncé is. So, I think I really appreciate that she can show those fans who aren't aware what it's like for Black women or what it's like for Black men or what it's like for lesbian women or what it's like for a gay man. I mean, I appreciate that she can show that in her visuals and in her music.”

When asked about how Beyoncé's portrayal of relationships impact her, Deja said

“Beyoncé sets like a model. Definitely something to look forward to or like a standard- creates a standard in relationships that I want to have. I feel like as a human being, you know you crave to be loved or to give love, so it caters to that inner desire that I have to be loved. Or not necessarily being loved but loving or loving in that capacity.”

### ***4.2.3 MILLENNIALS INTERPRETATION OF BEYONCE, BLACK MALE PATRIARCHY, AND FEMINISM***

The most critical aspect of the findings to the researcher was how the participants interpret Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy and feminism. This exploratory study is grounded in theories stemmed from both social science and philosophy. Feminism is rooted in the tangible means of equality for all sexes. Constructivism is based on the idea that reality is a product of one's own creation; that is everyone sees and interprets the world and their experiences through personal belief systems. Therefore, personal ideas of equality versus oppression and reality versus fantasy are going to stipulate how messages are interpreted and responses to those messages. Millennials, collectively have experienced things that could only be dreamed about fifty years ago. They have witnessed the nomination, election, and two successful terms of the first Black President of the United States. They have witnessed and possibly participated in social media justice movements, similar to the manner in which organizations like Black Lives Matter were founded in. They have been the generation of the greatest technological boom which allows them to have access to information from all over the world at their fingertips. This is not the generation of Emmitt Till's murder. Nor is it the generation of welfare reform in the 1980s. This is not the generation of the conviction of Mike Tyson for the rape of Desiree Washington. This is the generation that Obama promised would succeed, and that fueled Black Lives Matter.

The researcher wanted to understand the ways in which this generation, with all of the fruits of generations of advancement, thought about the issues that once, and to some degree still do, sought to demean, disenfranchise, and destroy Black life. How do the next generation of lawyers, politicians, teachers identify, interpret and respond to this issues, to ensure that their

children will have a better life? Of course, this question can be answered differently by each participant, but the foundation of the researcher's inquiry was to understand what they think of these issues, in this time, were opportunities are so endless. The researcher wanted to know if sexism, racism, and classism been cured by limitless access to possibilities. For the researcher, all of these are still sites of oppression for her, but she didn't know if that was the case for the next generation.

#### **4.2.3.1 BEYONCE**

The researcher also wanted to understand not only who Beyoncé's fans think she is, but more importantly what she represents. The researcher needed to understand what it is about this celebrity and her fan base that make her a global symbol of successful Black womanhood. From this line of questioning, two categories emerged. One is that she is an icon: an untouchable figure to look to for inspiration, motivation, and empowerment. The second category is the concept that Beyoncé is a role model. With icon status, the fan base is so loyal that artists are no longer expected to have human traits or characteristics. This can be seen in the deification of Beyoncé. There is a Beyoncé church. The National Church of Bey was founded in 2014, in Atlanta, Georgia. Although members of the church do not believe that Beyoncé is the creator of all things, but they do believe that she is a divine goddess walking amongst earth and is worthy of praise and worship. The foundation of the church, only made the researcher more curious about the interpretation of the artist.

##### **4.2.3.1.1 ICON**

When asked about the allure of Beyoncé, and when asked about what Beyoncé gives her, Jasmine described a captivating experience.

“People are drawn in to look at her, but then once they listen to what she's saying, it's make people hard because she's not as easy to fit in a box. Like you want, you know, her to be respectable, but you -- there's something about Beyoncé that it's like, okay, yeah, she's sweet and soft-spoken, but something about the way that she commands like energy and attention whenever like she's on stage, it makes people a little bit uncomfortable almost and I think that that's a definite form of power and she definitely uses her sexuality to do that.”

The inclusion of Beyoncé's performance of her sexuality, only further solidifies the icon status because Beyoncé is yielding her sexuality as a site of power and not oppression.

When asked how Sharla interpreted the messages in her favorite performance, she said, “If you watch *I Am* tour, it was *Get Me Bodied*, like I like it because a lot of times she's -- in that song she's like dancing and the dancers are following her and its men and women on the ground which is -- you know, but like the fact that the men are kind of like worshiping her and her body, I think that's, you know, important.” To witness a Black woman with the confidence to declare that she is worthy of pursuit, love, and happiness because she is at an icon status, speaks to her fans that they are worthy of the same pursuit, love, and happiness.

When asked about Beyoncé's impact on how she sees herself, Deja said,

“She has a very strong fan base. I want to say maybe one of the strongest in the celebrity world and a lot of people are very heavily influenced by her. If she says do this, they'll do it. So, if she says-if she supports, you know, these Black issues or Black feminine issues or something like that, more women will feel comfortable supporting it or speaking out on it. So, I do think that that's -I think-because I know how strong her influence is on

women my age and women of all ages, so I guess she does impact me on how I think of myself.”

#### 4.2.3.1.2 ROLE MODEL

The researcher was very interested in understanding how Beyoncé, a self-affirming sexual woman could be perceived as a positive role model for a population that has been raised to subscribe to respectability politics. When asked, Jasmine responded, “because I think she really cares about Black girls like me. Listening to her, I think she wants you to be safe sexually and to -- for us to be sacred, you know, like mess with him a little bit, tease him if he messes up, but like don't go out here and just be fucking anyone.”

Leslie said Beyoncé makes her feel motivated and capable of handling challenges.

“I think a lot of people who don't really pay that much attention to like her bodies of work -- you know, I -- like ever since like she came out on the Made in America thing where she flashed like the feminist sign or I think it might have been at another MTV performance she flashed the feminist sign. She got a lot of slack, especially from white feminists saying that, you know, oh, well, you know, she's not covered up. She's not a real feminist or she's not this. She doesn't fit like that certain like list of feminist requirements. I would just say that, you know, feminism looks different. Feminism is always inclusive and I would just say that when you look back her different bodies of work, everything kind of does tie in in terms of like to the point that I feel like she's been trying to get across for years now. I think she just has more freedom to do so. Her music just makes me feel really good. It makes feel like a bad bitch and -- no, seriously. Like - So, yeah, I just definitely appreciate it. I just feel like it's something -- I personally feel super empowered when I listen to her and not everybody is going to have that same

experience and I think that that's dope, but whether or not you agree with her on, you know, how she chooses to display her feminism, I think that you're going to like at least one song and if you don't even like one song, you're going to recognize that she has the power to sing it, you know what I'm saying, so.”

#### **4.2.3.2 BLACK MALE PATRIARCHY**

##### **4.2.3.2.1 WORTHY OF LOVE AND APPRECIATION**

In regards to the way that participants interpret Black male patriarchy, there was an underlying consensus that the appropriate response to oppression from Black men is to assert that Black women are worthy of love and appreciation. In the face of negativity and difficult emotions, there is a way to assert African American’s claim to love, respect, and appreciation from their community. Jaimi said, “There is one instance before *Lemonade*. Was it -- I think it was *4* -- the album *4* and she made like *Love on Top* and stuff like that. She showed a positive image of love and I think music is so powerful to the mind, so like when that album came out it was just like positive love, positive love or like for *Cater to You* with Destiny's Child like all those were positive things. I think it just made me question the way I love people, not just men but -- definitely men, but, you know.”

There was also the concept that African American women should be seen, understood, and validated by African American men. Lynn said,

“Beyoncé talks about that a lot in -- well, in general she talks about the play on being a woman and not being appreciated a lot, so I know in *Why Don't You Love Me* she talks about things relating to, you know, I can do this for you, I can do that for you, I have class, I can cook, I can do this, I put money in the bank account and things like that, but you still don't notice me and a lot of -- she has a lot of themes of that. So, for example,

like in *Upgrade U* she says that same type of thing where, you know, if you -- if you let me love you and stuff like that, I can upgrade you. And I know in -- I think some of her skits that she did in *Lemonade*, you know, like how she talked about how she put herself - she read the Bible and she fasted for -- 60 days and stuff like that, she pretty much lost herself trying to appeal to a man and, you know, before -- in the skit before *Don't Hurt Yourself*, she was talking a lot about, you know, why can't you see me, why can't you see me, everybody else can. So, I know that's like a big theme like in her music. It's kind of like here I am, I know that I'm all these things, I'm hardworking, I look good, you want me, a lot of other people want me, but the person that I'm trying to be with doesn't notice who I am.”

For there to be the collective experience that African American women feel ignored and neglected by African American men, speaks to the need of the development of culturally competent male-female relationship intervention.

#### 4.2.3.2.2 SELF RELIANT, SELF SUFFICIENT, AND INDEPENDENT

They have been several songs that Beyoncé has released that have messages that encourage female independence. However, she has several others as well that could send messages of male dependency. Although it is a romantic dependency, and not necessarily financial, it does seem to be emotional. Regardless, participants express this category in a very positive way, speaking of empowering messages to have more confidence and autonomy in their relationships. Vanessa said,

“I like how Beyoncé puts out like what we go through as women, what we need as women, kind of what we expect, but then she also like embraces who men are – embrace themselves and embrace who men are, but they also like -- they all challenge -- they're --

how can I put this? They are challenging the norms. Like what everybody is -- wants to be rich, everybody wants this perfect lifestyle with love and they want gender roles to be a certain way, you know, and men has the power and stuff, but they're like those things are all right, but don't let them rule your life. There's other -- like I think they all push more for love and acceptance and not always having the man in control, you know, like he doesn't always know what's right. Sometimes I know what's right, you know. I will still respect you as a man, but sometimes like I'm here and I'm awesome and I'm bad as hell, but I don't need you."

Deja spoke about her own experience with Black male patriarchy, and how Beyoncé's message of inclusion, allows her to feel as though Black male patriarchy can be overcome by recognizing that Black women are capable of anything.

"So what I think that Beyoncé has realized is that, you know, even as a girl -- and, again, this is something that I can so relate to -- you grow up and, you know, you're playing with boys in your kindergarten class and everyone is on the same level, but as you grow up, you know, boys get taller and you get taller and everyone, you know, hits puberty and then you start noticing changes in like where people fit in, I guess. So, you know, definitely notices that power like, you know, trip, I guess, among like men and women and I think that she knows that she's speaking to that audience. So, for example, Beyoncé her audience is not straight-male men, but a lot of gay people love her. A lot of LGBT love her. Like women love her, you know what I'm saying, and I think that she recognizes that and, you know, puts out songs like *Girls Run the World* to kind of like remind you like, hey, all of this stuff that you're eating off of, I cooked that, you know what I'm saying? These babies that you want me to have, I made them, like all of that

and then on top of that I can compete with you in your own workplace. So, I think that, yeah, definitely she says a lot of that, but it's also to prove a point.”

Deja went on to discuss how *Lemonade* spoke to her about women’s empowerment.

“She definitely made women feel more comfortable saying like, you know, we don’t depend on a man. They need us, you know. Made women feel like they could be savages with however she meant to apply that. I don’t know, but I know but I like that.

### **4.2.3.3 FEMINISM**

#### **4.2.3.3.1 AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE UNITY**

The overwhelming category that emerged from this study is the insight that African American women interpret messages of female, empowerment, upliftment of the African American community and African American female unity as tenants of feminism. Alexis said,

“I think Beyoncé like evolved from like who she was in the beginning where normally you would just see, you know, her talking about men and relationships or like, you know, guys are this or guys are that. It became something bigger than just guys. It became about African American people and woman empowerment and I think that was a really important move in her career.”

Kia agreed and said,

“Beyoncé wants African American women to care a little bit more about ourselves, but I think she doesn't want us to care so much that we're not truly ourselves. Like embrace your culture, you know, and be okay with being -- you know, my mom is from Louisiana, you know, and all that, but like be aware of like who you are in this world and know how to put it out there.”

When asked about how Deja interprets Beyoncé's feminism, she spoke about community and support.

“It’s like when you go through something and you know somebody supports it or been through that, too, it makes you feel more comfortable discussing it and speaking out on it because you’re like I’m not the only one who feels this way or this hasn’t only happened to me or, you know, they support it, so, you know, it gives you like more of a -what’s the word-like a better, you know, like perspective or stand-like something to stand on the fact that you have support behind how you feel...because of her status, I think her feminism is more compelling only because she can reach way more people than a lot of people can, so speaking on topics like that it’s going to touch many more ears and be received by a broader audience than it would by somebody I know who would identify as a Black feminists have reached her level yet and went in their career, so it is definitely more compelling because it’s pretty-a lot of celebrities on her level-the few that there are-they won’t risk their career to speak about certain topics and that’s what she does and it doesn’t hurt her career, so it’s like why wouldn’t she, why shouldn’t she.”

#### 4.2.3.3.2 PERFORMANCE BASED FEMINISM

The second category that emerged that the way the Beyoncé performs and embraces her own sexuality is a form of feminism. This interpretation does not require much from the audience, but it does require that sexuality is still evident in the performances because this feminism is tied to sexuality. Sharla said, “She makes you love who you are and how you look just the way you are. You don't have to be thick. You don't have to be skinny. You can just be whoever you are and just her songs and the way she embraces sexuality is just it's in a great way

like I'm a grown woman. It's not saying anything about, oh, I'm thick or I'm skinny. It's just like I'm grown, I'm sexy, I'm feeling it, I'm good.”

I asked how Beyoncé’s message of sexuality linked to feminism could have a negative effect. Kia said,

“I feel like some women could feel like they're inadequate because they have to live up to a certain, you know, long-haired, light-skinned, you know, revealing type of façade when, I mean, that's really not the message that she's promoting. She's saying hey, this is me. I'm a goddess and a diva and this is what I'm doing. Be comfortable doing what you're doing, you know. That -- she said that in *Flawless* like don't let anybody tell you, you know, that you're less than, you know what I'm saying, like you woke up like that.”

Therefore, as long as her messages are sexually empowering, they can be interpreted as feminist messages.

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

### 5.1 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study sought to examine the influences of Beyoncé's brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explore how the lyrical content and sexual imagery of Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influence the perspective of millennials on Black female sexuality, Black female identity, and agency juxtaposed against white supremacy, Black male patriarchy, and disembodied Black Feminism. The broader thematic research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. Does Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?
2. How does Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy, and Black male patriarchy influence her audience's awareness of Black female identity?
3. How do young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism?

Fourteen African American women between the ages of 18 and 25 were purposefully recruited and interviewed. All participants were screened prior to selection to gather inclusionary data, such as, gender, race, age, and favorite Beyoncé performance. Prior to the interviews, the participants all watched their favorite Beyoncé performance with the researcher. A qualitative research design was used to explore the factors that influence how are why Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonates more with young African American women; how Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy, and Black patriarchy influence her audience's awareness of Black female identity; and how young African American women

interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism. The data were analyzed by using two cycles of coding: values coding, and thematic coding. Face to face interviews were conducted. Participants were recruited from the undergraduate departments of African American Studies and Women, Gender, and Sexualities Studies at Georgia State University.

An analysis of the data revealed two categories related to the way participants resonate with Beyoncé's brand of feminism: ideal Black womanhood and Black feminist messages in lyrics. In regards to Beyoncé's treatment of sites of oppression, race generated two categories: action based and self-evident. Only one category emerged from Beyoncé's treatment of class: aspirations to be upper class. Only one category emerged from Beyoncé's treatment of gender: support struggles for equality regardless of gender or sexual orientation. In regards to Beyoncé's treatment of white male supremacy, only one category emerged: support issues, ideas, and people who reflect the needs of the African American community. Only one category emerged from Beyoncé's treatment of Black patriarchy: Black women are necessary in the Black community and to Black men.

In regards to how young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism; for messages about Beyoncé, only two categories emerged: Beyoncé being considered an icon, or a role model. The data analysis revealed two emerging categories in regards to how participants interpret Black male patriarchy: Black women are worthy of love, equality and appreciation, and Black women are self-reliant, self-sufficient, and independent. For how participants interpret messages about feminism, two categories emerged: Black female unity, and performance based feminism. This chapter includes detailed discussion regarding conclusions of the study implications for theory any practice in the field of African

American Studies, and limitations of this study. It also includes recommendations for future research.

For the first conclusion, the literature speaks to three determining factors in regards to the success of early Black female blues performers. The three factors are the way they spoke and used their voices in performances; their themes; and how they recognized the new opportunities for the highly elusive concept of freedom (Davis, 1998). All three of these can be applied to Beyoncé. She performs and speaks in to African American women in her lyrics; she speaks to themes that directly impact the African American community; and she recognizes new opportunities for the evolution of societal norms and expectations for women of color. These factors are why her brand of Feminism resonates more with your African American women.

As it pertains to the second conclusion, the researcher thought that class and white supremacy would be overlooked by many of the participants. The literature speaks to a historical negation of class in regards to African American communities. African American communities are not monolithic, and therefore have varying degrees of socioeconomic status. However, it is typically the opinions and struggles of those of means and opportunities, like Beyoncé, and Anna Julia Cooper, and not Bessie Smith that gets told. In regards to white supremacy, the researcher believed that the system of white supremacy would be too complex of a concept to analyze through the lens of a five-minute performance. Although, the researcher argues that white supremacy is always evident in discussion issues pertaining to equality, because white supremacy is a part of the global systems of oppression, it could be difficult to readily identify.

Race, gender and Black male patriarchy have also been the most common themes in Beyoncé's most recent album release, *Lemonade*. Seventy-one percent of the participants referenced *Lemonade* without provocation or the researcher's mention. One hundred percent of

the participants mentioned the album when asked about questions regarding Beyoncé's treatment or the portrayal of race, gender and Black male patriarchy. With these three themes being the most recent and current messages from Beyoncé, it is clear why the participants recognized these three sites of oppression over class and white supremacy. The images and lyrics of *Lemonade* solidifies her audiences' awareness of Black female identity by speaking to race, gender, and Black male patriarchy.

Although the third conclusion is founded in the participants' response to Black male patriarchy, it speaks directly to the theoretical framework that is the foundation of the data analysis. Womanism speaks to the experience of the average African American woman. This theory speaks to elevating communities of color from all sites of oppression, and maintains that women of color are worthy of love, equality, and appreciation (Phillips, 1991). This theory also recognizes that African American women have been to some degree, self-reliant, self-sufficient, and independent, more so than any other minority group (Collins, 1996).

In retrospect, there are things that the researcher wished she could have done differently. The scope of the study is rooted in issues of public health in regards to the high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and sexually transmitted contagion among African American women. The researcher's background is not in public health, but she did seek the advice of social workers and those who work in public health to assess the foundation, direction, and methodology of the study. A researcher in the field of public health or social work could have had more insight into appropriate lines of questioning and methodology that will speak to the nature of the public health issue. The researcher would have also liked to have included questions about the participants' understanding or experience with STD or STI contagion, and how they reconcile

those experiences with messages of Black female sexuality and agency. However, that would have changed the scope of the study and the findings.

The researcher also regrets that she did not get a chance to have a detailed discussion about how they think African American women are perceived. She would have liked to have been able to add interview questions regarding how they see themselves and if that perceptions ever change. The constructivism foundation of the study speaks to the participant's reality being a product of their experiences. With that being acknowledged, the researcher would have liked to have heard more about those experiences and what helped them grasp the concept of Black female identity and how they perform it.

The research did not get the opportunity to fully develop arguments on the concept of Western beauty and what has been argued as the idyllic standard of beauty for African American women. The researcher would have liked to have included data on colorism, data from the Clarke Doll Experiment, statistics in hair straightening products, and the international rise of popularity of skin bleaching products. These topics would have supported some the themes identified in the findings.

## **5.2 CHAPTER SUMMARY**

The purpose of this study sought to examine the influences of Beyoncé's brand of Black Feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explored how the lyrical content and sexual imagery of Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influenced the perspectives of millennials on Black female sexuality, identity, agency Black male patriarchy, and disembodied Black Feminism. The broader thematic research questions guiding this study were as follows:

1. Does Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonate more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism?
2. How does Beyoncé's treatment of race, class, gender, white supremacy, and Black male patriarchy influence her audience's awareness of Black female identity?
3. How do young African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé, Black male patriarchy, and feminism?

This study adds to the expanding body of knowledge that pertains to contemporary messages of Black Feminism and the evolution of societal norms and cultural expectations for African American women. The study investigated how and why Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonates more with young African American woman than previous iterations of feminism. Three conclusions were derived based on the data analysis and the coding strategy. They included: (1) Beyoncé's brand of feminism resonates more with young African American women than previous iterations of feminism because she has come to represent ideal Black womanhood and there are Black feminist messages in her lyrics, as well as in her performances; (2) Primarily Beyoncé's treatment of race, gender, and Black male patriarchy and not class or white supremacy that influence her audiences' awareness of Black female identity. Her treatment of these sites of oppression influence her audiences' awareness of Black female identity by including motivating and captivating imagery, and lyrics in her performances that awaken the consciousness of her audiences; and (3) African American women interpret messages about Beyoncé as an empowering figure that seeks to uplift and encourage all Black women. Messages of Black male patriarchy are interpreted most typically in regards to being in a romantic relationship with a Black man and being mistreated. Therefore, messages about Black male patriarchy are interpreted in retaliation to it. In that retaliation, African American women assert

that they are worthy of love, equality, and appreciation. Also, that African American women are self-sufficient, self-reliant and independence. African American women interpret messages about feminism as Black female unity and performance based feminism.

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## APPENDICES

### 6.1 APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Georgia State University  
Department of African American Studies

**Title:** Beyoncé Feminism: Feminist Messages' Impact on African American Female Identity: A Narrative Approach Research Study by Laura Taylor under the advisement of Dr. Sarita Davis

**Why is this research being done?**

Participants are invited to take part in a study that measures the correlation between media, sexual behaviors and. The study is designed to collect data on specific sexual behaviors and specific media consumption, primarily focusing on the music, lyrics, and imagery produced by Beyoncé. Do to the sensitive and private information being collected, the participants will have complete anonymity and there will be a non-disclosure document signed and submitted by those involved in participating and administering this study. Confidentiality is a key aspect in this study and participant's private lives and personal information will be protected.

**Who is being asked to take part in this research study?**

Participants who are invited to participate in this study are African American women, between the ages of 18 to 25, who live in the Metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia and attend Georgia State University. The participants must be sexually active and have be fans of Beyoncé.

**What procedures will be performed for research purposes?**

If you decide to participate in the study you must complete a self-assessment, that where they self-identify certain demographic factors, such as socio economic background. The self-assessment will also allow them to self-identify their race.

**What are the possible risks, side effects, and discomforts of this research study?**

There are minor risks associated with this research study. It is possible that participants may feel uncomfortable answering certain questions. If participants feel uncomfortable with a question, they can skip that question or withdraw from the study altogether. If they decide to quit at any time for any reason, their data will not be recorded. Removing them from the study will not negatively affect them in any way and their data and personal information that had been collected will be confidentially disposed of.

**What are possible benefits from taking part in this study?**

Participants in this study will have the benefit of receiving pertinent information about healthy sexual practices, and media literacy. Participants will have the opportunity to learn about the effects of high risk sexual behavior and analyze what causes them to engage in that behavior. After learning the causes of behavior, the participant can change their behavior and pass along the information and experience to their community.

**Will I be paid if I take part in this research study?**

Participants will not receive any compensation for their participation in this study. They will receive extra credit on an assignment and a free \$5 Subway gift card.

**Who will know about my participation in this research study?**

All information about participants obtained from this research will be kept as confidential as possible. Names will not be used unless deemed necessary and in which scenario, pseudonyms will be implemented. Due to the sensitive nature of the data collected in this study, confidentiality will be the researcher's highest priority.

**Is my participation in this research study voluntary?**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If participants want to withdraw at any time, they can. If participants do not feel as though they are comfortable giving out specific information they can choose to vacate the study. There is nothing that the participants have to consent or submit to outside of their free will.

**How will the findings be used?**

The results of the study will be used for scholarly purposes only. The results from the study will be presented in educational settings and at professional conferences, and the results might be published in a professional journal in the field of African American Studies.

**Contact information:**

If there are any questions, comments, or concerns about the study please feel free to email ltaylor52@student.gsu.edu. This is a placebo email address designed to protect the anonymity of the participants and the administrators of the study. Again, no real names will be given or used, nor will personal contact information.

**Voluntary Consent:**

By continuing in the study, including self-assessments, you acknowledge that you have read the parameters and agree to be a full knowing participant in the research. You agree to answer personal questions truthfully and reasonably within the tone of the study. You are free to withdraw at any time without penalty.

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Sign Name

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Print Name

## 6.2 APPENDIX B: SCREENING FORM

### Demographics

Please respond to the following questions and provide your name and email address for correspondence.

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you currently live in Metropolitan Atlanta? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you identify as an African American woman? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is the highest educational degree you have earned? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What degree are you currently pursuing? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Which socioeconomic status do you or identify with? (Please Select One Option)  
Lower Class/ Middle class/ Working class/ Upper class/
7. Do you consider yourself a Beyoncé fan? \_\_\_\_\_
8. If yes, how long have you been a fan? \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

### 6.3 APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLIER

#### **Beyoncé' Feminism Study**

Free Subway Gift Card and Extra Credit for 90 Minutes of Your Time for Students in  
AAS 4000: Issues in African American Communities

Hello. My name is Laura Taylor, and I am currently a master's level student in the African American Studies Department at Georgia State University. I am interested in interviewing you regarding Beyoncé's and Black feminist messages and performances, and how those messages motivate and encourage you in your everyday life and personal relationships. My study is entitled, "*Beyoncé Feminism: Feminist Messages' Impact on African American Female Identity: A Narrative Approach Research Study.*" The purpose of this study is to examine the influences of the musical artist Beyoncé and her brand of feminism on the sexual decision making among African American millennials. The research questions explore how the lyrics, images, and position of Beyoncé as an African American female performer, influences the perspective of millennials perception of Black femininity, sexual decision making, and Black female identity.

The current study includes African American women ages 18-25 living and attending colleges and universities in the Metropolitan Atlanta area. Data will be collected using structured and informal interviews. A narrative research design was used to contextualize the inquiry. The study's finding has implications for several arenas of research including sexual communication studies, Black male female relationships, and sexuality and gender studies. I am curious to know how Beyoncé's messages of independence, confidence, autonomy, and sexual liberation, impact younger generations perceiving her messages. You will not have to answer any questions that will make you uncomfortable, but you will be expected to speak freely about your

private relationships and how feminist messages or societal norms have influenced them. It is my hope that this study will help create the narrative of African American women's agency in their lives and in their relationships. More importantly, this study can serve as a catalyst that will allow young women to think critically about their community and the role that they play in it. If you are uncomfortable at any point, you can decline to participate, without any consequences. You will receive extra credit on a critique assignment and a free \$5 Subway gift card.

**To participate in this study, you must:**

- **Be between the ages of**
- **Self-identify as Black or African American**
- **Self-identify as a woman**
- **Self-identify as heterosexual and participate in heterosexual relationships**
- **Currently enrolled in a secondary academic institution in Atlanta, Georgia**
- **Consider yourself a loyal Beyoncé fan**
- **Can meet for interviews**

There are two ways to contact me if you are interested in participating in this study:

- Email me at [lauraashleytaylor25@gmail.com](mailto:lauraashleytaylor25@gmail.com)
- Email me at [ltaylor52@student.gsu.edu](mailto:ltaylor52@student.gsu.edu)
- Call or text me at (678) 313-9600

Thank you for your time. If you are interested, I look forward to speaking with you and discussing the details of this study with you.

**Laura Taylor**  
**Johnson C. Smith University**  
**Bachelors of Arts in Political Science, Minor in Mass Communications, 2011**  
**Georgia State University**  
**Masters in African American Studies, Projected 2017**

## 6.4 APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Beyoncé:**

1. What is your favorite Beyoncé video, song, or performance?
2. Why is it your favorite?
3. Why does it resonate with you?
4. What issues does the video address?
5. Are these issues important to you? Explain.

### **Black Male Patriarchy:**

1. Which videos does Beyoncé explore issues related to male/female relationship?
2. What kind of relationship issues does she address? Explain.
3. How does she explore issues around differences in power in these relationships? Can you give an example?
4. What do you think of her interpretations of Black female sexuality? Is it empowering? Explain.
5. Do you think Beyoncé's interpretation of Black female sexuality influences how young Black women see themselves? Explain.
6. Does it influence how you think of yourself? Explain.

### **Feminism:**

1. Does Beyoncé explore issues related to race in her videos? Explain.
2. How does she portray race?
3. How does her portrayal of race make you feel as a Black woman?

4. Do you think her portrayal of race affects young Black women's perceptions of themselves? Explain.
5. Does Beyoncé explore issues related to class in her videos? Explain.
6. How does she portray class issues?
7. How does her portrayal of class make you feel as a Black woman?
8. Do you think her portrayal of class affects young Black women's perceptions of themselves? Explain.
9. Does Beyoncé explore issues related to gender in her videos? Explain?
10. How does she address gender?
11. How does her portrayal of gender make you feel as a Black woman?
12. Do you think her portrayal of gender affects young Black women's perceptions of themselves? If so, explain how?
13. Does Beyoncé's performances encourage acceptance of the Black female body?
14. Does Beyoncé's performances encourage acceptance of sexual choices?
15. Are there other female artists who speak to race, class, and gender issues? If so, who are they and how do they address these issues?
16. Is Beyoncé's expression of feminism compelling to you as an African American woman? Explain.
17. Any other thoughts, feelings, or comments about Beyoncé and how her performances impact you on any level?

## **6.5 APPENDIX E: THE PARTICIPANTS**

<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Which Beyoncé Album Made You a Fan</b>	<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>	<b>Favorite Video/Performance</b>	<b>Degree Currently Pursuing</b>	<b>Perception of Black Women 136</b>	<b>Degr</b>
Fayetteville, North Carolina	B-Day	Working Class	Formation	Masters	Stereotypes: over sexualized, ghetto, loud, bitter, angry	
Marietta, Georgia	B-Day	Middle Class	Formation	Bachelors	Stereotypes: promiscuous, bitchy, rude, lazy, bossy	Scho
Oakland, California	Dangerously in Love	Middle Class	Super Bowl 2013	Bachelors	Hyper sexual, aversive, bitter, angry	Scho
Queens, New York	Survivor	Middle Class	2016 MTV VMAs	Bachelors	Less than white women, not allowed to be multidimensional or sexual while being respected	Scho
New Orleans, Louisiana	Destiny Fulfilled	Middle Class	Formation	Bachelors	Black women are perceived in many different ways, some bad, some good, but it's rare someone has a true understanding of the black women	Scho

					they perceive or assume	
New Orleans, Louisiana	Dangerously in Love	Middle Class	Formation	Bachelors	Overly aggressive, dominant, ghetto, single mothers, uneducated	Scho
Decatur, Georgia	B-Day	Middle Class	XO	Bachelors	Powerful, beautiful, capable	Scho
Cheyenne, Wyoming	Dangerously In love	Working Class	Partition	Bachelors	Loud, angry, bossy, bitchy, and sexual	
Atlanta, Georgia	B-Day	Middle Class	Sweet Dreams	Bachelors	Angry, unintelligent	Scho
Atlanta, Georgia	B-Day	Middle Class	End of Time	Bachelors	Negatively “hyper-sexualized, angry, bitter, ugly, voiceless.”	Scho
Fayetteville, North Carolina	B-Day	Middle Class	Freakum Dress	Bachelors	Loud, angry, ghetto, bitter, overly sexual, animalistic, aggressive, strong, stubborn	Scho
Atlanta, Georgia	Dangerously in Love	Middle Class/ Working Class	Deja Vu	Bachelors	“I feel like black women are	Scho

					often seen as mean or aggressive, bitchy and are often undervalued.”	
Manhattan, New York	I Am Sasha Fierce	Middle Class	Freedom	Bachelors	Caregivers, sexual deviants, angry	Scho
Atlanta, Georgia	B-Day	Working Class	Deja Vu	Bachelors	“I think the perception of a black women depends on who is perceiving her. To many we’re unattractive loud, mean, selfish, and materialistic. To some we’re hoes and nice but simply not attractive or desirable. To many others we’re gorgeous, versatile, down to earth, driven and more aware of ourselves	

						and how our behavior impacts others. I'd go for the latter description!	
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