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"Motherland, drip on me": Exploring diasporic identities, feelings of displacement and Blackness in Beyoncé's 'Black Is King'

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Abstract

With thousands of people taking major cities around the world by storm throughout the summer of 2020 in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, the release of Beyoncé's most recent visual album, Black Is King (2020), felt like perfect timing. Taking an unapologetically Afrocentric approach to dismantling – or, at least, addressing – the white-washing practices deeply-rooted in mainstream media, the album was welcomed by many, celebrating her decision to embrace African cultures and use her platform as a way of promoting non-Western talent. On the other hand, her privilege and celebrity status within an inherently white supremacist media system has led critics to question the authenticity of her relatively recent turn towards activism. The purpose of this research is to enquire into the ways in which Black Is King speaks to Black experiences, ultimately assessing the extent to which Beyoncé's most recent album can justifiably contribute to wider efforts towards decolonising the media industry. This dissertation will therefore employ a qualitative methodological approach, using Critical Discourse Analysis as the main framework for unpacking and contextualising the narratives embedded throughout Black Is King, revealing hidden references to Pan-Africanism and anti-colonial scholarship.

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Introduction

The summer of 2020 was a heart-wrenching one. Only a few months after devastating fires took over Australia, prompting international humanitarian action, the world came to a halt as the unprecedented crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic wracked havoc across the globe, its devastating effects and loss of life only marking the beginning of what was going to be a prolonged period of grief and collective trauma. With borders closing and nations going into lockdown, the Covid-19 crisis appeared, at first, to bring back to the surface deeply rooted class inequalities leading to unmatched unemployment rates. And yet, on May 25th, millions of people around the world were faced with the rude awakening that the Covid-19 outbreak was not the only pandemic causing death and suffering. As videos of George Floyd's senseless murder at the hands – or, perhaps more literally, the knee – of a police officer for his alleged use of a counterfeit $20 bill surfaced on the internet, it was clear that the flood gates had opened: after years of feeling like their pain was ignored, minimised, or even weaponised against their own communities, countless African American activists took to social media to share other disturbing accounts of police brutality, leading to names such as Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd becoming international symbols for the ongoing fight for racial equality under the Black[1] Lives Matter movement. With major

[1] For the purpose of this dissertation, the following discussion will refer to members of the Afrodiasporic and Afro-Caribbean community, as well as to African American individuals, as 'Black', rather than 'black'. By choosing to capitalise the word, I hereby acknowledge that beyond standing merely as the signifier for a racial category, 'Black' is representative of a broader range of experiences and power struggles that characterise an otherwise heterogenous demographic. As a white, heterosexual, able-bodied, middle-class researcher, it is my ambition to incorporate terminology into my writings that is both respectful and representative of how the community I am writing about wishes to be referred to as. Following the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests, a series of debates surfaced to the attention of the general public regarding why members of the African American and Afrodiasporic communities wish to be identified as 'Black' (Laws, 2020; Appiah, 2020). While I do recognise this is a highly debated topic, with many critical race scholars such as Paul Gilroy or Ruth Wilson Gilmore continuing to use lowercase 'black' in their works (see University College London, 2020), after close consideration I decided, for the time being, to adopt the capitalised version of the word in an effort to honour the intricate meaning- and identity-making processes that Black people have to negotiate as members of an inherently white supremacist society.

cities around the world being taken by storm by crowds of people deploring the systemic oppression of Black and Brown bodies under a corrupt policing system (Buchanan, Bui & Patel, 2020), the summer of 2020 went down in history as not just a time of mourning, but of extraordinary civil unrest.

It was amid these tensions that, on June 19th 2020, international pop culture icon Beyoncé released a surprise single, entitled 'BLACK PARADE'. The song, deliberately timed to celebrate the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth, an African American holiday commemorating the eradication of slavery, whose roots go back to Beyoncé's native Texas, seemed to address not only the pandemic, but the ongoing abuse suffered by Black and Brown bodies at the hands of police: "Need another march, lemme call Tamika / Need peace and reparation for my people" (Beyoncé, 2020a). The song also reiterated Beyoncé's stance as a voice for the African American community, her philanthropic endeavours – such as the decision to donate all proceeds gathered from 'BLACK PARADE' to support Black-owned businesses affected by the pandemic – being brought back to public attention by the lyrics "I'm for us, all black / All chrome, black-owned" (Beyoncé, 2020a).

It was only ten days after the release of 'BLACK PARADE' that Beyoncé fans were once again met with a surprise release, this time in the form of the trailer for *Black Is King*, Beyoncé's third full-length visual album. In an Instagram post announcing the release, Beyoncé wrote "I believe that when Black people tell our own stories, we can shift the axis of the world and tell our REAL history of generational wealth and richness of soul" (Beyoncé, 2020b). Despite having been filmed almost entirely in 2019 as a companion to the new live-action remake of Disney's classic *The Lion King*, the subtle references spotted throughout the trailer, as well as the timing of Beyoncé's announcement, were not lost on her audiences. Hence, without being overtly marketed as such, the album was perceived by many as a timely triumph of Black excellence, Beyoncé's use of media giant Disney Corporation's funding and

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visibility to champion African cultures standing out as a not-so-subtle way of subverting the means of productions that have historically oppressed Black and Brown identities.

Following the story of a young prince setting out on a bildungsroman journey of finding his true self in order to become the rightful heir to his father's throne, *Black Is King* functions as a modern-day companion to the original movie while simultaneously bringing a distinctive Afrodiasporic sensibility to the original plotline. Additionally, although perhaps unintentionally, Beyoncé's retelling of the *Lion King* narrative may be viewed as criticism towards the white-washing and fetishizing practices so common in mainstream media, especially since Disney's 'original' storyline was, in fact, stolen from the 1950s manga *Jungle Emperor* by Osamu Tezuka (Hellerman, 2019), whose work was not credited as an inspiration to the 1994 animation. Released shortly after HBO Max announced its decision to pull *Gone With the Wind* from its streaming platforms until a companion contextualising the film's racial stereotypes was made available to the public (Knibbs, 2020), Beyoncé's decision to create *Black Is King* prompts important questions about the colonialist practices still deeply embedded in mainstream media. By employing an all-Black – and, more specifically, an overwhelmingly Afrodiasporic – creative crew, as well as incorporating African customs, symbolism, and narratives throughout the visual album, Beyoncé's *Black Is King* appears to be, at least on a surface level, an act of protest against the white, Eurocentric practices defining what ought to be 'popular' in pop culture. As a result, *Black Is King* forgoes the mainstream tropes that have contributed to Beyoncé's superstar status and prompts audiences to challenge the systems of oppression that have led to the systematic exclusion of other cultures in favour of the hegemonic white standard. Inspired by these considerations, this dissertation project seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: To what extend does Black Is King speak to the feelings of displacement and rootlessness associated with the African diaspora, and how do these feelings influence its representation of Blackness?

RQ2: Can Black Is King claim to be an accurate representation of the Black experience? What are some challenges Beyoncé might face in her attempt to bring Pan-African influences to the mainstream public?

Literature Review

Mainstreaming Black Feminism: Storytelling Through a Womanist Lens

> *"I am the Nala, sister of Naruba*
>
> *Oshun, Queen Sheba, I am the mother."*
>
> - *Beyoncé, Childish Gambino, Jay-Z & Oumou Sangare (2020c) 'MOOD 4 EVA'*

Even as a non-critical viewer watching the visual album for the first time, *Black Is King* appears to be heavy with Afrocentric symbolism, from different interpretations of African deities – most notably, Yemoja, Oshun and the god of masculinity, Ogun – to the recurrent theme of the Nile River, as well as several biblical references tying back Christianity to the African continent. Despite the film's superficial focus on the young prince – symbolizing Simba's character from *The Lion King* – and his initiating journey towards becoming a man worthy of claiming his late father's throne, closer analysis of the characters portrayed in *Black Is King*, as well as the power dynamics embedded in its visual repertoire, denote a distinctly feminist understanding of masculinity, many such influences reminiscent of Beyoncé's previous visual album, *Lemonade*. Given these considerations, the purpose of this literature review is to critically engage with key feminist texts while contemplating the specific influences and ideological practices embedded in *Black Is King*.

Before proceeding to inquire into the feminist schools of thought that may have influenced the representations of femininity and womanhood in Beyoncé's latest visual album, a brief overview of feminism, and its academic impact, is paramount to the present discussion. According to Hannam's (2013) study into the history and evolution of feminism, the movement is often assumed to have originated in the late nineteenth century, against a backdrop of overall civil unrest and drive for social reform. This line of thought then points

towards the Suffragettes – a collective of women who mobilized across the world to campaign for women's right to vote – as the archetypal feminists, with Hannam suggesting a theory of feminism that "describe[s] a set of ideas that recognize in an explicit way that women are subordinate to men and seek to address imbalances of power between the sexes" (2013: 7). Similarly, Redfern & Aune suggest that "if you believe feminism is about equality and freedom of choice for men and women, you're more likely to call yourself a feminist" (2010: 7). However, while the unsuspecting reader might consider these to be suitable definitions of what feminism stands for in dominant public sphere discourses, a plethora of academic texts have been published since the dawn of the feminist movement emphasizing the inherently classist, racist and homophobic practices embedded in Western feminism (hooks, 2000; see also Lorde, 1988; Carby 1982).

The work of Audre Lorde brings to the forefront important issues of representation in the feminist movement, problematizing the extent to which mainstream feminism can reasonably support its claims for the liberation of *all* women. More specifically, in *Sister Outsider*, Lorde makes a powerful argument:

'Some problems, we share as women, some we do not. You fear your children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against you. We fear our children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and you will turn your backs upon the reason they are dying" (2007: 119).

This is particularly poignant, as Lorde effectively claims that white feminism, through its practices and communications (such as, but not limited to, championing the idea of an equality of the sexes), remains deeply engrained in the oppressive social hierarchies which legitimize the rights of white women, while continuing to enact violence against both women of colour and ethnically and racially diverse queer individuals. Similarly, Springer proclaims

that "the wave model perpetuates the exclusion of women of color from women's movement history and feminist theorizing" (2002: 1063), an argument aligned Taylor's vision, whose seminal work on Black feminism and the importance of intersectional practices within women's studies sheds lights on how "far too many black people continue to link the feminist movement exclusively to the activism of bourgeois white women and not to the struggles initiated by African Americans" (1998: 18).

A crucial starting point for such conversations lies in engaging with the works of Patricia Hill Collins, as she chronicles African Americans' attempts at reclaiming the feminist movement through the "use [of] alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations, and everyday behaviour as important locations for articulating the core themes of Black feminist consciousness" (2003: 48). Whereas white feminism is located within the parameters of legislation and policy reform, starting with the Suffragettes' goal to obtain voting rights for women (to be understood as white, heterosexual, middle-class women) to more recent attempts at reducing the wage gap, Black feminism as interpreted by Collins (1998; 1989; 2003), hooks (2000) and Chepp (2015) is situated within the everyday lived experiences of women who are disadvantaged both on the basis of their gender identity, as well as their racial or ethnic identity. The tensions that arise at the crossroads between gender, class, race, sexual orientation and social status are therefore the focus of womanism, which Taylor, drawing from the work of Alice Walker, describes as a radical pedagogy of self-love and acceptance, which "flows from a both/and worldview, a consciousness that allows the resolution of seeming contradictions not through an either/or negation, but through the interaction and wholeness" (1998: 26). Womanism is therefore an act of radical compassion, both to oneself and to one's community, fostering a sense of sisterhood among its adopters.

Womanism, or, at least, even casual interpretations of Black feminism, appear to be embedded in Beyoncé's latest album, and while such practices have been harshly criticised in the past (see hooks, 2016), there is something to be said about introducing a mainstream audience to the specific tensions that shape Black femininity. To this extent, Benard goes so far as to suggest that Beyoncé's take on feminism is reflective of "contemporary Black feminism, rooted in the agency of the individual and personal empowerment" (2016: 8), pointing towards the collective meaning-making processes of African American women, whose sense of self is rooted in both personal life stories as well as the lessons passed on by generations of (Black/Brown) women. While indeed a contested identity in the African American community, due to her success within and financial gain from an explicitly patriarchal, misogynist, and racist music industry, Beyoncé's recent turn to Afrocentrism, and her deliberate choices of promoting symbols, practices and traditions originating from the African continent, sparks important conversations about the double-edged sword of capitalist gain and activist agency. This, in turn, furthers the conversation surrounding what Patricia Hill Collins refers to as an Afrocentric feminist epistemology, which "tap[s] the fundamental question of which version of truth will prevail and shape thought and action" (2003: 49). On the one hand, there is hooks' harsh criticism of Beyoncé's use of Black women's struggles for monetary gain, and on the other, there is the dilemma of whether celebrities using their platform to raise awareness about the struggles and lived experiences of a specific group might bring positive outcomes. This discussion is further complicated by the fact that Beyoncé herself is a Black woman, and thus belongs to the same social group she seems to be championing, while simultaneously having little in common with most Black women in contemporary America. It could be argued, then, that *Black Is King* is informed by a broader Afrocentric feminist epistemology, which, in turn, opens up important conversations surrounding the narratives portraying Blackness in mainstream media contexts.

Find Your Way Back: Navigating Identity in the African Diaspora

"Got the Nile runnin' through my body

Look at my natural, I'm so exotic

Darker the berry, sweeter the fruit,

Deeper the wounded, deeper the roots."

- Beyoncé & Kendrick Lamar (2020d) 'NILE'

Black Is King is inextricably connected to the idea of Africa as a long-lost homeland, thus evoking the idea of a diasporic community navigating ideas of displacement, ethnic identity, and cultural heritage outside the proverbial place of origin. According to Zeleza, diasporic communities could be defined as "complex social and cultural communities created out of real and imagined genealogies and geographies (cultural, racial, ethnic, national, continental, transnational) of belonging, displacement, and recreation" (2009: 33). The notion of "imagined genealogies and geographies" stands out as particularly relevant to this study, as it reflects affective patterns of memory-making where reality is constructed and negotiated against a backdrop of a romanticised past. By connecting diasporic communities to the idea of 'imagined' identity markers, Zeleza's definition is evocative of Anderson's (2006) seminal work on *Imagined Communities*, which provides a useful framework for analysing the ways in which meaning is produced, consumed, and contested within diasporic communities.

More specifically, Anderson's work focuses on interrogating the practices contributing to the formation of nationalist discourses by first unpacking the concept of 'nationhood' as a figment of a group's collective imagination. In other words, Anderson proposes that "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (2006: 6). In other words, while it is simply impossible for members of communities larger

than, say, remote villages, where all residents routinely have in-person contact, to be consciously aware and connected to each individual making up their group, nationalism functions to establish "a deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson, 2006: 7) between people living within the same geographic area, under the same rule of law and political organisation, without necessitating a direct relationship between all members of the community. Re-contextualised within the present discussion, Anderson's framework offers valuable insights into the mechanisms reinforcing group cohesion among members of diasporic groups, particularly with regards to Palmer's argument that "regardless of their location, members of a diaspora share an emotional attachment to their ancestral land, are cognizant of their dispersal and, if conditions warrant, their oppression and alienation in the countries in which they reside" (2000: 29). While some authors have incorporated elements of Anderson's 'imagined communities' framework into their appraisal of diasporic identities (see Lamelle & Kelley, 1994; van Gorp & Smets, 2015; Hall, 2017), others have taken a clear stance against his methodology, citing limited applicability for case studies concerned with racialised communities impacted by the systemic injustices embedded in the fabric of nationalist discourses. In particular, Smith (2010) actively challenges the use of Anderson's 'imagined communities' framework in diaspora studies, suggesting his failure to acknowledge the systems of oppression and alienation informing ideas of nationhood thus rendering him "largely able to disregard the unpleasant histories of the reservation, the Bantustan, the ghetto, while proclaiming the egalitarian beliefs of his neo-Platonic concept of national belonging" (Smith, 2010: 7). Additionally, the fact that Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' is intrinsically connected to the idea of a geographically-confined nation poses additional questions to the study of diasporic communities more broadly and the African diaspora more specifically, for reasons none more obvious than the fact that Africa contains a multitude of ethnicities, religions and cultural heritages, thus reducing the African diaspora to

a homogenous group of individuals with similar experiences would be not only fundamentally reductionistic, but also quite evidently flawed.

These tensions, however, are reflective of wider debates among scholars investigating the African diaspora, as multiple perspectives have emerged throughout the past fifty years as the subject gained more academic popularity. On the one hand, history scholars such as Palmer (2000) advocate for assessing the African diaspora through the lens of its five 'streams', the first of which is considered to have begun some 100,000 years ago. On the other hand, a plethora of academic literature has been dedicated to what Palmer identifies as the fourth diasporic stream, most commonly associated with chattel slavery and the trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is this fourth stream that seems to be alluded in most analyses of the African diaspora, with authors such as Patterson & Kelley arguing "that diaspora 'served in the scholarly debates both as a political term, with which to emphasize unifying experiences of African peoples dispersed by the slave trade, and also as an analytical term that enabled scholars to talk about black communities across national boundaries'" (cited in Hintzen & Rahier, 2010: x). As such, this literature review seeks to acknowledge the different approaches to African Diaspora studies by aligning to the theory put forward by Zeleza that diasporic identities ought to be examined simultaneously as "a process, a condition, a space and a discourse" (2005: 41) in order to not only encompass all streams of movement from African countries to other continents, but to also honour the plurality of experiences and identities within the global African diasporic community.

Perhaps one of the most widely known approaches to understanding contemporary African diasporas is through Paul Gilroy's seminal work exploring "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating and remembering" (1993: 3) which have come to be referred to as the Black Atlantic. Gilroy's

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work provides a particularly insightful perspective as it actively challenges the historical development of discursive practices establishing the white, Enlightened figure as the superior being, in turn relegating Black subjects to the outskirts of modern society through civilised-savage, high class-tribal dichotomies. Deemed inherently inferior, Afro-diasporic communities making up the Black Atlantic therefore became "a product of lived experiences under racial capitalism and an 'imagined community' that is discursively constituted and reconstituted through localized and diasporic popular culture" (Lamelle & Kelley, 1994: 10). Although deeply rooted in the trauma of the Middle Passage and the systems of racism that have subjugated members of the African diaspora across the Western world, Gilroy's use of Anderson's 'imagined communities' framework aligns with the efforts of Stuart Hall towards shifting the narrative from absolutist analyses of African diasporic identities towards an acceptance of processes of hybridisation and exchange, therefore paving the way for a new African diaspora (Hall, 1990; see also Goyal, 2014). This cultural approach to diasporic communities is also reflective of what Mudimbe (1988) coined as the "Invention of Africa", a discursive practice positioning the mythical homeland (Africa) as an ideological mechanism "positioning blackness on its constitutive outside (…) by providing a basis for relations of racial exclusion" (Hintzen & Rahier, 2010: xviii).

This latter point resonates with an even wider academic tradition of assessing the "struggle against misrecognition that positions black subjectivity firmly within the space of modernity" (Hintzen & Rahier, 2010: xviii), championed as early as the nineteenth century by W.E.B Du Bois, through his concept of the 'double-consciousness'. According to Du Bois, Black Americans' struggle against misrecognition could be summed up to "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro" (Du Bois, 1897: n.p.). The tension between these two dimensions of the African

diasporic identity is further exacerbated against a backdrop of Western white supremacist practices perpetuating the misrecognition of African 'Others' by negating their varied ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, instead categorising them as a relatively homogenous, alien population by racializing them (see Wright, 2005; Gordon & Anderson, 1999). Pan-Africanism, then, emerged as a movement against the racist structures that attempt to erase the roots of African diasporas, this movement instead representing "a determined effort on the part of Black peoples to rediscover their shrines from the wreckage of history" (Lamelle & Kelley, 1994: 2). This scholarly approach to seizing control of Black narratives and repositioning their lived experiences at the forefront of struggles for liberation ties back to the idea of 'imagined communities' by persuading African diasporas around the world to retrace their journey back to the homeland, establishing emotional connections to the land of origin and developing a sense of selfhood rooted in African spirituality (Akyeampong, 2000).

While Pan-Africanism has generated a rich academic tradition encouraging "Black Americans [to] reject the dominant American delusion that the United States was 'the one country where it is unnecessary to have a past'" (Schomburg cited in Ogren, 1994: 20), this return to the homeland presents several complications for contemporary African diasporic identities. On the one hand, much of the academic work that has focused on mobilising Black people to reverse the trans-Atlantic sail and discover their roots failed to account for the individual tribes, organisations and ethnic groups populating the African continent, thus resulting in mis-matched mythologies perpetuated across diasporic groups (see Ogren, 1994; Akyeampong, 2000; Palmer, 2000). On the other hand, as Zeleza (2005) and Gilroy both point out, "the bulk of today's Black communities are of relatively recent origin dating only from the post-World War II period" (Gilroy, 1994: 96), thus further problematising the collective Pan-African ambition to create emotional bonds between members of the African diaspora based on the shared trauma of displacement caused by chattel slavery and other

dehumanising practices such as the human zoos popular in the Western world until mid-twentieth century. Although Black individuals continue to be influenced by the systems of oppression caused by white imperialism, to what extent can the affective heritage of chattel slavery unify members of the contemporary African diaspora, separated to such extent from the motherland (through, among others, the passing of generations, migration, and hybridization) that Africa no longer represents the location of one's roots, but rather another layer of mystery to one's identity? This question remains central to debates among African diaspora scholars and shall inform the following analysis of Beyoncé's *Black Is King* as well.

"Uishi kwa muda mrefu mfalme": Long Live Africa, Long Live Hip Hop

> *"We got rhythm, we got pride*
>
> *We birth kings, we birth tribes*
>
> *Holy river, holy tongue*
>
> *Speak the glory, feel the love."*
>
> *- Beyoncé (2020a) 'BLACK PARADE'*

Any analysis of the current case study would be incomplete without close consideration for the intricate relationship between music and race, particularly within the context of a Pan-African project curated by one of the most successful voices in contemporary hip-hop and pop music. Hence, this literature review is aligned with James A. Snead's argument that "music is fundamentally related to the social world, that music, like other cultural creations, fulfils and denies social needs, that music *embodies assumptions* regarding social power" (cited in Rose, 1994: 70, emphasis in original). Following this line of enquiry, Gilroy's exploration of contemporary cultural practices among Afro-diasporic groups suggests that the dissemination of black music across different geographic dimensions

not only establish an affective connection to the idea of Africa as a motherland but can also open up conversations among Afro-diasporic groups about their shared experiences as Black people in a white supremacist world (Gilroy, 1993). Taking this argument even further, Weheliye's research into music and Afro-Modernity unravels an important distinction between the normative, Enlightened voice and what Lindon Barrett coins as the 'singing voice', which "provides a primary means by which African Americans may exchange an expanded, valueless self in the New World for a productive, recognized self" (cited in Weheliye, 2005: 37). This distinction is particularly important to the present case study as it alludes to an Afrocentric subjectivity that defies hegemonic forms of self-expression, instead investing the singing voice with the power to transcend communicative barriers and appeal to the Black experience outside the labels and narratives imposed by racist social structures.

Reflecting on trans-generational and pancontinental examples of the African singing voice, many authors "trace the origins of hip hop back to Africa and argue that hip hop has multiple elements, histories, origins, and births" (Akom, 2009: 52; see also Karvelis, 2018), all of which pertaining to a quintessentially Afro-diasporic understanding. Emerging as a cultural form towards the end of the twentieth century, hip hop stands out as an exemplary manifestation of the African singing voice in international contexts, as it "attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity, and community" (Rose, 1994: 21). In other words, hip hop – particularly during the 1990s – functions as a useful ontology for young populations of African descent to negotiate their cultural heritage as well as their day-to-day circumstances, raising awareness to the discriminatory systems and practices continuously reducing Black individuals to unwanted outcasts of society. Providing critical analyses of these injustices against Black subjects, hip hop culture in general – with its "four related art forms that emerged in the late 1970s in poor

inner city neighbourhoods such as the Bronx (…) break dancing, turn-tabling (…), rapping, and graffiti" (Creese, 2015: 204) – exacerbates and subverts the Otherness of African American, Caribbean and Hispanic communities by renouncing Western ideas of 'harmony' and replacing them with "rearticulation[s] of African American oral practices" (Rose, 1994: 85). Specifically, through its use of intonation, pronunciation as well as rhythm, layering techniques and reliance on percussion, hip hop contributes to what Weheliye refers to as "modernity otherwise" (2005: 23), the conscious effort to gatekeep culturally specific artforms while exploring emerging technological developments pertaining to the production, dissemination, and consumption of music.

Further elaborating on hip hop's preoccupation with addressing the struggles of Black subjects, Gibson (2014) and Abdul-Khabeer (2018) remark that spatiality represents a central theme in hip hop culture, the idea of the Black communities being contained or exiled within inner-city neighbourhoods appearing as a recurring motif. Additionally, Abdul-Khabeer suggests that "hip hop's spatial imaginary also takes shape (…) as a 'nation' in which 'an ideology of nation-consciousness and nation-building shapes the actions of those involved in' hip hop music and culture" (2018: 150-1), once again bringing into focus the idea of an 'imagined community' of Afro-diasporic identities collectively involved in processes of meaning (re)making as a result of their lived experiences within a fundamentally anti-Black society. Given these considerations – as well as hip hop's quick rise to international acclaim, especially among youth cultures around the globe – Weheliye contends that hip hop "offers Afro-diasporic subjects an omnipresent cultural form through which to identify as black without having to fall back on strictly racialized ways of belonging, at least exclusively" (2005: 148), thus suggesting that despite a growing white fan base, hip hop remains rooted in profoundly racialised experiences pertaining to the systemic injustices perpetrated against Black individuals abroad. Due to this emphasis on a particular Black subjectivity, Weheliye's

argument leads to a series of difficult questions pertaining to ideas of authenticity, particularly as it relates to the auto-ethnographic character of hip hop music (see Abdul-Khabeer, 2018). Reflecting on the seminal work attempting to answer these questions in the realm of hip hop feminism (see Durham, Cooper & Morris, 2013; Peoples, 2008), to which Beyoncé has been known to associate herself with, will, in turn, lead to fruitful debates when assessing the extent to which her own experiences can adequately inform her efforts in representing an alternative, Afro-centric diasporic identity model.

Methodology

Situated within the broader academic tradition of postcolonialist thought, defined by Gandhi as "an ameliorative and therapeutic theory which is responsive to the task of remembering and recalling the colonial past" (2019: 8), the purpose of this dissertation is to critically engage with the discourses embedded in Beyoncé's latest visual album *Black Is King*. Exploring issues of displacement, discovering one's racial heritage and re-negotiating Black femininity/masculinity, the album represents a metaphor for the complex identity politics of the African diaspora. Given this interest in the lived experiences and affective labour of diasporic communities, this dissertation ascribes to a constructionist epistemology which validates highly subjective, unquantifiable accounts as legitimate research subjects (Madill, Jordan & Shirley, 2000). Moreover, this epistemological standpoint proposes that reality is a socially mediated, constantly re-defined phenomena (see Bryman, 2003: 51), therefore dispelling the idea that there is only one meaning, or that truth resides in only one interpretation of a social interaction or a media text. Furthermore, this epistemological approach is also situated within the spectrum of interpretivism, therefore advocating for the legitimacy of subject's lived experiences, as well as their agency to interact with media text against a wider backdrop of socio-cultural and political factors (Bryman, 2016).

It was by no arbitrary decision that this dissertation project centres around *Black Is King* as its case study. With over thirty million monthly listeners (Spotify, 2021), Beyoncé undoubtedly stands out as one of the most commercially successful musicians of current times, her mainstream appeal and ability to tap into diverse demographics positioning her as a dominant voice in contemporary popular culture. However, while it could be argued that, due to her celebrity status, the visual album was intended for the enjoyment of a general audience, acknowledging the uniquely Black experiences embedded throughout the album is

paramount. As such, my epistemological approach is fundamentally influenced by my own experiences as a white, able bodied, heterosexual, cisgender woman, and the privilege – as well as ignorance and engrained prejudices – that come with my status. Indeed, the following analysis is profoundly shaped by my personal interpretation of 'Black Is King', which in turn is the result of the socio-cultural and political environment in which I am situated. While some proponents of quantitative research in social sciences may challenge the validity of the present dissertation project, questioning the extent to which such highly subjective accounts can enrich existing academic discussions, I would argue that it is exactly within these personal encounters with media texts that researchers might best observe dominant discourses and normative narratives at work, a suggestion reminiscent of Hanisch's proclamation that "the personal is political" (2000).

With the above arguments in mind, this dissertation will employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its primary research method. More specifically, this project aligns to the academic belief that CDA represents the specific subject area concerned with unpacking various forms of public (and, implicitly, private) discourse to unravel the dominant messages informing them (see Machin & Mayr, 2012). As suggested by van Dijk (2011), academic research into CDA is an explicitly militant attitude towards media texts, as this strand of critical scholarship focuses on revealing the mechanisms of maintaining and enforcing hegemonic power subconsciously, through the use of superficially innocuous techniques such as using specific pronouns ('us' often representing the national collective), or words to shape the viewer's feelings on a topic – such as portraying military troops as 'our boys' (see Nussbaum, 2019). Although predominantly championed by political scientists looking into the propagandistic nature of speech and the pervasive nature of linguistics (see Fairclough, 2010), CDA provides a useful critical framework for unpacking *Black Is King* due to its ability to both contextualise the aesthetic universe of the film within broader social,

historical, and political contexts, as well as deconstruct individual visual cues in order to break down the ideological implications they carry.

This paper's approach to CDA is further informed by the multidisciplinary approach of Multimodal Analysis. Defined as "the grammar of visual communication that is used by image designers (…) an analysis of the rules and principles that allows viewers to understand the meaning potential of the relative placement of elements, framing, salience, proximity, colour saturations, styles of typeface" (Machin, 2011: ix-x), multimodal analysis proposes that no media text is arbitrarily constituted. In other words, Machin maintains that every aspect of our day to day lives is deeply embedded in discourse, thus arguing that only by taking into consideration all components making up a media text can viewers successfully identify what the underlying hegemonic status-quo is. This perspective is therefore highly reliant on semiotic analysis, defined by Chandler as the academic perspective "help[ing] us to realise that whatever assertions seem to us to be 'obvious', 'natural', universal, *given*, (…) are generated by the ways in which sign systems operate in our discourse communities" (2021, n.p. – emphasis in original). Hence, this dissertation will employ a multimodal approach to media analysis, whereby CDA's focus on unravelling the ideological function of media texts is informed by the subtle inflections decoded through semiosis.

Analysis

King Already, You Know It: Exploring Masculinity & Tradition in Black Is King

> *"Only you got the remedy, I say you got the remedy*
>
> *Shine your body, shine your body*
>
> *Be your own king*
>
> *Make nobody come rule your world"*
>
> *- Beyoncé, Shatta Wale & Major Lazer (2020e) 'ALREADY'*

As a modern-day interpretation of the Disney classic, *Black Is King* does not merely add a contemporary spin to Simba's tale of vengeance and conquest against evil, but rather offers an insightful study into the coming-of-age struggles of African American youth in a manner highly evocative of Du Bios' double-consciousness. Simba's journey towards avenging his late father and dethroning Scar, the villain, ought to therefore be interpreted as young Black people's attempt to retrace their roots back to the motherland – the album's explicit use of Afrocentric ideas and imagery presenting Africa as the universal place of origin – while simultaneously resisting society's demands to conform to white supremacist expectations of Black identities. Given this context, the fact that *Black Is King* was dedicated to Beyoncé's only son, Sir Carter, contributes to the idea that the album is a deliberate attempt at shifting representations of the African American experience in mainstream popular culture, instead encouraging younger generations to embrace a new Black sensibility: "And to all our sons and daughters, the sun and the moon bow for you. You are the keys to the kingdom" (*Black Is King, 2020*).

The issue of unrepresentative imagery depicting Black identities in mainstream media has long been the focus of intense scrutiny among cultural studies scholars, with Stuart Hall's

seminal analysis of Black male identities within white supremacist media formats standing out as an insightful analysis of the types of aggressions normalised within mainstream culture. More specifically, grounded in a Gramscian approach to hegemony and power relations reinforced by traditional broadcasting systems, Hall's argument unravels a pattern of consistently constructing Black masculinities as folk devils, as hyperbolised embodiments of everything that the white, middle-upper class elite deems to be unfavourable, grotesque and delinquent:

> "When blacks appear in the documentary/current affairs part of broadcasting, they are always attached to some 'immigrant issue': they have to be involved in some crisis or drama to become visible actors to the media. (…) Blacks participate, then, in broadcasts defined by the media as 'black' problems (…). It is very rare indeed to see a programme where blacks themselves have defined the problem as they see it" (Hall, 2021: 52)

Hall's argument that mainstream media coverage functions as a mechanism of gatekeeping and perpetuating the hegemonic status-quo by manipulating mainstream representations of Black people more specifically and people of colour more broadly becomes even more troubling when contextualised within a plethora of recent studies critically assessing industry practices fetishizing Black men in film, television, and print media (Miller, 1998; Adam-Bass, Stevenson & Kotzin, 2014). Addressing this pervasive attempt at constructing Black masculinities according to a narrow binary of the hyper-rich idol and the criminal outsider, Guerrero argues that mass media narratives further victimize Black individuals by "allow[ing] the general population to deify a few 'exceptional' black men at the heights of super stardom while at the same time dismissing or despising the vast majority of others as either criminals, dependents, or victims" (1995: 396-7). Stuck between the ghetto gangster and the adored celebrity – whose wealth, more often than not, is

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associated with a successful career in sports, further exacerbating the idea of an 'abnormally'

strong Black physique (Sabo & Jansen, 1994) – the Black man is a subject of the extreme,

situated either within poverty and lawlessness or the unattainable realm of lavishness and

excess, leaving little room for other masculinities. Complicating matters even further, these

polarizing media representations of Black men exist within a wider context of

heteronormative gender expectations, where masculinity is defined by rationality, extreme

control over one's emotions and a general disinterest in endeavours traditionally deemed

'feminine', such as grooming, looking after one's mental health or participating in child-

rearing (see Avery et al., 2017). As a result, Black masculinities in the media exist at the

intersection of several layers of alienation beyond mere racialised stereotypes, leading to a

complete erasure of non-conforming identities.

Figure 1: Young Simba encounters modern-day Rafiki for the first time.

Black Is King demonstrates a heightened awareness of the white supremacist systems

of representation seeking to categorize Black subjects within narrow tropes by showcasing, in

contrast, a varied selection of Black masculinities throughout the visual album. Furthermore,

the album strays away from attempting to provide a ready-made, hassle-free solution to the challenges associated with its coming-of-age storyline, instead proposing that finding one's sense of self comes only at the expense of resisting the temptation to 'fit in' by abandoning rigid expectations of Blackness. Addressing the insecurities adjacent to such character-building processes, the tenth song on the album features an excerpt from a poignant conversation between *The Lion King* characters Rafiki and Simba reflecting on the struggles of understanding one's place in society:

> Simba: Who are you?
>
> Rafiki: I know exactly who I am. The question is, who are *you*?
>
> Simba: I'm nobody, so leave me alone, alright?
>
> Rafiki: Everybody is somebody. Even a nobody.
>
> Simba: Yeah, I think you're confused.
>
> Rafiki: I am confused? You don't even know who you are!
>
> Simba: Oh, and I suppose you do.
>
> Rafiki: Follow me, I will show you!

The decision to sample this exchange between the sage shaman and the novice prince struggling to accept his destiny was by no means accidental. Paired with the subtext of the song – suggesting that reaching one's full potential is entirely dependent on making peace with one's identity and inner 'king' – this dialogue further progresses the wider bildungsroman narrative portrayed throughout the visual album. More specifically, proposing that "Every warrior, dey conquer, yeah (…) / King, dey rule them longer, yeah", *Black Is King* advocates for abandoning unrealistic expectations of (Black) masculinity, instead encouraging viewers to return to their communities in search for guidance and wisdom as they transition from novices to 'kings', an idea championed by several modern-day interpretations of traditional African coming-of-age practices, such as the adumu dances practiced by the Maasai people of Kenya and northern Tanzania (Figure 2; see Kasambala,

2020). Endorsing this idea of healing through a return to tradition, while simultaneously providing a modern alternative to tribal folklore and wisdom, *Black Is King* contributes to existing debates in favour of members of the African diaspora engaging with Afrocentrism, ultimately bringing anti-colonial ideology to the attention of mainstream audiences by pleading with viewers to "let Black be synonymous with glory" (*Black Is King*, 2020).

Figure 2: A cast of Black young men performing the adumu, which roughly translates to 'the jumping dance'.

Black Is Rich: Affluence, Power, and the Problem with the Rags to Riches Narrative

"I'm so unbothered, I'm so unbothered

Y'all be so pressed while I'm raisin' daughters, sons of empires

Y'all make me chuckle, stay in your struggle, crystal blue water

Piña colada-in', you stay Ramada Inn

My baby father, bloodline Rwanda

Why would you try me? Why would you bother?

I am Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter"

– Beyoncé, Childish Gambino, Jay-Z & Oumou Sangare (2020c) 'MOOD 4 EVA'

Figure 3: Beyonce & Jay-Z portrayed as the grown-up versions of Simba and Nala.

Figure 4: Jay-Z, in his role as grown-up Simba, embodies the image of opulence & success associated with male rappers.

In many ways, however, this idea of Black 'glory' within the *Black Is King* aesthetic universe becomes inextricably tied to representations of neoliberal ideals pertaining to financial prowess, social capital, and conspicuous consumption, perhaps best represented in the music video for 'MOOD 4 EVA', the sixth track on the album. Conceptualised as young Simba's daydreams regarding his adult life as the rightful heir to his father's throne, 'MOOD 4 EVA' presents a reversal of the master-slave narrative by casting Beyoncé and Jay-Z as the royal power-couple living in a lavish manor house where an all-white cast of household aides – from drivers to butlers and valets – cater to their every need, from carrying Jay-Z's chess board to brushing Beyoncé's bedazzled grills. Donning expensive jewellery and designer outfits, the Carters' portrayal in 'MOOD 4 EVA' speaks louder of the neoliberalism associated with hip-hop entrepreneurship than it does of the rags to riches narrative implied by Simba's coming-of-age story.

The opening shot showcases a leopard-print Rolls Royce convertible transporting young Simba throughout the desert, the following frame transitioning to the driveway of a

luxurious manor, where a black car of the same make and model pulls up with Jay-Z sitting in the back seat, his feet propped up on the passenger seat. In his seminal analysis of the moral economies of Afrodiasporic communities, Gilroy suggests the theme of the luxury car represents a fundamental pillar of the hip-hop royalty aesthetic, evoking a proverbial escape from an oppressed and segregated past. Speaking of the intricate relationship between automobiles, consumerism and the civil rights movement among African Americans, Gilroy posits:

> "(…) the vernacular speech of African Americans still sometimes refers to automobiles as 'whips.' The term suggests that deeply repressed and fragmentary acknowledgements of the painful slave past may be quietly active, undergirding the patterns of sometimes ostentatious and excessive market behaviour associated with black consumerism in general and the African American desire for automobiles in particular." (2010: 16)

Throughout the visual album, automobiles play a crucial part in supporting the bildungsroman narrative portraying the protagonist's evolution from an uninitiated boy to a self-confident young man. Contextualised within Gilroy's framework, the presence of luxury cars throughout *Black Is King* stands out as an especially telling symbol of social mobility, perhaps best represented in the 'MOOD 4 EVA' music video, where the Rolls Royce becomes the epitome of escaping disenfranchisement. The metaphor is particularly poignant especially when considering the fact that Simba's projection of success is Jay-Z, whose own life story resonates with the aspirational themes often associated with hip hop. Raised along with his three siblings by a single mother in a relatively low-income neighbourhood of Brooklyn, Jay-Z – born Shawn Corey Carter – took up drug dealing at age 12 as a way of contributing to the family income before committing to a full-time career in music in the late 1990s (Hattenstone, 2010). Despite his family's struggles, Jay-

Z's career propelled him to become one of the first hip hop billionaires, – "That's a billi', a thousand milli', first one to see a B out these housing buildings" he raps in 'MOOD 4 EVA' – with an estimated fortune of $1.4 billion as of 2021 (Berg, 2021). Additionally, in a move further cementing their status as hip-hop royalty, the Carters recently made headlines with their purchase of the world's most expensive car, a custom-made Rolls Royce Boat Tail estimated at $28.4 million (Doyle, 2021).

However, while Jay-Z's rags to riches life story resembles the aspirations of young Simba, the real-life implications of this narrative are more complicated than the surface-level success story. Researching the paradoxes of contemporary Black masculinities, Neal's analysis of hip hop cosmopolitanism contends that "success in the music industry has allowed young black people to breach the furthest territories of white exclusivity (…), their flaunting of wealth is intended as a provocation against a society that has striven to confine the aspirations of black people" (2013: 35-6). More specifically, reflecting on the cultural and emotional heritage of chattel slavery and subsequent abolitionist power struggles, one ought to acknowledge the systems of oppression put in place to continue the subjugation of Black communities even beyond slavery, with modern capitalist structures preventing disenfranchised members of society from participating in the same conspicuous consumption practices as the hegemonic elite – such as white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied people. Given this analysis, then, Jay-Z's trajectory from drug dealer to mogul loses its supposed relatability factor – evoked by *Black Is King*'s protagonist envisioning his grown-up self as resembling the hip hop artist – because his impressive wealth has been accrued by participating in the same capitalist structures contributing to the continued segregation of people of colour around the world. A telling example of the mechanisms in which Jay-Z's fortune protects him from the systematic injustices committed against other Black and Brown is the fact that Carter owns a significant percentage of his own music, as

well as the rights to songs he has produced or written for others (Berg, 2021), a luxury musicians of colour have been historically denied (Neal, 2013). Within this context, the fact that Beyoncé and Jay-Z portray themselves as royalty within a dynamic reminiscent of colonial race relations – whereby they are seen reversing the power relations within the dichotomous pair of the white owner and the Black slave – becomes credible only when acknowledging the privileges both have been afforded by the contemporary white supremacist society, permitting them to not only exceed their class status but ultimately become some of the most loved pop culture icons of the past two decades. While their rags to riches narratives may be emblematic of the narratives circulated in hip hop, particularly when reflecting on their status as a power couple as well, there is little hope for young Black people looking up to the Carters as a viable embodiment of where their own hustle could lead them to.

What's In a Hairstyle? The Political Power of Black Is King's Fashion

Figure 5: Beyoncé seen wearing Bantu Knots, a hairstyle popular among the Zulu people of southern Africa.

While *Black Is King* may not provide viable options for the power struggles young Black people still face in order to escape the shackles of an oppressive and hostile white supremacist society, much of the praise the visual album has received centres around the invaluable work it has done to expose mainstream audiences to Afrocentric standards of beauty and style. With over 69 costume changes throughout the duration of the visual album, Beyoncé's deliberate decision to showcase Black-owned fashion labels and African hairstyles in of itself should come across as a political act reminiscent of the Harlem Renaissance of the early 1900's. Demonstrating an acute understanding of her influence as

a global phenomenon, as well as showcasing her deep appreciation for the cultural heritage of the Afrodiasporic community, *Black Is King*'s idea of 'Black glory' therefore appears better situated within the "Black is Beautiful" ontology of the 1960s, whereby Beyoncé's decision to abandon the Eurocentric standards of beauty that have shaped much of her career thus far symbolises a return to an unapologetically Black savoir faire.

Figure 6: Hairpiece inspired by the Mangbetu tribe of Congo, originally used as a status symbol.

Any analysis of *Black Is King* that fails to acknowledge first and foremost its hair designs, ultimately fails to fully appraise the political dimensions of Beyoncé's vision. More specifically, in her book exploring the complicated intersections constructing Black femininity in the United States, Winfrey (2015) dedicates an entire chapter to the double-whammy of navigating beauty standards as a Black woman, proposing that a hierarchy of desirable features has long governed Afrodiasporic interpretations of what attractiveness means in the New World. In other words, she argues that:

"Hair is a lightning rod for enforcement of white standards of beauty. And reactions to black women's natural hair help illustrate the broader disdain for black appearance. While black hair can have a variety of textures, most tends to be curly, coily or nappy. (…) For centuries, black women have been told that these qualities make their hair unsightly, unprofessional, and uniquely difficult to manage." (Winfrey, 2015: 27)

Beyoncé herself has been subjected to similar critiques, her professional appearance – from her debut as part of Destiny's Child up until her breakthrough as an individual artist – having been for many years associated with long, flowy waves or slick, straight hair, mirroring the beauty trends of the time. As a pop culture icon in the making, Beyoncé's evolution from a whitewashed video vixen to, more recently, a self-assured proponent of African American culture within mainstream media confirms the notion that in order to be granted success by white society, "Black women in the entertainment industry are expected to approximate a white standard of beauty" (Byrd & Tharps, 2014: 184). While *Black Is King* takes a decisive stance against such standards, it ought to be noted that Beyoncé's most recent attempts at celebrating and popularising traditional African hairstyles and fashion only come after nearly twenty years of unmatched success in the music industry, her visual album *Lemonade* (2016) standing out as the first explicitly Afrocentric endeavour of her career. Additionally, Beyoncé own identity as a light-skinned African American woman benefitting from what has been referred to as "ideas about beauty [that] are shaped through an understanding about hierarchies based on hair and skin color" (Banks, 2000: 30) has consistently challenged the authenticity of her efforts to promote Afrodiasporic cultures through her music. Still, it is important to acknowledge the importance of such visibility work, especially when juxtaposed with a history of systematic erasure of African American creatives. In particular, the fact that Beyoncé commissioned several young Black designers to create the costumes for *Black Is King* may even be interpreted as part of a wider system of

reparations towards the African American community, especially when considering that even after the abolition of slavery, "racial segregation and fierce job competition worked together to guarantee the exclusion of African American women from the national American fashion and textile industry" (Lewis-Mhoon, 2014: 65).

Figure 7: Frame from the 'BROWN SKIN GIRL' music video showcasing the versatility of African hairstyles.

Making Space for Diasporic Black Identities in Mainstream Pop Culture

> *"Ebony and ebonics, black people win*
>
> *They say we bein' demonic, angel in disguise*
>
> *I hate I have to disguise it, why you gotta despise it?"*
>
> - *Beyoncé et al. (2020g)'MY POWER'*

Beyond the diverse cast of Black – and, more specifically, Afrodiasporic – artists and designers featured throughout the visual album, *Black Is King* goes beyond superficial practices of representation. More specifically, departing from the fundamental need to showcase different Black identities on-screen, the album provides a detailed

overview of the varied cultures and practices of Africa, championing once more the idea of a vast and diverse continent rather than a homogenous experience. This is particularly relevant to the present study, especially when contextualised within Lewis-Mhoon's argument that African American culture has emerged as a melting pot for a blend of practices carried over from the motherland by those brought over to America through the slave trade:

> "The Africans who were brought to the English colonies in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries did not carry with them a network of belief, customs, institutions, and practices constituting what might be called with accuracy a unified 'African' culture. (…) The peoples of Africa created a myriad of languages, religions, customs, social, political, and economic institutions, which differentiated them and gave them separate identities. These cultural features have remained with Africans throughout their exhaustive 'American' experience." (Lewis-Mhoon, 2014: 62)

By incorporating a plethora of traditional practices and symbols belonging to a range of tribes and cultures, *Black Is King* could be interpreted as a pedagogical tool for Afrodiasporic subjects wising to retrace their family tree and uncover their roots, despite the displacement and rupture resulting from the slave trade's legacy. For instance, perhaps the most prominent theme throughout the visual album is that of the Blue Man, portrayed by Nigerian-born performer Papi Ojo. Featured during key-moments in the protagonist's journey, the Blue Man symbolises a sacred spirit guiding and protecting Simba as he progresses from his childlike state towards adulthood. Moreover, the specific shade of blue covering Ojo's skin provides further layers of analysis, as this 'Haint' colour speaks directly to the transgenerational trauma underlying African American cultures. In Hoodoo spirituality, a set of religious practices performed by

enslaved Africans across the Western world, blue holds particular importance as a way of warding off malevolent spirits and ghosts (Parks, 2020) while simultaneously honouring the ancestors by demonstrating a vested interest in perpetuating sacred customs. Furthermore, the colour has been consistently tied to abolitionist struggles of emancipated slaves in South Carolina (Feeser, 2013; Young, 2011), thus further highlighting the cultural significance indigo holds among the Gullah Geechee people, descendants of West African slaves brought to the Western world in order to work on rice, cotton, and indigo plantations (Gullah Geechee Corridor, 2021). As such, the Blue Man can be interpreted as both a good omen, representing spirituality and ancestral wisdom, as well as a direct reference to the complex historical, social, and cultural intersections that young African Americans must grapple with in order to uncover their true identity.

Figure 8: Artist Papi Ojo appears throughout the visual album in blue paint, a colour believed to ward off evil in African American cultures.

Further elaborating on pan-African symbolism, another crucial theme throughout *Black Is King* is that of water, and its use in various rites of passage or religious customs. The visual album debuts with a shot of an infant in a basket, slowly floating towards the shore, where Beyoncé, dressed in white, awaits, ultimately picking up the child and proceeding to baptise him. Even to the uninitiated viewer, the sequence stands out as a literal interpretation of the legend of Moses, a Christian story about the systematic persecution of the firstborn infants of Jews in Egypt. According to the biblical tale, Moses was placed in a basket by his birth mother and send down the stream in hopes of saving his life, only to be discovered by the pharaoh's daughter, who took him in and raised him without revealing the truth about his identity (Beegle, 2021).

Figure 9: Referencing the ritual of baptism, Black Is King portrays water as a source of life, regeneration, and possibility.

Contextualised within the greater narrative of the visual album – encouraging members of the African diaspora to 'reverse' the journey across the Atlantic and reconnect with their birth culture – the legend of Moses presents an interesting parallel to the displacement experienced by victims of the transatlantic slave industry, whose descendants

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were faced with the predicament of growing up and establishing families of their own without any significant knowledge of their lineage. Additionally, *Black Is King*'s references to water – particularly the Nile and the ocean – are reminiscent of the slave trade itself, a connection previously made by Paul Gilroy when conceptualising the idea of a Black Atlantic as a new chronotope marked by specific systems of meaning production and dissemination:

> "The image of the ship-a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion-is especially important (…). Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs." (Gilroy, 1993: 4)

Nonetheless, while Beyoncé acknowledges the traumatic connections between Afrodiasporic communities and the ocean, *Black Is King* also uses water as a symbol for rebirth, facilitating a much-needed spiritual cleansing allowing Black people to overcome their past and build a new, 'glorious' future, full of prosperity and possibility. Finally, beyond these over-arching themes, the visual album pays tribute to the versatile cultural practices of pan-African cultures by incorporating symbols and patterns within its broader aesthetic universe, promoting a visual culture remarkably different from Western standards. Building on previous appearances in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé is seen wearing yellow, a nod towards the traditional Ifa belief system practiced by the Yoruba people in Nigeria, for whom the colour is a representation of the goddess Oshun (Oluwole et al., 2013), with whom Beyoncé has compared herself to previously. Additionally, further distancing herself from Eurocentric standards of beauty, Beyoncé is seen paying tribute to the practice of body adornments of several African tribes, including, for instance, the Mursi people, known for their lip plates and traditional accessories stretching the earlobe (Strejc, 2021), while simultaneously demonstrating a profound understanding of pan-African mythologies, appearing as Hathor,

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the Egyptian "goddess of the sky, of women, and of fertility and love" (Britannica, 2021) in
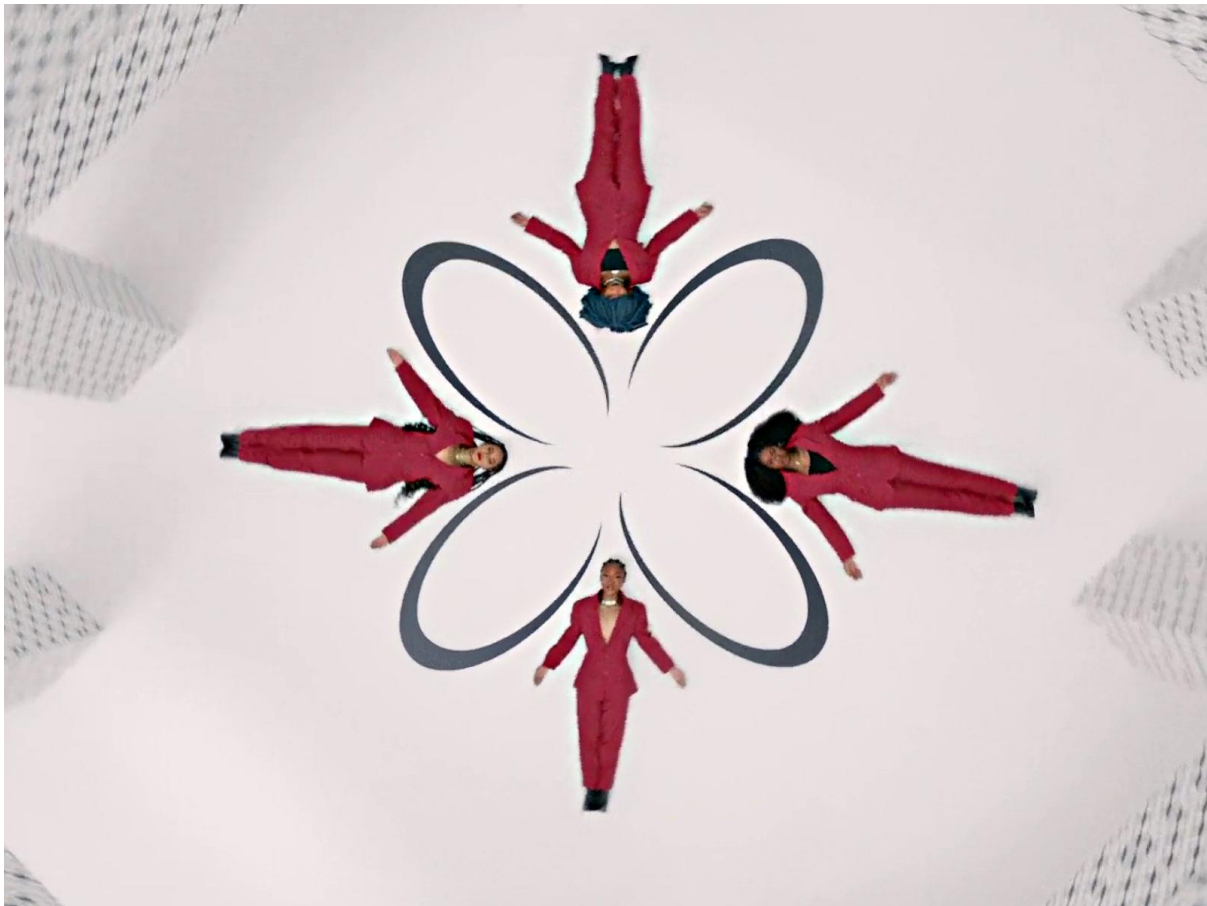the music video for 'ALREADY'.

Figure 9: Adinkra symbolism, common to Ghana and the Ivory Coast, featured in the 'MY POWER' music video.

Beyond Black Is King: Misreading, Misrepresenting, Misunderstanding

"You're part of something way bigger

Bigger than you, bigger than me

Bigger than the picture they paint us to be"

- *Beyoncé & RAYE (2020h) 'BIGGER'*

When Beyoncé announced the release of *Black Is King* in the summer of 2020,
despite the project having been a year in the making, many felt the timing could not have
been better. Prompted by the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in the United

States, the world was taken over not only by a global pandemic, but also by a wave of protests organised as part of the wider Black Lives Matter movement. Given this tumultuous context, the fact that Beyoncé would unexpectedly release a new song entitled 'BLACK PARADE' on the 155th anniversary of Juneteenth, an African American tradition commemorating the eradication of slavery (Savage, 2020), came as both a surprise to her fans and as a clear political statement. Announcing that all proceeds collected from the song would be donated in full to the BeyGOOD Black Business Fund (Benjamin, 2020), a scheme providing financial aid to Black-owned businesses affected by the pandemic, Beyoncé once more assumed her role as an advocate for Black people and an ambassador for their Black excellence. Still, as remarkable as her efforts have been, and as visually impressive as *Black Is King* turned out to be, the visual album left in its aftermath a mixture of high praise and equally harsh criticism, leaving many to question the true merit of her work. Not unlike the criticism that followed after *Lemonade* was released four years prior, *Black Is King*, too, faced considerable resistance from Black scholars and journalists challenging the extent to which Beyoncé's own agenda-pushing motivations were indeed rooted in the radical ideology the album claimed to champion. More specifically, reflecting on the critical acclaim *Lemonade* was met with due to Beyoncé's use of Black authors, artists and symbols throughout the visual album, critical scholar bell hooks contended that "Beyoncé uses her nonfictional voice and persona to claim feminism (…), but her construction of feminism cannot be trusted. Her vision of feminism does not call for an end to patriarchal domination" (hooks, 2016). Similarly, when asked to reflect on the public frenzy caused by Beyoncé deciding to sample her speech, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014), for her song '***Flawless' back in 2013, Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie admitted that while she could see positives in this interaction, given Beyoncé's platform as a world-renowned artist whose music has a wider audience than her own essays

do, ultimately "her [Beyoncé's] type of feminism is not mine, (…) it is the kind that, at the same time, gives quite a lot of space to the necessity of men" (Dandridge-Lemco, 2016).

Negotiating Beyoncé's perhaps more recent interests in positioning herself as both a feminist icon and, more importantly, as of lately, a Black activist, is no easy task. On the one hand, with nearly 200 million followers on Instagram and over 30 million monthly streams on Spotify alone, her global platform reaches out to more people than academics and critical race scholars ever could. Evidently aware of this fact, Beyoncé's decision within the past five years to embody the role of a community educator opens up exciting new opportunities for demystifying important academic debates currently restricted to the highly privileged closed circles of lecture theatres, university libraries or conference halls. On the other hand, however, criticism directed at *Black Is King* challenges the extent to which such new avenues seeking to democratise the curriculum are better off being led by world-renowned superstars who themselves may struggle with the depth of knowledge required for such community-led learning and unlearning. For instance, reflecting on the visual album's interpretation of *The Lion King* as not only a story about Africa, but also about Black masculinity, Attiah suggested that "The insistence that Black men's true power comes from being descendants of monarchical societies that somehow disappeared once Africa had the white encounter is not entirely true" (2020). Attiah's statement echoes the opinions of several other Afrodiasporic writers (see Sumba & Pinkrah, 2020; Nsofor & Ngumbi, 2020), whose own thoughts regarding *Black Is King*'s purpose pendulate between appreciating the visibility Beyoncé brought to customs and traditions otherwise deemed 'niche' by the white, Western eye, and criticising the representation of those same practices as an over-simplification of a rich and heterogenous collection of pancontinental African cultures. How can Beyoncé, a highly privileged, light-skinned African American woman, not only understand, but fully honour networks of localised rituals and divination systems

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without ever having had the chance to experience those very customs herself? How is Beyoncé's decision to pick and choose which African traditions to showcase in *Black Is King* any different from the alienating anthropological gaze, presenting sacred cultures as 'exotic' or 'backward' to the Western world?

Attempting to answer these questions becomes further complicated by the fact that, aside from criticism coming from the Afrodiasporic community condemning Beyoncé's *Black Is King* as a blatant appropriation of African cultures, several controversies have ensued following white audiences' reception of the visual album. It is here that I want to draw attention to the challenges pop culture icons face when trying to embody the role of the educator: without a sound critical basis informing their work, celebrities sharing surface-level activism with their fans through bite-sized material such as social media posts or music videos ultimately place the responsibility for deciphering the deeper critical readings of their actions on their audiences who, in many cases, lack the resources to properly do so. Perhaps best illustrating this double-whammy is the reaction of several right-leaning, white fundamentalist media outlets who, upon viewing *Black Is King*, were able to craft their own narrative interpreting the visual album as a nexus of Satanic practices, rather than an expression of Pan-Africanism (see figure 11). More specifically, in an article warning audiences of the upsetting content of *Black Is King*, one author goes so far as to suggest that "In multiple songs, Beyoncé and her dancers don cattle horns and cow skulls, which could have direct parallel to witchcraft and animal sacrifice", adding that despite the beautiful imagery throughout the visual album, "this does not negate the major overarching worldview issues that will lead children and families to enjoy demonic rituals associated with false religions presented in *Black Is King*" (Lancaster, 2020). While addressing this statement would require an entire essay of its own, for the purpose of this dissertation, I will resume to the underlying idea that any practices that are non-Christian

and, perhaps more blatantly, non-white, ought to automatically be deemed 'false', untrustworthy and a threat towards the young and impressionable minds of white Christian children. Situated within a rich history of racial conflict between white Americans and their Black and Brown counterparts, this argument becomes especially telling of the anti-Black sentiments still deeply rooted in contemporary society, with the U.S. in particular standing out as a colonising force that has systematically sought to reduce and alienate those cultures and beliefs not aligned with their hegemonic worldview (see figure 12).
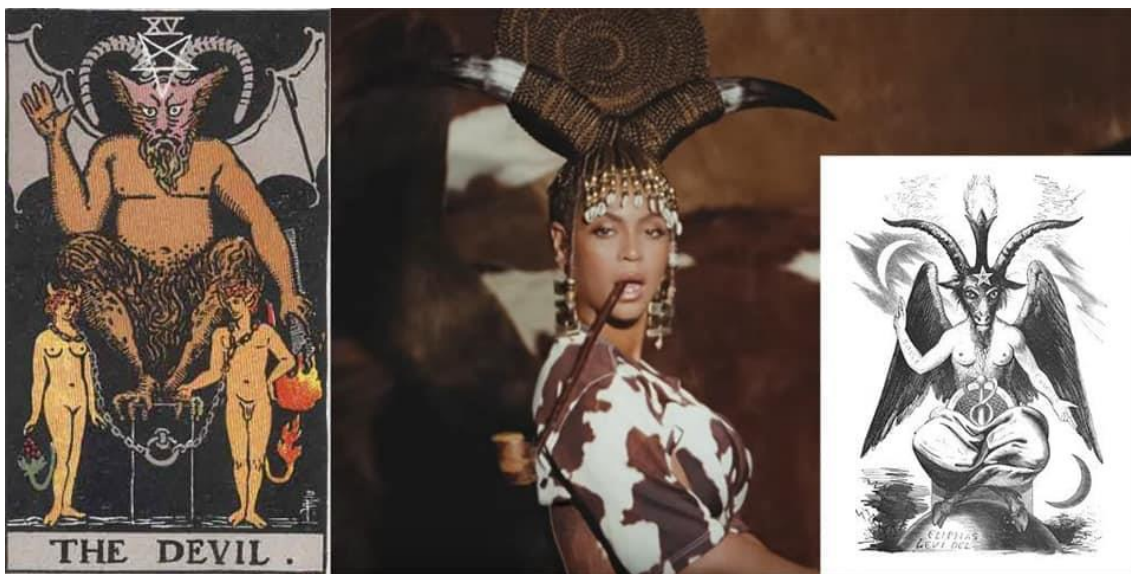

Figure 10: An illustration which had gained traction on Twitter, linking African headpieces to Satanism.

Figure 11: Rapper NoName criticises 'Black Is King' for its commodification of Black struggles.

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Conclusion

Drawing from the aforementioned arguments, let us now circle back to the initial research questions posed at the onset of this project: how does *Black Is King* picture contemporary Blackness, and how does this representation relate to the specific lived experiences of the African diaspora? Furthermore, can an international superstar such as Beyoncé be trusted with the role of community educator, sharing deeply spiritual Pan-African customs and traditions with audiences raised on profoundly anti-Black imagery? These questions are, without a doubt, impossible to find the right answer to. On the one hand, this dissertation has highlighted the importance of bringing unapologetically Black identities to the forefront of media narratives, presenting them as viable – and valuable – options for young (Black) viewers struggling to negotiate their identities as both gendered and racialised subjects in contemporary society. Using her global platform to celebrate non-dominant cultures with a mainstream audience, Beyoncé's visual album stands out as a powerful political act of reclaiming the narratives of those communities and cultures that have been historically side-lined in favour of the hegemonic Western standard. On the other hand, however, this remarkable endeavour is not without its limits, especially due to Beyoncé's international acclaim and her implicit participation in business practices that have systematically fetishized or altogether erased the voices of people of colour throughout the years. For instance, while the rags to riches formula appears suitable for a modern-day retelling of the original *Lion King* storyline, several critics have taken issue with the profoundly neoliberal discourses embedded throughout the visual album, especially considering how Black people across the world continue being victimised by oppressive hierarchies preventing them from participating in capitalism in the same manner as their white counterparts. Although the Carters imagine themselves as the living proof of Black

excellence, their success story is only reflective of a small percentage of the African American population, therefore rendering their own claim to fame and fortune as an exception within an otherwise overwhelmingly white entertainment industry.

Beyoncé's status as pop culture royalty further challenges the authenticity of experiences represented throughout *Black Is King*, with criticism coming from the Afrodiasporic community proving there is a fine line between accurately depicting and oversimplifying elements of African cultures, even when the author is a Black person herself. Despite Beyoncé's attempts to showcase as wide a variety of African identities as possible, critics have pointed towards a confusing blend of non-descript traditions and practices that, unless already familiar to the viewer, could be mistaken for pretty aesthetics. Additionally, many have taken issue with Beyoncé assuming the role of an ambassador for African traditions, considering her own immediate family lineage does not appear to have any clear ties with the continent, nor has she been known to champion this new-found affinity towards Pan-Africanism in the past. Nonetheless, in a world where representation of non-dominant cultures is so limited and, more often than not, orchestrated by members of the hegemonic elite, many viewers – myself included – have found it difficult to be overly-critical of the visual album when there is so little it can be compared to.

In conclusion, the purpose of this dissertation was to enquire into the representation of Blackness and Black excellence as reflected in the visual album *Black Is King*. Informed by a rich academic tradition investigating topics such as Black feminism, Afrodiasporic identities, race and media and hip-hop cosmopolitanism, the present discussion was focused on highlighting ways in which Beyoncé's most recent visual album contributes to the decolonization of mainstream media practices. In other words, reflecting on the wide range of African symbols, practices and traditions embedded throughout *Black Is King*, this dissertation has argued the visual album paves the way for unapologetically Black identities

to become more visible within mainstream media discourses. In doing so, Beyoncé's decision to celebrate other Black and Afrodiasporic creatives should be perceived as a welcomed first step towards a more ethnically and racially diverse media landscape where non-white voices are invited to participate in the mainstream market rather than being cast away as 'niche' or 'too ethnic'. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the present dissertation is merely an introduction to what ought to be a burgeoning academic interest into the specific decolonising practices celebrities and other pop culture icons could co-opt in hopes of diversifying existing media narratives. Taking into consideration the rise of phenomena such as Instagram infographics – presenting viewers with critical analysis of current events through aesthetically-pleasing visuals – more studies researching the impact of artists' political alignments on their viewers' beliefs ought to be conducted, as the boundaries between art, social responsibility and politics become increasingly blurred.

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Appendices

Module Level Ethical Review Form (MLERF)

COMM5600M Dissertation and Research Methods