Spring 2018

Beyoncé, Blues, and the Black Body: Lemonade from a Crossroads Theological Perspective

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Beyoncé, Blues, and the Black Body: *Lemonade* from a Crossroads Theological Perspective

A thesis submitted to

Regis College

The Honors Program

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for Graduation with Honors

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Acknowledgements

Firstly, thank you to my advisor, Dr. Kari Kloos, for your unwavering compassion, support, and patience. You were with me through the triumphs and tears, and I couldn't have done this without you!

Thank you Dr. Erin Nourse for your careful reading, thoughtful feedback, and continual encouragement.

Thank you Dr. Kleier for your enthusiasm for the project and confidence in me, and to Dr. Narcisi for the conversations in your office and for challenging me to find my voice. You have both been the strong female role models I've looked up to throughout college.

Thank you to Dr. Bruhn for teaching me how to think and write well, and to Dr. Howe for teaching me to lean into complexity and believe in myself.

Thank you to the members of my Honors cohort for your friendship over the years. You have all shaped me in unique ways through our discussions inside and outside the classroom. Another thank you to my fellow Religious Studies seniors – we did it!

Thank you to Allie Holmquist, for urging me to take a risk by writing about something I'm truly passionate about, and believing this was possible. Thank you to Natasha Hill, for helping me realize the importance communicating *Lemonade's* worth.

Thank you to Alex, Nina, Jackson, Jackie, Meredith, and Jacob for giving me my best memories of college. A special thank you to Jackson Rodriguez for our nightly discussions to and from the library, and for sitting a few chairs away as most of this was written.

Thank you to my sisters, Mollie and Madeline for your unconditional love and friendship. Thank you for all the hours of brainstorming and proofreading, and even more hours analyzing and singing along to Beyoncé's music together over the years.

Finally, thank you to my parents, Martha and Charlie Lacy. Mom, thank you for helping me persevere through this process and for setting an example of what hard work looks like. Dad, thank you for instilling a love of blues and a talent for writing in me from the start, and for buying me my first Beyoncé albums. I can never thank the both of you enough for your love and support. This is dedicated to you.

Introduction

On December 21st, 2008, my thirteenth birthday, I fell in love with the music of Beyoncé Knowles. It started off much like any other birthday, with my family putting up our Christmas tree in the morning and having cake and presents in the evening. My parents had gone to bed, so my sisters and I stayed up late watching T.V. We aimlessly flipped through the channels, giving each one about four seconds before moving on to the next. Finally, we landed on a DirecTV channel airing "The Beyoncé Experience Live," a concert film of the Los Angeles stop of her 2007 world tour. Immediately, I was intrigued and told my sister to linger on this channel. Then, Beyoncé appeared on stage belting her high-energy hit single "Crazy in Love" to thousands of fans in the Staples Center Arena in Los Angeles. With each song, Beyoncé conveyed a range of emotions building up to the grand finale. I sat transfixed as she went from heartbroken in tears one minute to fiery and fierce the next. She could be contemplative and heavy, and then transition to bubbly and light.

As the daughter of a blues guitarist, my own upbringing was shaped by musical genres such as blues, R&B, funk, country, and rock n' roll. I was rarely exposed to contemporary pop music, so Beyoncé was a new experience entirely. However, what initially drew me to Beyoncé, beyond her immense talent and indescribable "it" factor, were the connections she drew to the past in her music. Her all-female band, The Suga Mamas, included musical references to Stevie Wonder, James Brown, and Donna Summer in their arrangements. As Beyoncé demonstrated her vocal prowess, one could see the influence of powerful entertainers such as Michael Jackson and Tina Turner

before her. Her ability to incorporate elements from a variety of genres to create a novel sound struck me. Throughout the show, I noticed myself being drawn to her, focusing so intently on the performance that I seemed to lose all sense of time beyond that moment.

The experience culminated with her performance of her club hit "Get Me Bodied." As she sang, "Baby, all I want/is to let it go/Ain't no worries, no/We can dance all night/Get me bodied," I felt my spirit sore along with her. She smiled and moved with her partner to the beat so effortlessly, even in high heels. Despite the seemingly simple pop lyrics about dancing the night away in a club, there was something transcendant about this performance. Smiling as she belted, "I wanna let it out tonight, Wanna party, wanna dance, wanna be myself tonight," she appeared so joyful and so *free*, expressing herself with her body and her voice. In fact, in my estimation, her performance, along with her band and her backup dancers, demonstrated what our bodies are meant for – for communication, for relationship, for being one's self. From that night on, Beyoncé and her music became an integral piece of my life. I spent hours and hours learning about her, watching her videos, and talking the ear off of anyone who would listen.

The year that I stumbled upon this Beyoncé performance was the same year President Barack Obama was elected. As a naive thirteen year old, I thought his election indicated that we were living in a post-racial world. While I knew racism existed, I thought it really only found its home on the fringes. However, as the years went by it became difficult to ignore the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, and others. As I grew up, I came to realize that the unearned privileges I enjoy from being white do not necessarily extend to people of other races. As a young,

thin, cisgender white woman, my body has always been the body represented on T.V. and in movies. No one follows me around in stores, questioning my intentions entirely based on color. I do not fear for my safety when I encounter the police. Generally, my body has not been denigrated by larger societal structures. As these realizations hit me throughout the years, layers of Beyoncé's rendition "Get Me Bodied" that I had not considered prior became clearer to me. Beyoncé is not only celebrating her own body and her individuality. Rather, for her to sing, "I wanna party, wanna dance, wanna be myself tonight," she gives her black fans an opportunity to dance and be themselves in a world that can be hostile to their blackness.

As the years went on, not only did I grow, but Beyoncé's music did as well. Beyoncé emerged onto the national music scene at the age of sixteen with the release of Destiny's Child's 1997 single "No, No, No." Quickly, the group became one of the most popular girls groups in the world. Through subsequent releases such as "Bills, Bills, Bills," "Say My Name," and "Survivor," many of Destiny's Child's songs centered on female empowerment. Throughout her solo career, she has only continued to empower women through her songs and her countless achievements. As her career has progressed, her music has become more and more personal, and has deviated from typical "radio pop" content into more complex racial and political themes, culminating in her 2016 visual album *Lemonade,* which is the focus of this thesis.

Through her lyrics, visuals, and spoken word interludes adapted from the poetry of British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, *Lemonade* depicts the story of Beyoncé's journey to find healing after her husband's infidelity. Each song of the album corresponds to one of

the eleven "chapters": Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. The album serves as her most emotionally revealing yet, offering her audience a glimpse into her notoriously private personal life.

However, while much of the buzz around the album centered on the rumors that the cheating narrative was based in reality, there is much more to *Lemonade* than tabloid headlines. Although her husband's infidelity serves as the basis of the plot, the true core of *Lemonade* is Beyoncé's celebration of black womanhood. At the same time Beyoncé calls out her husband's infidelity, she also names the societal injustices that she and other black women face. *Lemonade* responds to America's legacy of disparaging the black body that began in slavery and endures to this day.

Of course, it would be impossible for Beyoncé to address all of the implications of the legacy of slavery in America in one 65-minute film. However, one of the many projects she takes up in *Lemonade* is the relationship of the black body to Christianity. Through *Lemonade's* images, lyrics, and spoken word pieces, she alludes to the ways in which certain strands of Christianity have disparaged black bodies, and also examines the possibility of a body-affirming Christian faith. While it is vital for any Christian theology to recognize the dignity of the body, it becomes all the more urgent when considering the historical degradation of the black body in America.

By addressing this subject matter in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé and her creative team enter a larger conversation on the experience of black womanhood that womanist theologians have engaged in for decades. Novelist Alice Walker, the orginator of the

word, defines a womanist as "a black feminist or a feminist of color."[1] Christian womanist theolgians engage in questions of theology through a lens that centers the experiences of black women. According to womanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher, "Womanist theology, being contextual theology, commences by considering the revelation of God in the lives of Black folk historically and in the present, particularly in the lives of ordinary women of African descent."[2] In other words, this branch of theology begins with questions pertaining to black women's experiences, and seeks to establish those experiences as vital to the Christian vision.

Among the questions that American womanist theologians take up is how to wrestle with the historical degradation of the black body through slavery and racism in America. One of the valuble resources for asking questions about embodiment, and a resource that Beyoncé utilizes in Lemonade, is the blues. The blues emerged during the Reconstruction era and they responded to the historical situation that newly autonomous, yet still oppressed, African Americans found themselves in. Blues expressed people's disappointment with the failure of reconstruction to deliver the promise of social equality, political participation, and economic advancement.

Unlike the spirituals that preceded them, the blues tended to deal with raw, secular subject matter. Common themes within blues music include sex, violence, broken relationships, poverty, and natural disasters. However, through this secular and even taboo subject matter, blues music did hold religious insights despite getting labeled as the

[1]Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens.* London: Womens Press, 2000.
[2]Karen Baker-Fletcher, "The Strength of My Life," in *Embracing the Spirit*

"Devil's music." Scholar Teresa L. Reed further characterizes the religious insights that can be gleaned from the blues. First, according to Reed, blues "shows how turn-of-the-century-blacks integrated secular with religious thought."[3] In a blues worldview, the secular and religious realms were not distinct realities but rather one. While they did not sing explicitly religious songs, they often evoked God's name in songs about secular subject matter, breaking down the binary way of thinking that God only belonged in certain realms of human existence. Second, in the blues, "black religious thought becomes less focused on the afterlife and intangible world, and becomes more concerned with the concrete realities of day-to-day living."[4] Instead of looking toward the afterlife as the means for escaping human suffering, in blues music faces the evils of the world head on. Blues was vital to the experience of survival in the face of oppression, because it allowed both the blues performers and their audience to name and overcome the evil they encountered. Additionally, it naturally follows that a system of thought concerned with "concrete realites of day-to-day-living" would be concerned with the body. In the blues, the body is celebrated and sexuality is revered rather than deplored. Rather than viewing the body as an obstacle to be overcome to be in right relationship with God, it is the site of communication with the divine and with others. For theologian Tolonda Henderson of the Chicago, "The witness of the blues to embodied reality is one avenue for womanist

[3] Teresa L. Reed, "Blues Lyric: Voices of Religious Consciousness." *The Journal Of Religious Thought* 55-56, no. 2-1 (September 1999), 47
[4] Teresa L. Reed, "Blues Lyrics: Voices of Religious Consciousness," 47

theology to reclaim the power of the erotic within the divine."[5] By paying attention to blues' witness to embodied reality, womanist theology can explore all of the possibilities that accompany divinity that is not at odds with the physical.

Two prominent womanist theologians, M. Shawn Copeland and Kelly Brown Douglas, have begun the work of examining the relationship between blues and theology through "crossroads theology." Drawing from the crossroads as a common blues motif, Copeland initially coined the term "crossroads theology" in her essay "Theology at the Crossroads: A Meditation on the Blues."[6] For Copeland, crossroads theology is theology in dialogue with blues music. While theologians have largely ignored the significance of blues music in the past due to the perception that blues is secular or even "the Devil's Music," Copeland argues that the blues and the people who create them have a rich theological importance. M. Shawn Copeland advocates for a "theology at the crossroads," which is theology in dialogue with the blues. According to Copeland, black Catholic theology, "must go down to the crossroads, to listen and to learn from black vernacular culture, to the blues. By engaging in a dialectical conversation with this music, theology places black vernacular culture at the heart of its mediation of the Christian message." In other words, theology, and in particular for Copeland, black Catholic theology, must not be alienated from the lived experiences expressed by blues people, because to listen to

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[5] Tolonda Henderson, "Honey, this Shug is Feeling Fine: the Blues Woman as Theologian." *American Theological Library Association Summary Of Proceedings* 60, (2006): 147.

[6] M. Shawn Copeland, "Theology at the Crossroads," *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland with LaReine-Marie Mosely and Albert J. Raboteau, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009), 98

these performers is to root theology in the experiences of those who have experienced marginalization. Through their music, bluesmen and blueswomen reveal the "depth of sorrow" of the human experience. To dismiss blues's potential for valuble contribution to theology on the basis of its secular or even immoral nature is to dismiss and demonize the people who create the blues and their audiences. Rather, theologians (particularly womanist and liberation theologians) should, and often do, embrace subversive theology that challenges "status quo" theology that reinforces dominant power structures.

Kelly Brown Douglas significantly expands upon M. Shawn Copeland's concept of "crossroads theology" in her book *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant.* Douglas asserts that crossroads theology informed by the blues. For Douglas, the crossroads marks the point of intersection between the personal, political, and spiritual. According to Douglas, a crossroads theology "affirms the transforming energy that is found in these strands acting as a whole. At the same time, this theology challenges the destructive forces that prevent these intersections."[7] For Douglas, and blues people, all of reality is intertwined, and the personal, political, and spiritual strands all have influence over one another.

One of the destructive narratives that Kelly Brown Douglas discusses in her crossroads theology is the "narrative of civility." While this will be discussed further in chapter two, the civility narrative was the black church's reaction to white society's racist over-sexualizing sterotypes of black people. In order to preserve their own racial superiority myth, white society falsely characterized black men and women as sexually

[7] Kelly Brown Douglas *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 124

aggressive and immoral. They used this myth to continue racial discrimination and to justify the murder of black people. However, in order to refute these dangerous stereotypes, the black church responded with its own overcorrection by encouraging a superhuman purity standard of its community, which ultimately led to the church's rejection of some black bodies. According to Kelly Brown Douglas,

> It cannot be said enough that the sanctified civility narrative is lethal, it destroys black bodies. The black church must do as blues women have done, name the evil and then act in such a way that does not foster this evil. It is only in acting in another way—the way suggested by embodied memories—that the sanctified narrative that ultimately destroys black bodies can effectively be disrupted.[8]

It is at this point, through the blues, that Lemonade and womanist theology most clearly intersect. Beyoncé's journey in *Lemonade* parallels that of blues women before her. The film follows the structure of "naming the evil," and then finding new ways of acting through embodied memory that disrupts racial injustices, including the harmful civility narrative.

Chapter One, "Down to the Crossroads," examines the expositionary groundwork that Beyoncé lays in the first chapter of *Lemonade*, "Intuition," which features the song "Pray You Catch Me." "Intuition" introduces not only the infidelity conflict in Beyoncé's marriage, but also the larger conflict of the legacy of slavery in America. Additionally, this chapter examines the significance of the crossroads imagery in which Beyoncé evokes the Yoruban God Esu.

Chapter Two, "Black and Blue," details chapters two through five of Lemonade, entitled "Denial," "Anger," "Apathy" and "Emptiness," which feature the songs "Hold

[8] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 178

Up," "Don't Hurt Yourself," "Sorry," and "Six Inch," respectively. In this chapter, I argue that Beyoncé takes up the blueswoman tradition of naming injusties and overcoming them through various blues pratices. In particular, Beyoncé responds to forces within society that seek to denigrate the black body in various ways as she demonstrates a blueswoman understanding of reality that resists dualistic bifurcation and affirms the body.

Chapter Three, "Faith and the Blues," covers chapters seven, eight, and nine of Lemonade, which are entitled, "Accountability," "Reformation," and "Forgiveness," corresponding to the songs, "Daddy Lessons," "Love Drought," and "Sandcastles." This chapter traces the shift that occurs within these three songs to Christian themes, demonstrating the compatibility of faith and a blues-worldview.

Finally, Chapter Four, "Making Lemonade," covers the final three chapters of the film, "Resurrection," "Hope," and "Redemption," featuring the songs, "Forward," "Freedom," "All Night," and "Formation." In this chapter, I argue that Beyoncé exemplifies what lived "crossroads theology" looks like – an active faith informed by the wisdom of the blues that seeks to bring redemption to the here-and-now.

The interpretative lens I've used to analyze *Lemonade* – crossroads theology informed by blues music – does not provide an exhaustive analysis of the film. A creative work as rich as *Lemonade* requires examination from various fields in order to digest its multivalent layers of meaning. Even within the religious studies field, there is more work to be done with *Lemonade*. Given more time, it would be beneficial to fully attend to the Yoruba and Voodoo imagery, as well as other religious influences of Louisiana on the

film. Scholars Kinitra Brooks and Kameelah Martin have already begun this work. Rather, this thesis allows for a particular narrow reading of *Lemonade* that can serve as a starting point for those interested in some of the religious and historical-musical heritage that *Lemonade* takes up, as well as the potential for art and theology to enrich one another. I argue that in viewing the film through the lens of crossroads theology, one finds an artistic example of authentically lived black faith that takes up blues' here-and-now emphasis, the integration of the sacred and the secular, and the attention to embodied existence and sexuality. In this way, *Lemonade* serves as a reminder that its heart, Christianity is and should be body-affirming.

Chapter One: Down to the Crossroads

The first chapter of *Lemonade* is called "Intuition" and features the first track of the album, "Pray You Catch Me." In this chapter, Beyoncé introduces the major conflict of the film, Beyoncé's husband's infidelity,. However, through her imagery and spoken word interlude, Beyoncé also subtly introduces the conflict that lies deeper beneath the surface of the infidelity narrative: the denigration of the black body. Beyoncé alludes to the historical roots of this degradation by white America by calling to mind the legacy of slavery. Overall, in this chapter I will elucidate the ways in which Beyoncé's personal narrative points toward larger societal evils that find their origin in slavery. Additionally, I will demonstrate that the crossroads imagery she utilizes lays the groundwork for the "blueswoman journey" she undergoes in subsequent chapters.

Throughout the first chapter, Beyoncé reveals the suspicion she holds toward her husband. In the opening track, "Pray You Catch Me," Beyoncé sings, "You can taste the dishonesty/it's all over your breath/ as you pass it off so cavalier/But even that's a test/constantly aware of it all."[9] Immediately, she makes it clear that she suspects her husband is cheating on her. However, she has not quite accepted this; she is still in a place of uncertainty. She must be "constantly aware," on guard for signs that he is truly being unfaithful. When the song reaches its refrain, Beyoncé repeats, "Pray to catch you whispering/I pray you catch me listening/I'm prayin' to catch you whispering/I pray you

[9] Beyoncé Knowles-Carter. "Pray You Catch Me," *Lemonade*. Parkwood Entertainment, 2016. www.beyonce.com/album/lemonade-visual-album/

catch me."[10] She "prays" in order to bring clarity to her situation. She wants to them to "catch" each other in order to end her suspicions, so she can move beyond her uncertainty. Even to discover his infidelity is preferable to remaining in a place of apprehension.

Halfway through the song, the music stops and Beyoncé begins her spoken word portion. Adapting the words of British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, she tells her lover, "I tried to make a home out of you/But doors lead to trapdoors. A stairway leads to nothing."[11] If she is speaking directly to Jay-Z, Beyonce states that she had intended for him to be her home, her family, but he deceived her. However, in the sense that Beyoncé is speaking existentially, she laments that she "tried to make a home" out of America, but that it would not accept her. While a stairway is generally associated with ascendancy, this stairway "leads to nothing," emphasizing her spiritual disillusionment. Immediately after this line, the screen goes black for three seconds, to emphasize her despair and the "nothingness" that confronts her.

Beyoncé's voiceover resumes as she questions her husband, "Unknown women roam the hallways at night/Where do you go when you go quiet?" When he "goes quiet," he is not present to his wife, as his mind is somewhere else. She continues, "You remind me of my father, a magician. Able to exist in two places at once." He is a "magician" in the sense that he created the illusion of trustworthiness in their marriage, while being in "two places at once," —with her but also with another woman. Furthermore, Beyoncé

[10]Knowles-Carter, "Pray You Catch Me," *Lemonade*, 2016.
[11]Knowles-Carter, "Pray You Catch Me," *Lemonade*, 2016, adapted from Warsan Shire's "for women who are difficult to love"

draws a connection between Jay-Z and her father, Mathew Knowles. In 2009, news broke that Knowles had cheated on Beyoncé's mother, Tina. This marked not only the end of her parents' marriage, which ended in divorce, but also the end of Beyoncé's professional relationship with her father. She fired him as her manager and began to manage herself, ushering in a new era of independence in her career.[12] By comparing her husband to her father, she makes clear that this is a pattern in her family, and that the wounds are generational.

Beyoncé's final lines of spoken word in this chapter are, "What are you hiding? The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse."[13] Beyoncé makes explicit that she and her husband have encountered a crossroads. The past, which has been shaped by the tradition of unfaithful men in her family, and the future, which is open to revision and has the potential for either destruction or new creation merge to create the crossroads she finds herself in. In this sense, a "crossroads" represents a moment of decision in the face of uncertainty. Additionally, she will embark on a journey to embrace the "curse" of unfaithful men the women in her family have had to endure.

However, the crossroads she finds herself in is not hers alone. Starting in chapter one and continuing througout *Lemonade,* Beyoncé uses her personal narrative to express communal hardship, just as blueswomen had done before her over a century ago. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, "Blues is . . . not afraid of the personal. The story of

[12] J. Randy Taraborelli, *Becoming Beyoncé* (New York: Rose Books, 2015), 402
[13]Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, 2016

a people is disclosed through personal experiences." [14] Through sharing personal stories in blues music, people could come together and recognize common struggles. By speaking their individual truths, blues people could also create shared narratives that provided a space for their audience to experience catharsis and healing.

Although a contemporary listener may take the personal narrative element of the blues for granted, it is a significant feature of the music because it reflects the historical shift that blues emerged in. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis details the ways in which blues music emerged post-emancipation and reflected the new way of life for African-Americans in the south. During slavery, spirituals were the most prominent form of music in the black community. The spirituals were often performed communally and expressed hope in God's transcendence. However, blues music diverged from the spirituals not only because they dealt with secular subject matter but also because they were often performed individually rather than communally. Rather than focusing on themes of God and salvation, individual blues performers gave voice to the shift in the social reality that occurred in the decades following emancipation by singing about secular themes, and interpersonal relationships in particular. According to Davis, "The former slaves' economic status had not undergone a radical transformation—they were no less impoverished than they had been during slavery. It was the status of their personal relationships that had revolutionized."[15] Blues music gave voice to the shift in social reality for the black community as they had the autonomy to pursue relationships

[14] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, xviii.
[15] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, (New York: Random House, 1998), 4

without the constraints of slavery. However, these relationships were not always blissfully romantic – they were hard and disappointing even when the freedom was there. These relationships were often incredibly difficult to maintain due to the economic, social, and psychological strain white society placed on the black community.

While popular music in the early twentieth century often explored themes of romantic love, love songs took on an entirely different context in blues music. Although mainstream popular music glamorized romantic love, in blues music, Davis states, "Love was not represented as an idealized realm to which unfulfilled dreams of happiness were relegated. The historical African-American vision of individual sexual love linked it inextricably with possibilities of social freedom in the economic and political realms." [16] Despite the economic and political limitations placed on the African American community, the freedom of sexual love provided a glimpse to the full potential of freedom. These love songs were not overly sweet and rosy, and instead pointed toward the difficulty in maintaining relationships in a racist society. Thus, love songs came to represent more than just a relationship between two individuals but rather an expression of human freedom for people who had siginificant freedoms denied.

While love was celebrated it was also a source of pain and tribulation, and blues music reflected that reality. The experience of infidelity is a prominent theme in blues music. In blues, infidelity often served as a metaphor for society's treatment of black women. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, one such example is Bessie Smith's "Down Hearted Blues." Recorded in 1923, "Down Hearted Blues" depicts a woman whose lover

[16] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 10

has mistreated her. Smith laments the loss of this love, singing, "Gee, but it's hard to love someone/When that someone don't love you/I'm so disgusted, heartbroken, too/I've got those down-hearted blues"[17] These opening lines establish her personal heartbreak and give voice to her raw pain. Douglas explains,

> On the most literal level, this song calls out to black women who experience the trauma of a bad relationship. Yet, even on this level the song is about more than one woman's love gone wrong; it is also a poignant commentary concerning the inherent difficulty of maintaining black relationships in a world hostile to black life.[18]

Bessie Smith calls her audience to community not only through the relatable personal account of mistreatment in a relationship, but also through her societal commentary. Her relationship with this man who mistreats her is not hers alone, and it does not remain untouched by the broader structures of society. As the song progresses, Smith opens up to broader challenges of being a black American. Douglas continues in her analysis, "Essentially, in moving from a troubled love story to a general notion of black troubles, 'Down Hearted Blues' places the blame of the bad relationship not on the black man alone, but also on the white society that makes all aspects of black life difficult'[19] Although the song itself revolves around a relationship, it "signifies" that ultimately the pain of heartbreak is not entirely due to another person but rather an evil beyond just one individual: rather, the oppression she and her partner face from white society.

Following in the tradition of Bessie Smith and countless other blues people, Beyoncé's personal narrative in *Lemonade* serves to communicate not only her particular

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[17] Bessie Smith, *Down Hearted Blues* (Columbia Records, 1923).
[18] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church,* 15
[19] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church,* 16

heartbreak, but to point toward the challenges facing the black community as well. According to Melina Matsoukas, one of *Lemonade's* directors, Beyoncé, "wanted to show the historical impact of slavery on black love, and what it has done to the black family."[20] Like Smith, although Beyoncé sings about her husband's infidelity, the root cause of suffering is not necessarily her husband himself but rather a society shaped by slavery. Beyoncé must overcome not only the strain in her relationship, but also recover that which has been damaged by the legacy of slavery in America – the black body.

The first chapter of *Lemonade* features numerous elements that establish the historical impact of slavery as a focus of the film. The chapter begins with an extended shot of a chain hanging from the roof of a shack in the bayou. Although the chain has been broken, it looms over the viewer and serves as a reminder that while slavery itself is over, its deep wounds keep a hold on America and perpetuate injustice. The post-bellum hardships that arose in the African-American community over a century ago persist in new forms, so Beyoncé draws upon past resources, such as the blues, to tackle the present. This chapter, as well as subsequent chapters, is also set both at the Madewood Plantation,[21] which was once the site of a slave rebelllion, as well as Fort Macomb, a

[20] Alexis Okeowo, "The Provocateur Behind Beyoncé, Rihanna, and Issa Rae," *The New Yorker*, March 6, 2017, accessed January 23, 2018. https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/03/06/the-provocateur-behind-beyonce-rihanna-and-issa-rae

[21] Marshall, Keith. "Making 'Lemonade:' Beyonce filmed mega video at Madewood Plantation house." *The Times-Picayune*. April 26, 2016. Accessed February 27, 2018. http://www.nola.com/homegarden/index.ssf/2016/04/making_beyonces_lemonade_on_th.html.

Civil War fort used by the Confederate army later captured by the Union in 1862.[22] The usage of both of these locations which have a history of supporting slavery as a strucutre but also instances of resistance simultaneously represent the horrror of slavery as well as the potential for transformation.

One can also clearly see the reference to the Emancipation era through the wardrobe of the women of *Lemonade*. A number of black women wearing white, Victorian style dresses appear in the first chapter during Beyoncé's voiceover, which signifies the connection to that time period. By wearing the beautiful, ornate dresses these women not only evoke the period of slavery and emancipation but also retroactively take back power by dressing in styles black women seldom would have been given the opportunity to wear in that era. Additionally, Beyoncé dons a tignon, which is a headrcovering worn by Creolé women in Louisiana beginning in the Spanish colonial period and enduring to this day. [23]

As previously mentioned, at the end of her spoken word interlude, Beyoncé states, "The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse."[24] While this curse is the generational curse of infidelity in her family, the curse that Beyoncé references is also racism in America and the legacy of slavery. For hundreds of years, white Christians justified the enslavement of Africans through their interpretation

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[22] Hémard, Ned. "History of Fort Macomb" New Orleans Nostalgia. *New Orleans Bar Association.* (2011), 2. http://www.neworleansbar.org/uploads/files/FortMacombArticle.7-27.pdf

[23] Kameelah Martin, *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 176

[24] Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, 2016

of Genesis 9:25, "Cursed be Canaan; lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers."[25] According to Christian historian Edwin Yamauchi of Miami University, "Since Ham was commonly reckoned as the progenitor of Africans, when African slavery became widespread – First among the Arabs and then among the Europeans and Americans – the verse was reinterpreted to justify enslaving the Africans."[26] For centuries, white slaveowners used this misguided biological and theological rationale to sanction slavery. When Beyoncé names the generational "curse" of infidelity, she also names the societal "curse" that is the impact of slavery. Like blueswoman Bessie Smith in "Downhearted Blues," Beyoncé uses infidelity as a starting place for broader societal commentary regarding the legacy of slavery and the injustices that endure for the black community today. As the film develops, Beyoncé's social commentary becomes more explicit.

Again, in her final spoken word line of the chapter, Beyoncé makes explicit that she and her husband have encountered a crossroads, stating, "The past and the future merge to meet us here."[1] The past, which has been shaped by the tradition of unfaithful men in her family, and the future, which is open to revision and has the potential for either destruction or new creation merge to create the crossroads she finds herself in. In this sense, a "crossroads" represents a moment of decision in the face of uncertainty. Within this crossroads, she must seek out discernment to determine which path she should take.

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[25] Gen. 9: 25 (New International Version)
[26] Yamauchi, Edwin M. "The Curse of Ham." Criswell Theolgical Review, 6, no. 2 (2009): 45, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2018).

Beyoncé establishes "crossroads imagery" through her allusion to the Yoruban god of the crossroads, Esu.[27] The West African men and women who were brought to the Americas on the Middle Passage brought their religions with them. Over time, the enslaved were forced to adapt their religions with Christianity, created a variety of syncretic religions across the American south and the Caribbean. Yoruba has been a source for many of these religions, and its practices have endured and shaped religious experiences for black people in America.

In Yoruba religion, people interact with orishas, which are spiritual manifestations of Oludumare, the supreme deity. Researcher Joseph M. Murphy states, "the Yoruba find spiritual strength in relationships with a pantheon of spiritual beings called *orishas*. The orishas are personifications of ashe that can be put at the disposal of human beings who honor them."[28] As personifications of *ashe,* which is "the blood of cosmic life, the power of Olodumare toward life, strength, and righteousness," the orishas are linked to natural elements of life and are involved in human affairs.

In the first shot of the film featuring Beyoncé, she wears all black, kneeling in prayer on a stage with a red curtain closed behind her. Red and black are the colors of Esu, also known as Eleggua, Legba or Elegba, the orisha that serves as a messenger between the gods and the people. According to Murphy, Esu's principle role is as a "way opener, messenger, and trickster," and he is associated with crossroads.[29] Beyoncé

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[27] Joseph M. Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America,* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993)
[28] Murphy, *Santería: An African Religion in America,* 11
[29] Murphy, Santería 36

appeals to Esu because her path is uncertain, and not only needs a way opened, but also needs an intermediary between the human world and the spirit world. She also communicates with Esu because she is about to embark on a journey to break the curse of infidelity that has plagued her family and the curse of racism that has plagued her people.

The allusion to Esu, a god resistant to binaires, creates a link between Beyoncé and blues people of the past. According to Angela Davis,

> The blues were part of a cultural continuum that disputed the binary constructions associated with Christianity . . . Among the many myths surrounding the legendary Delta blues man Robert Johnson is one that has him signing away his soul to Legba, or Elegua, the Yoruba orisha of the crossroads- represented in the black southern vernacular as a Devil-like figure.[30]

Although the legend of Robert Johnson's meeting at the crossroads has been interpreted as a deal brokered with the Devil, it had its roots in Yoruba. While blues has gained a reputation for being "the Devil's music" for a variety of reasons, it was partially due to a mischaracterization and oversimplification of the orisha Esu.

As an orisha, Esu contains a host of attributes that appear to be at odds with one another. For one, Esu is not entirely good nor evil, but rather has the capacity for both modes. In *Blues and Evil*, John Michael Spencer details how Legba [Esu] has been misconstrued in Christianity and associated with the devil:

> In the African-American Lore, Legba's synchronous duplicity was bifurcated by Christian dualism (or semi-dualism), though his personality as a trickster was maintained. He was no longer subhuman and superhuman, male and female, profane and sacred, destructive and reconciling—no longer beyond good and evil; he was singularly superhuman, male, profane, destructive, and irreconcilably evil.[31]

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[30] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 123
[31] John Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 72

While in Yoruba religion Esu contains a host of seemingly conflicting attributes, over time he came to be associated as an evil entity analogous to the the Devil. This "bifurcation" that Spencer attributes to Christianity diminishes the complex nature of Esu and creates a caricature for him. As Thomas F. Marvin puts it, "By reducing the complex figure of Legba to the one-dimensional character of the devil, Christians demonized many important facets of African Spiritual life and branded the blues as 'The Devil's Music.'"[32] While the blues retined many aspects of spiritual life from a variety of African spiritual traditions, the church tended to be suspicious of the blues due to its association with the devil.

However, prior to the dualistic understanding of Legba (Esu) that emerged, he could be seen as an orisha that demonstrated the holistic approach to reality by Yoruba people and their descendants in America. Rather than assigning strictly good or evil categories to Esu, he holds contradictions and demonstrates the complexity of the divine. As Beyoncé encounters him in this sense, she opens herself up to the array of possible outcomes for her journey. She genuinely steps into the unknown, because even the deity she first appeals to has a mysterious nature that cannot be predicted. Furthermore, through encountering this orisha for guidance not only concerning her marriage but also the curse of racism itself, Beyoncé demonstrates that she does not seek clear-cut solutions to this situation but a complicated, risky approach.

Through the invocation of Esu, a crossroads god, Beyoncé also lays the groundwork for her blueswoman persona due to the popularity of the "crossroads" as a

[32] Thomas F. Marvin, "Children of Legba: Musicians at the Crossroads in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man," *American Literature*, Vol 68, No. 3 (September 1996), 595

blues motif. The concept of "crossroads" has implications that are outlined in crossroads theology. In *Sexuality and the Sacred*, Kelly Brown Douglas further illustrates a what "crossroads" can mean to theology. According to Douglas,

> The crossroads is a place where various realities intersect, interact, and influence each other. A crossroads worldview is one, therefore, that denies rigid antagonistic boundaries, even when two dimensions of existence may seem to be intrinsically oppositional—such as sacred and secular dimensions of life. Instead, a crossroads paradigm suggests the 'truth' of life is found in appreciating the inherent dialectic nature of human existence, and thus forging a 'harmony' between these dialectics of living.[33]

Beyoncé takes up this denial of "rigid, antagonist boundaries" present in Yoruba religion as she examines injustice. By reclaiming these elements of Yoruba religion that white Christians attempted to eradicate, and that flourish in blues music, Beyoncé fights back against the oppressive conditions that a dualistic approach to religion fostered. By establishing the start of her journey at the crossroads, Beyoncé indicates that she will utilize the resources of a blueswoman to address not only the state of her marriage but also the state of society following the racism that began with slavery and endures today.

[33] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Sacred*, 102

Chapter Two: Black and Blue

After establishing her connection to faith and the blues in "Pray You Catch Me," in the subsequent four songs Beyoncé engages in a blues practice rooted in West African philosophy called "nommo." According to Angela Davis, "In the Dogon, Yoruba, and other West African cultural traditions, the process of nommo – naming things, forces, and modes – is a means of establishing magical (or, in the case of blues, aesthetic) control over the object of the naming process."[34] This process was essential to the blues because as an individual blues performer named "issues that posed a threat to the physical or psychological well being for the individual,"[35] her community experienced, she could take back power over those forces. In addition to naming the threats she experiences, Beyoncé also engages in a "blueswoman" response by engaging in blues practices such as using the personal to address the communal in the songs "Hold Up" and "Don't Hurt Yourself." Additionally, in "Sorry" she takes up the blues theme of traveling, while in "Six Inch" she demonstrates sexuality. Overall, in this chapter I will establish that the first half of Lemonade serves to establish Beyoncé's blues response to injustice.

"Hold Up": The Narrative of Civility and The Blues Alternative

Throughout *Lemonade's* second chapter,"Denial," Beyoncé details the ways in which she alters her behavior as she suspects her husband of cheating on her. Not only does Beyoncé deny her suspicions, but she resorts to a self-denial in order to meet her partner's expectations. As she descends into the water following her leap at the end of the

[34] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism, 33*
[35] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,33*

first chapter, “Intuition,” Beyonce states, “I tried to change, closed my mouth more. Tried to be soft, prettier, less.” Her attempt to close her mouth, as well as to be “soft,” “prettier,” and “less” paint a picture of a woman who attempts to relinquish her individuality for non-threatening, servile role. She becomes increasingly objectified as she lessens herself. By attempting to be “prettier,” Beyoncé implies that her husband will reject her if she is anything other than pleasing to him, particularly visually. Additionally, to be “less” suggests that she becomes not only less than her full potential, but less than her husband as well, creating a hierarchy within their marriage, with her husband holding the position of power.

However, like in Bessie Smith’s “Down Hearted Blues,” Beyoncé’s struggle does not simply apply to her relationship with her husband but also point toward her experiences as a black woman in America. By outlining the ways she tries to change herself, she also names the pressures that black women face in a blues-like processs of “nommo.” Her attempt to be “soft” mirrors the way in which black women often have to downplay their behavior in order to counter the “Angry Black Woman” stereotype society places them in. In their 2017 *Iowa Law Review* article “Aggressive Encounters and White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman” Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwoood write that “this so-called ‘Angry Black Woman’ is the physical embodiment of some of the worst negative sterotypes of Black women–she is out of control, disagreeable, overly aggressive, physically threatening, loud (even when

she speaks softly) and to be feared."[36] By closing her mouth more, Beyoncé attempts to avoid being seen as an "Angry Black Woman" and all of the negative sterotypes that accompany it. This coping strategy reveals itself to be damaging, because Beyoncé becomes "less" and therefore does not live up to her full potential.

Additionally, Beyoncé's attempt to be "prettier" can represent the ways in which black women are expected to conform to Eurocentric beauty standards. Professor Shauntae Brown White states,

> Since slavery, the colour caste system within the African American community has perpetuated internalized racism and self hatred. The system promotes a hierarchy among African Americans that suggests that the more European one's features – the lighter one's skin, the less ethnic one's facial features and the straighter and longer one's hair – the greater one's social value[37]

Beyoncé herself has not been immune to such a color caste system. In 2008, L'Oreal Cosmetics was accused of lightening Beyoncé's skin in an ad, which implies that lighter skinned people are valued more. Although L'Oreal denied the accusations, the implication is that black women such as Beyoncé are treated as commodities that can be altered in ways a company sees fit in order to increase sales, and that they only have value when they conform to certain beauty standards.

Furthermore, Beyoncé ties her self-denial to religious themes in the next part of Shire's poem. She continues, "Fasting for. . .60 days. Wore white. Abstained from

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[36] Trina Jones and Kimberly Jade Norwood, "Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman," *Iowa Law Review* 102, no. 5 (July 2017), 2049.

[37] Shauntae Brown White, "Releasing the Pursuit of Bouncin' and Behavin' Hair: Natural Hair as an Afrocentric Feminist Aesthetic for Beauty," *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, 1, no. 3 (September 2005): 295-308.

mirrors. Abstained from sex. Slowly did not speak another word." This time, Beyoncé appears to fall into an intense ascetic practice that involves bodily denial. While ascetic practices such as fasting and abstinence do not always carry negative connotations amongst religious people, in the context of the piece it is clear that these practices are another form of becoming "less." By avoiding her own reflection in the mirror, she looks outward to seek approval and does not cultivate a self-love. In abstaining from sex, she represses an essential part of her humanity. Finally, as Beyoncé transitions from closing her mouth more to no longer speaking at all, the audience understands that she has been completely silenced in her marriage. By engaging in these ascetic practices, Beyoncé dissociates from her own body. Rather than using her own body to enjoy sensual experiences, she fasts, abstains, and grows quiet in a denial of her own physicality.

Beyoncé's bodily denial leads to spiritual ramifications, which Beyonce describes, stating,

> In that time my hair grew past my ankles. I slept on a mat on the floor. I swallowed a sword. I levitated. . . into the basement, I confessed my sins and was baptized in a river. Got on my knees and said amen and said Ameen. I whipped my own back and asked for dominion at your feet.[38]

Although Beyoncé "levitates," she does not ascend but rather descends into the basement, the lowest part of any home. She continues to pursue religious solutions by confessing her sins, and getting baptized in an attempt at purification. As she gets on her knees and asks her husband for "dominion" at his feet, she reveals that she likens him to a God. By asking him for dominion at this feet, she implies that he has the ultimate power

[38] Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade,* 2016, adapted from Warsan Shire's "for women who are difficult to love"

to grant such a request. By imagining her own husband as a god, she also draws attention to Christianity's tendency to depict God in an idoltrous, masculine way. This false idolization of her husband is underscored by her self-flagellation. By whipping her own back, she conjures up the image of slavery and the physical torture that the enslaved had to endure. Once again, she has become objectified and her own body becomes a tool for someone else rather than a site of subjectivity.

The pressures Beyoncé describes mirror those that were present in the black community following Emancipation. In the blues era, blues people were counter-cultural in that they rejected a demanding standard of morality placed upon lower class black people by the upper class black elite. According to blues scholar Rod Gruver, "the newly awakened prophets of the lower-class Negro arose to revenge themselves against white America and the blacks who had accepted its Puritan ethos." [39] In other words, blues people served to challenge rigid expectations placed on the lower black community by both white people and the upper-class black population.

As mentioned in the introduction, scholar Kelly Brown Douglas refers to the damaging side of America's Puritan ethos as "the narrative of civility." Ultimately, the narrative of civility was a response to white society's damaging claims that dehumanized and hypersexualized black people. According to Douglas, the "narrative of civility," "was grounded in white/puritan standards of propriety. It promoted values of modesty, self-control, and cleanliness. Most importantly, it emphasized the value of hard work and self

[39] Gruver, Rod. "The Blues as Secular Religion." *Black Sacred Music.* Vol. 6 Issue 1 (1992): 58. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials,* EBSCO*host* (accessed November 29, 2017).

restraint."[40] The pressure to conform to this standard was stifling for the black lower class, who ultimately turned to blues to regain what they lost in the narrative of civility. Blues allowed a performer and audience to affirm their bodies, reclaim their sexuality, and heal with one another. This process involved naming the pain one experienced in a community. As Beyoncé evokes this narrative of civility, it becomes clear that the narrative has a lingering effect in our contemporary moment.

Finally, at the end of the poem, Beyonce declares, "Still, deep inside me was the need to know, 'Are you cheating on me?'" Despite all of her attempts to deny not only her suspicions but her self as well, she finally acknowledges what she has been avoiding. No matter how much she tries to bend to his will, none of her actions will be enough for him. She must instead accept the parts of herself that have been subjugated and stand against his domination. She comes to the realization that she can no longer deny her self and her personhood, and instead must confront her husband, and society, head on.

As the spoken word portion of "Denial" ends, the song of the chapter, "Hold Up" begins. With the music playing, Beyoncé re-emerges from the waters and opens massive doors of a large city building, letting a flood waters out onto the streets. No longer dressed in black or muted colors, Beyoncé wears a bright yellow dress with red nail polish on her feet. For the first time in the film, Beyoncé smiles and laughs. As she walks through the streets of New Orleans, she takes a baseball bat from a young boy and begins to smash cars, windows, and a hydrant that releases a torrent of water into the air.

[40] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church,* 17

Finally, Beyoncé has regained her sense of self and unreservedly affirms her feelings. No longer willing to put up with objectification, she instead smashes objects all around her.

Kameelah Martin offers an alternative reading of "Denial" wherein Beyoncé undergoes a Yoruban initiation ritual rather than a self-denial. According to Martin, throughout the poem and Beyonce's subsequent emergence, "The fluent viewer understands what has transpired: mounted by Yeye Oshún, laughing and destructive in her jealousy over her lover, Beyoncé reveals herself as an iyalorisha, or priestess— a vessel for the orisha."[41] Scholars such as Kameelah Martin argue that in this piece Beyoncé embodies Oshun, the Yoruba orisha. Oshun is the orisha of fresh waters. According to Joseph Murray and Mei-Mei Sanford:

> Osun can be old and young, rich and impoverished, loving and spiteful. At every turn she is something that the devotee does not expect. She cries when she is happy and laughs when she is sad. She is a powerful sovereign and master of the domestic arts. She heals with cool water, and destroys life in a raging flood. She is a loving mother and a leader of vengeful spirits who can take anyone's child away.[42]

One does not have to reject the interpretation of Beyoncé's bodily denial in order to appreciate Martin's interpretation of the scene. Rather, one can hold the two interpretations in tension in order to see a clear picture of the message being conveyed. By embodying a deity that holds all of these opposing characteristics, Beyoncé responds to society's pressures to make black women conform to a particular standard by becoming a paradoxical deity. In this way, Beyoncé shows herself to be a complicated,

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[41] Kameelah Martin, *Envisioning Black Feminist Voodoo Aesthetics*, 177
[42] Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford, "Introduction," in *Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas,* ed. Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 7

dynamic figure as opposed to a silent, subservient wife. Rather than avoiding the "Angry Black Woman" stereotype, Beyonce allows herself to be rightfully angry at her lover's infidelity.

Additionally, her embodiment of Oshun further aligns her with a blueswoman aesthetic. According to scholar Velma E. Love, Oshun's expression of bittersweetness, despair, and hope mirror the sentiments expressed in the blues.[43] By blurring the distinctions between human and divine, Beyoncé enters into a holistic blues worldview. Love continues, "The blueswomen, by taking on the role of traveling performers singing about the raw emotions of life, moved beyond the domestic roles assigned to women and communicated hope for a new and different life. The blues singers thus expressed a sentiment consistent with the energy represented by Oshun."[44] As Oshun, Beyoncé herself takes on the "traveling blueswoman" aesthetic in subsequent chapters as she resists typical domestic roles and expresses her strong emotions rather than resorting to repression. She simultaneously holds complex feelings of love and jealousy, pain and vengeance, sadness and laughter.

"Don't Hurt Yourself": Continuation of "Nommo"

The third chapter of *Lemonade* is entitled "Anger" and features the song "Don't Hurt Yourself." The camera cuts to Beyoncé in a parking garage wearing a fur coat and her hair in cornrows, asking her husband, "Why can't you see me? Everybody else can." The music begins with a powerful drumbeat sampled from Led Zeppelin's 1971 song

[43] Velma E. Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 64
[44] Love, *Divining the Self: A Study in Yoruba Myth and Human Consciousness, 65*

"When the Levee Breaks," originally a blues song by husband and wife Kansas Joe McCoy and Memphis Minnie in 1929.[45] While the history of rock music involves much appropriation of black blues songs by white artists, in reclaiming this blues song for her own purposes, Beyoncé takes back the power of the blues. Additionally, the use of "When the Levee Breaks" nods to the legacy of Katrina, as *Lemonade* is set in the city of New Orleans where the levees failed, flooding thousands of homes and businesses, particularly affecting the black, lower class community. Through the use of this sample, Beyoncé at once reclaims blues music that has been appropriated and also calls attention to an instance of racial injustice.

In "Don't Hurt Yourself," Beyoncé continues the process of naming injustices, as she features a clip of Malcolm X's speech often titled, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself?" in which he states, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman." As this voiceover plays, the footage cuts to images of everyday black women. This moment marks one of the first scenes in which Beyoncé explicitly calls to attention the conflict beyond her personal relationship. In its full context, Malcolm X's speech addresses the societal pressures that black women face. Malcolm X asks his audience, "Who taught you to hate the texture of your hair? Who taught you to hate the color of your skin? [. . .] Who taught you to hate the shape of your nose and lips? [. . .] Who taught you to hate your own

[45] Marshall, Matt. "A Brief History of "When the Levee Breaks," American Blues Scene, December 31, 2016, Accessed February 27, 2018. https://www.americanbluesscene.com/a-brief-history-of-when-the-levee-breaks/.

kind?"[46] The inclusion of this speech highlights the main conflict in *Lemonade*: the objectification of the black body. As Malcolm X discusses the status of black women in America, he points out that black women have been not only disrespected but also taught to hate aspects of their embodied selves. Therefore, through the inclusion of X's speech coupled with the images of black women, Beyoncé makes it explicitly clear that *Lemonade* is not only about Beyoncé's personal journey of navigating an unfaithful marriage but rather the journeys of American black women who must reckon with a society that disrespects them and leaves them unprotected. However, while X does refer to black women as "unprotected," Beyoncé's representation of black women throughout Lemonade is not helpless. Instead, the hard rock beat and her powerful assertion that she is a "lion" and a "dragon breathing fire" demonstrate her own strength as a black woman.[47]

"Sorry": Beyoncé as Traveling Blueswoman and the Unity of Body and Spirit

In addition to the process of "nommo," another prominent characteristic of the blues woman was her ability to travel and her tendency to reflect this ability this in her music. In chapter four, "Apathy," Beyoncé sings "Sorry," an unapologetic song in which she warns her husband that she will take their daughter and leave him as a result of his cheating. While Beyoncé has been in motion throughout the first three songs, the visuals in "Sorry" makes the "traveling blueswoman" theme explicit. The video alternates between scenes of Beyoncé and U.S. tennis star Serena Williams dancing in a former

[46] Malcolm X, "Who Taught You to Hate Yourself," (speech, Los Angeles, California, May 5th, 1962).
[47] Knowles-Carter, "Don't Hurt Yourself," *Lemonade*, 2016

plantation mansion, and Beyoncé sitting in a bus with over a dozen women whose bodies are painted with traditional Yoruba symbols swaying back forth. Beyoncé's traveling in this scene is important in that it further aligns her with the blues tradition. According to Angela Davis, "Blues representations of women engaged in self-initiated and independent travel constitute a significant moment of ideological opposition to the prevailing assumptions about women's place in society"[48] While emancipation brought the freedom of traveling to many freed black men, most black women still did not have the ability to freely travel due to societal pressure on them to fulfill domestic roles and thus remain in one place. However, blues women rarely sang about domesticity and instead lived counter-cultural lives traveling from town to town to perform. Often, their lyrics reflected this freedom and autonomy.

In particular, blueswoman Gertrude "Ma" Rainey made use of traveling themes in her songs. In Rainey's songs, the need to embark on a journey often stemmed from experiences of heartbreak. Angela Davis states, "The subject's of Rainey's songs, like those of other blues women, make decisions to embark on various journeys because they have been hurt deeply by their sexual partners but refuse, even in their pain, to relinquish their own agency."[49] Like Rainey's subjects, Beyoncé asserts her own identity in the face of infidelity through travel. Beyoncé's bus ride represents autonomy and a refusal to be defined by gender roles. She is free to travel anywhere she desires, and she tells her husband, "Me and my baby we gon' be alright."[50] She is open to a world of possibilities

[48] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 67
[49] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 67
[50] Knowles-Carter, "Sorry," *Lemonade,* 2016

that await her and her daughter, and she is not dependent on a man to fulfill her purpose. Her future is not set in stone due to her bodily existence as a woman but instead is open to creativity and the deepest expressions of her soul. Additionally, as she rides along in the bus and dances in front of it, she calls to mind the buses of the bus boycotts during the Civil Rights movement that also became vehicles for change and freedom for the black community.

Additionally, there is significance to the Yoruba body paint on the bodies of the women traveling with Beyoncé. According to the artist Laolu Senbanjo, the symbols he paints on his muses are called "The Sacred Art of the Ori" and they represent a physical manifestation of each of his muses' souls.[51] In this sense, their skin acts as a canvas that holds the image of their souls. Therefore, this art further demonstrates the body not as an object but rather as a site for communicating one's soul.

"Six Inch": Embrace of Sexuality

Another key characteristic of the blueswomen was their celebration of sexuality and sex-positivity. Although most women of the blues era were discouraged from sexual expression, blues women made a point of it. This acceptance demonstrates that for blues people of faith, God does not reject sexuality. According to Douglas, "The sensual dimensions of life are not seen as profane, irreverent, or sinful. God is thought to be just as concerned with matters of the body as with matters of the soul."[52] For God to be "just

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[51] Laolu Senbajo, "The Sacred Art of the Ori," Laolu.NYC, accessed January 7th, 2018. http://www.laolu.nyc/ritual-face-art/

[52] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant,* 24

as concerned" with the body as with the soul eliminates any kind of dualistic hierarchy of the body and soul. Like the soul, the body is sacred and it is not to be denigrated.

The sort of God that Douglas describes is present in the spoken word interlude that begins chapter five. As the words "Emptiness" flash across the screen, Beyoncé describes an encounter between a woman and her husband. The poem, adapted from Warsan Shire's "Grief Has Its Blue Hands In Her Hair," reads,

She sleeps all day
dreams of you in both worlds,
tills the blood and and out of uterus,
wakes up smelling of zinc.

Grief sedated by orgasm,
orgasm heightened by grief.

God was in the room
when the man said to the woman
I love you so
much wrap your legs around
me pull me in pull me in pull
me in pull me in pull me in
pull me in.

Sometimes when he had her
nipple in his mouth she'd whisper
"Oh my God" –
this too is a form of worship.[53]

This poem does not reflect a particularly positive experience, as the woman is grieving. However, despite the emptiness that she feels, God is still "in the room" with her, present to her grief. Like the God of blues people, this God is concerned with both

[53] Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade,* 2016, adapted from Warsan Shire's "Grief Has its Blue Hands in Her Hair"

matters of the body and soul, and as this poem makes clear, these can seldom be separated.

Then, the spoken word piece pivots to a focus on the moon. "Dear Moon, we blame you for floods. . . for the flush of blood. . . for men who also are wolves. We blame you for the night, for the dark, for ghosts."[54] In this poem, Beyoncé addresses the moon, which is traditionally associated with femininity. She apologizes for humanity's tendency to blame ills beyond its control on the moon. However, due to the moon's traditional association with femininity across cultures, the poem also draws attention to the tendency to place blame for societal ills on women. In particular, the Christian creation story has historically used to place blame on women for the existence of sin and suffering in the world. By apologizing to the moon, Beyoncé also implicitly acknowledges our need to examine the ways in which we suppress women through blame.

Finally, as the song "Six Inch," begins, Beyoncé's character describes herself as a stripper in the third person, singing, "Six inch heels/She walked in the club like nobody's business/God damn, she murdered everybody and I was her witness."[55] Although portraying a stripper seems antithetical to a blueswoman's insistence of humanity rather than objectification, her portrayal is one in which she is her own agent rather than an object. The scene alternates between images of her driving in a limosuine to scenes of her dancing on a stage with no one in the audience. This contrasts with her 2013 music video to "Partition," in which she and her husband share a limosuine ride and she dances on a

[54] Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, 2016, adapted from Warsan Shire's "Dear Moon"
[55] Knowles-Carter, "Six Inch," *Lemonade*, 2016

stage with him in he audience. Now, on her own, she displays her own sexuality for no one but herself. While the idea of stripping as an empowering act is a controversial position that is still largely debated in feminist circles today, Beyoncé's character is celebrated as she sings, "She's stacking money, money everywhere she goes . . . She don't gotta give it up, she professional."[56] In Beyoncé's interpretation she is seen as a powerful, independent woman who maintains professionalism as she continues to work hard. In this context, she is not shamed for the sexual nature of her profession but praised for her industriousness.

Overall, each of the personas that Beyoncé utilizes chapters two, three, four, and five contribute to her overall blueswoman response to the devaluation of the black body. The entire process is one of "nommo" in which she puts words to the pressure placed on black women to be silent, to look whiter, to fulfill particular domestic roles, or to suppress their sexuality. She even highlights the ways that the black church itself failed black women historically by adhering to the "narrative of civility." In order to combat these injustices, Beyoncé names them and offers a blueswoman alternative that abandons any societal expectations to fulfil a particular role.

[56] Knowles-Carter, "Six Inch," *Lemonade*, 2016

Chapter Three

The sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters of *Lemonade* are called "Accountability," "Reformation," and "Forgiveness," respectively. They deal primarily with the personal infidelity narrative, while the final three chapters of the film open up to communal hardships once again. These chapters link the first half of *Lemonade*, in which Beyoncé names the ways in which the black body has been denigrated to the final three chapters in which she imagines redemption. Although these three chapters tend to focus heavily on Beyoncé's personal narrative of infidelity in her marriage, they also include rituals that introduce Christian imagery to the film. While Beyoncé has subtly alluded to spiritually and theologically significant themes up to this point, chapter six, "Daddy Lessons" and chapter seven, "Love Drought," both take a more overt turn toward Christian imagery through the representation of the rituals of a funeral and a baptism. Finally, "Sandcastles" resolves the infidelity narrative between Beyoncé and her husband, which allows her to address communal injustices more directly. These chapters are significant not only because they resolve the infidelity narrative but also because they demonstrate the compatibility of Christianity with the unified blues worldview.

"Daddy Lessons": Breaking the Curse

The chapter "Accountability" features a spoken word interlude prior to the song "Daddy Lessons" in which Beyoncé revisits the generational curse of infidelity within her family. Before healing and forgiveness can take place, both her husband and father must take accountability for their actions of betrayal. Additionally, as referenced in chapter one, to the extent that Beyoncé's aim for *Lemonade* was to examine the ways in which

the legacy of slavery has impacted black relationships, white America must also take accountability for the "curse" of slavery that Beyoncé has elucidated up to this point. Just as Beyoncé looks to previous generations within her family to heal the root cause of the destructive pattern of infidelity within her family, Beyoncé's naming of societal injustices rooted in racism to this point has been a way of demanding accountability.

Just before the song "Daddy Lessons" begins, Beyoncé addresses her "mother dearest," as images of ordinary black women wearing serious expressions across their faces appear across the screen. Through a voiceover, Beyoncé says

> Mother dearest, let me inherit the Earth. Teach me how to make him beg. Let me make up for the years he made you wait. Did he bend your reflection? Did he make your forget your own name? Do his eyes close like doors? Are you a slave to the back of his head? Am I talking about your husband or your father?[57]

Throughout this poem, a connection is drawn between Beyoncé and her mother's experiences. The language echoes that of the spoken interlude in "Denial" in which Beyoncé discusses the ways she denies her body in order to accommodate societal pressures. However, in this poem she places the responsibility on the men of her family. When she asks her mother, "Did he bend your reflection? Did he make you forget your own name?" she implies that through her father's mistreatment, her mother has lost a piece of her own identity that it is vital to recover. By asking, "Are you a slave to the back of his head?" she once again evokes the legacy of slavery in America. Finally, through her question, "Am I talking about your husband or your father?" she makes clear

[57] Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, 2016

that these statements could apply to men across the generations in her own family, including her own husband.

As Beyoncé sings about her father, the scene continually cuts to a New Orleans jazz funeral in front of a Christian church, suggesting that a significant death and ritual are taking place. Insofar as Beyoncé ties the "curse" to her father, and sings about her father's death, the funeral appears to represent a the "death" and disruption of a generational pattern of infidelity. With the death of her father comes the death of his sins and, hopefully, a breaking of the curse that has plagued her family. Through taking accountability, there is potential to disrupt negative family patterns.

The jazz funeral is significant not only for the advancement of the personal narrative but also because jazz funerals serve a protesting function. According to Malik Walker, "While the jazz funeral is a performance of grief, it is also a protest. The master of the form of the state funeral is an expression of rootedness in the civic traditions of society, and its imitation in the jazz funeral is simultaneously an undermining of the notions of power and prestige associated with the state funeral" [58] Just as the jazz funeral demonstrates a breaking of the pattern of infidelity in Beyoncé's own family, the funeral can serve to undermine larger power structures in society rooted in racism. Additionally, while up to this point Beyoncé has generally utilized blues resources to combat injustice, this ritual introduces the idea that a faith community can also be a powerful aid.

[58] Malik J.M. Walker, "Jazz Funerals and the Transcendental Politics of Struggle," *Arts* 26 no. 2 (2015), 23 *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed February 28, 2018).

Although this chapter features a Christian funeral, Beyoncé continues to display her blueswoman persona by including New Orleans guitarist Little Freddie King, younger cousin to legendary blues performer Freddie King, in the scene. While the blues often gets labeled as "secular" or even associated with the Devil, in *Lemonade* Beyoncé holds the blues and her faith simultaneously. According to John Michael Spencer, many blues performers underwent a "prodigal bluesman" arc throughout their lifetime, in which they left the church to pursue blues music, only to renounce the blues later in life to return to the church.[59] However, for Beyoncé, blues and faith does not have to be an "either-or" but instead two facets of a unified perspective on reality.

"Love Drought": Baptism

The next chapter, "Reformation," features the song Love Drought. This marks the first song in which Beyoncé directly expresses a desire to reconcile with her husband. Although the previous three songs featured travel imagery as Beyoncé rode a bus, a limousine, and a horse, she appears to finally reach her destination in "Love Drought." Beyoncé and a group of women, dressed in ritual white, enter a lake and perform a ritual akin to Baptism, symbolizing both a purification and regeneration of her relationship.

Prior to the song and the ritual visual, Beyoncé addresses her lover asking, "Why do you deny yourself heaven? Why do you consider yourself undeserving? Why are you afraid of love? You think it's not possible for someone like you. But you are the love of my life…" As a follow up to "Accountability," this line of questioning suggests that in addition for taking responsibility for his actions, her husband must also address his

[59] John Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil,* 63-64

internal barriers to love. As has been previously mentioned, one of the elements of blues that *Lemonade* takes up is the notion that societal pressures can place on strain interpersonal relationships. In the context of the film, part of the answer to Beyoncé's question of, "Why do you deny yourself heaven?" could be an internalization of negative messages about the black body. To fully heal and move toward reconciliation, Beyoncé's husband must deconstruct any self-understanding based in white superiority myths.

The question directed towards Beyoncé's husband could also be addressed to all "blues bodies." According to Kelly Brown Douglas, "In order to dislodge dualistic oppositional constructs of identity and the world, it is necessary to dislodge an 'oppressor's' consciousness from blues bodies. The blues body must be free of outside perceptions of themselves so they can claim and trust their own experiences"[60] Through the difficult process of undoing an "oppressor's consciousness" that has taken up space in one's own mind, one can begin to claim and one's own identity. Thus, Beyoncé includes a Baptism to represent not only the cleansing of her marriage but also the new beginning made possible when one sheds internalized messages of oppression.

"Sandcastles": Resolving the Infidelity Narrative

Finally, in the eighth chapter of *Lemonade*, "Forgiveness," which includes the song "Sandcastles," Beyoncé and her husband resolve their conflict. Compared to the rest of the chapters of the film, "Forgiveness" is very stripped down and intimate. There are no other characters featured apart from Beyoncé, who sings alone at a piano in a cabin,

[60] Kelly Brown Douglas, "Black and Blues: God-Talk/Body-Talk for the Black Church," *Sexuality and the Sacred,* ed. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, (Louisville: KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 133

and Jay Z, whose presence suggests a wordless apology. The forgiveness between them is demonstrated not through a conversation but through body language as Beyoncé sings, "And although I promised/That I couldn't stay, babe/Every promise don't work out that way," and she and her husband embrace.[61] While the rest of the songs in *Lemonade* signify meaning beyond the personal infidelity narrative, "Sandcastle's" main purpose is to resolve this conflict in the film. However, insofar as the blues attests to a unification of the personal, political and spiritual, the resolution of Beyoncé's marital strife will have implications that extend beyond her interpersonal relationship. Taking the unified blues-faith that she has established in "Daddy Lessons," "Love Drought," and "Sandcastles," Beyoncé elucidates a communal vision of redemption in the final chapters of *Lemonade.*

[61] Knowles-Carter, "Sandcastles," *Lemonade,* 2016

Chapter Four: Making Lemonade

Following the reconciliation with her husband in "Sandcastles," the final three chapters of *Lemonade* reflect a shift wherein Beyoncé moves the focus away from her personal struggle in her marriage to the struggles of the black community more explicitly. In this shift, she reveals the spiritual resources to be found in Christianity. Although the first part of *Lemonade* details the ways in which Beyoncé resists Christianity's "narrative of civility" and other societal pressures create repressive conditions for black women, the latter half reveals that an authentic Christian faith grounded in embodied-ness can engender transformation. This Christianity, informed by the wisdom of the blues, exemplifies "crossroads theology." These final three chapters, entitled "Resurrection," "Hope," and "Redemption," not only resolve Beyoncé's personal conflict in *Lemonade* but also demonstrate what resurrection, hope, and redemption can look like in a "crossroads" theological worldview. Overall, Beyoncé's message becomes an artistic example of lived crossroads theology as she affirms the black body.

"Forward": The Blues God and the Resurrection of the Black Body

At the core of Kelly Brown Douglas's "crossroads theology" is a "crossroads God" that identifies with blues bodies. Blues bodies, as defined by Douglas, are the bodies of those who are oppressed for multiple facets of their identity.[62] In the blues era, blues artists represented the black lower class. Through blues performance, these blues artists, and their audiences, expressed the injustices they experienced due to their races, economic statuses, genders, and sexualities. In the blues community's resistance to the

[62] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 76

"narrative of civility," they created an environment of acceptance of the characteristics that made them "blues bodies."

While blues people were looked down upon not only by white America but also by the middle and upper class black community, the "blues God" embraces them. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, the blues holds "a truth about the strife and strivings of blues bodies."[63] The blues became an outlet for people to express their realities without the constraints placed upon them by white America or the narrative of civility. However, blues did not only serve to express the realities of day-to-day living but also served an even deeper purpose. The blues also expressed truth about black faith. Douglas continues, "the songs they sang testified to a God that was present in their blues lives. Their sung testimony was about a god who knew, like nobody else did, all of their troubles . . . Such a god was present in the crossroad intersects of their living."[64] Although many considered the blues to be "the Devil's music" insofar as it embraced sex and other forms of impropriety, the blues revealed a faith in a God that accepts all bodies, regardless of color, sexuality, or status. For blues musicians, there were not sharp distinctions between the sacred and secular. Instead, all aspects of life held their own sacredness that could be revered.

Additionally, just as there is no divide in a blues worldview between the sacred and secular, a crossroads God blurs the divisions between the human and divine, creating a "crossroads reality." According to Douglas, "The very revelation of god itself is a

[63] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 141
[64] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 141-142

crossroads reality. When we state that God reveals, it means that god has entered into human history. Divine revelation therefore reflects two spheres of existence coming together, the divine and human."[65] This revelation is made clear in the person of Jesus. Through the Incarnation, Jesus makes it clear an attempt to bifurcate divine and human realities is to create illusory divisions. Instead, as a crossroads God, Jesus is intimately connected with the human world.

In the latter songs of *Lemonade,* Beyoncé's use of Christian resurrection imagery points to a parallel of Douglas' "blues god." The ninth chapter of *Lemonade*, "Resurrection," features the song "Forward" and establishes Jesus Christ as a figure of hope and solidarity within the black community. The title of the chapter, "Resurrection," at once alerts the viewer to the theological significance of the scene, as the word is inextricably associated with Christianity. Although the chapter occurs following the reconciliation of Beyoncé and her husband, it takes on a somber tone, as it features the images of mothers of unjustly killed unarmed black men posing with photos of their sons. However, as the chapter title suggests, there is a quiet hope in the Resurrection of these men as well.

Rather than opening this scene with Beyoncé's voice, the audience instead hears the voices of unnamed black women in conversation, suggesting that Beyoncé has taken a step back to take the focus away from her personal story. One woman asks, "How will we lead our children into the future?" as the camera pans to two black women on either side of a young black girl staring into the camera. Given that so much of the film to this point

[65] Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, 142

has been devoted to naming injustice, this woman brings about the important question of, "Now what?" This woman voices the concern that has built up throughout the film, as her question reflects not only her personal concerns but also the state of the black community's response to the intrinsic racism so pervasive to the structures of our society. How do black mothers raise their children to find self-worth in a society hostile to their blackness? How do black mothers ensure a better future for their children?

Part of the answer can be found in a faith that firmly stands against the devaluation of the black body. As the camera cuts to a pair of middle-aged black women in casual, modern clothes, another woman responds, "Love. L-O-V-E love." Then, the first woman says, "When your back is against the wall and your wall against your back, who you call? Hey! Who you call? Who you call? You gotta call him. You gotta call Jesus. You gotta call him. You gotta call him, 'cause you ain't got another hope!" Through the expression of hope in Jesus during hard times, this woman answers the question of, "How do we lead our children into the future?" with the assertion that it is through faith in Jesus. She echoes the womanist sentiment of, "Making a way out of no way," insisting upon hope in Jesus even in the most dire of circumstances.

However, as is to be seen throughout the subsequent music video to the song "Forward," this hope in Jesus does not rely on a "pie-in-the-sky" sort of theology that looks to the afterlife as a release from the suffering of the present day. People of this faith do not passively wait for the day that their spirits will be delivered from their racial injustice. To do so would be to buy into a dualist split between body and spirit that the blues does not recognize. Rather, those with a blues-faith understand that life's evils

cannot be ignored or escaped. They must be overcome through naming these evils that threaten life "when your back is against the wall and your wall is against your back." The "blues god" they look to in Jesus helps them to face these injustices through his own presence on Earth and within blues bodies.

As the somber music of "Forward" begins, the audience hears the voice of British recording artist James Blake singing, "Forward/Best foot first just in case/When we made our way 'til now/It's time to listen, it's time to fight."[66] These lyrics reinforce the shift that has taken place in the narrative. Now that Beyoncé and her husband have reconciled, they must move forward by continuing to listen to one another's needs and concerns, as well as "fighting" for their relationship to survive. However, Beyoncé also moves forward in the sense that she explicitly shifts the film's focus to communal concerns. Although Beyoncé and her husband have resolved their interpersonal conflicts, the lingering societal injustices that she has alludes to throughout the film remain. Therefore, it is important to not only listen to those experiencing injustice, i.e. black women, but to fight the structures that create these conditions in the first place.

The visual that accompanies the song "Forward" further illustrates Beyoncé's shift away from her personal narrative to a communal narrative. Once the music begins, Beyoncé herself does not appear. Instead, the video features the images of black women whose sons were unjustly killed by police or armed civilians. The first image is that of Gwen Carr, holding a photo of her son Eric Garner. The second is Lezley McSpadden, holding an image of her son Michael Brown, and the third is Sybrina Fulton, holding a

[66]Knowles-Carter, "Forward," *Lemonade,* 2016

portrait of her son Trayvon Martin. Then, more of the women who have been featured throughout *Lemonade* display older images of black men who have been unjustly killed throughout history.

Since their sons' deaths, Lezley McSpadden, Sybrina Fulton, and Gwen Carr have been outspoken activists for the Black Lives Matter movement and have been called the "Mothers of the Movement."[67] The presence of these women with images of their sons evokes the memory of Mamie Till Mobley, the mother of Emmett Till, the fourteen-year-old boy who was tortured and lynched in Mississippi in 1955. Mamie Till Mobley famously held an open casket funeral for her son so that the world could see what had been done to her son. She devoted the rest of her life to civil rights activism and keeping the memory of her son alive. As the camera cuts between McSpadden, Fulton, and Carr, they too hold up the images of their sons for the world to see as they continue their own activism against racial inequality. In many ways, through the connection of these women to women of the past, and women like Mamie Till Mobley, who have suffered the loss of family members at the hands of racism, Beyoncé and her creative team draw a connection between the brutality of the Jim Crow era and the present day. Gun violence, especially state-sanctioned gun violence, serves as a modern form of lynching that creates terror for the black community.

This chapter of *Lemonade* places America's epidemic of the killings of unarmed black men, as well as the resolve of their loved ones left behind, at the core of the film.

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[67] Will Drabold, "Meet the Mothers Of The Movement Speaking at the Democratic Convention." *Time Magazine*. July 26, 2016. Accessed 7 Janurary 2018. http://time.com/4423920/dnc-mothers-movement-speakers/

Up to this point, Beyoncé has named the ways in which members of the black community have been objectified by white society. In particular, she demonstrates that black women are pressured to adopt Eurocentric beauty standards, discouraged from sexual expression, and moved to silence. However, by including the images of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, as well as their mothers, Beyoncé further demonstrates the life-threatening danger of being black in American society. Had Martin, Brown, or Garner not been black, perhaps they would be alive today. Therefore, not only does white America's anti-blackness devalue the humanity of black people, it threatens their very lives.

This chapter holds a strong theological significance as well as a political one. In particular, the appearance of these three women with the images of their sons demonstrates Kelly Brown Douglas' concept of Jesus Christ as a "Blues God." The juxtaposition of these images with the chapter title "Resurrection" suggests an identification of these unarmed black men with Christ. In *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, James H. Cone discusses how black people could identify Christ's suffering on the cross during the horrific lynching era, and used his resurrection as a symbol of hope. Cone states, "In the mystery of God's revelation, black Christians believed that just knowing that Jesus went through an experience of suffering in a manner similar to theirs gave them faith that God was with them, even in suffering on lynching trees, just as God was present with Jesus in suffering on the cross."[68] In this sense, while the lynching tree was a symbol of suffering and death, Christ's cross was a symbol of solidarity with those

[68] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll: NY, Orbis Books, 2011), 22

suffering. Black Christians of the lynching era could understand that a true Christian God did not identify with the white oppressors wreaking violence and havoc in their communities, but rather stood with the marginalized in solidarity.

By framing this chapter as "Resurrection," Beyoncé and her creative team urge their audience to consider the ways in which Jesus can identify with Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and numerous other black people who have lost their lives to gun violence, the modern lynching. These men have undergone their own form of crucifixion that Jesus understands and experiences alongside them. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, "Because of Jesus' death on the cross, there is no doubt he would have a 'deep and personal' identification with the black pain, heartache, suffering, and death that is exacted by stand-your-ground culture"[69] The "stand-your-ground culture" that Douglas refers to is the culture based around a white racial superiority myth that has produced "Stand Your Ground" laws often used as justification for the killing of unarmed black men perceived as threats.[70] In his identification with black pain, heartache, suffering, and death, he aligns himself with the black community.

Upon viewing this scene, the audience must ask themselves why a scene featuring the images of these men is called "Resurrection." Although Jesus identifies with "blues bodies" and "stand-your-ground" culture victims in their modern crucifixions, how is resurrection present today? What does "Resurrection" mean in the cases of Trayvon

[69] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, (Maryknoll: NY, Orbis Books, 2015), 178
[70] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 4

Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown? How can it be possible to speak of resurrection for human beings who have been violently killed in such a way?

The choice to frame these images in terms of resurrection reveals that death does not have the last word. In fact, when we focus only on the deaths of Martin, Garner, Brown, and others, we devalue their lives. We reduce them to their "crucifixions," rather than their humanity. Furthermore, citing womanist theologian Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas insists that to glorify the crucifixion of Jesus is dangerous, as it leads to the acceptance of "redemptive suffering."[71] To claim that Jesus' crucifixion alone creates meaning for suffering diminishes the horror of not only Jesus' crucifixion, but also the "crucifixions" of countless black men and women who have lost their lives to lynching, police brutality, or other forms of violence. Romanticizing the deaths of these black men in order to find redemptive meaning in suffering ignores the absurdity and evil that these losses represent. Additionally, it ignores very real pain on the faces of their mothers directly shown in *Lemonade.*

Rather, Douglas states, "If the crucified Jesus is seen in the face of Trayvon dead on a Florida sidewalk, then the resurrected Jesus is seen in the faces of his parents testifying to the meaning of Trayvon's life beyond his crucifying death." [72] The crucifixion itself does not create redemption but rather the resurrection creates redemption. It is in Beyoncé's inclusion of McSpadden, Fulton, and Carr, known activists in the movement, that one can begin to envision resurrection through honoring the lives

[71] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground,* 186
[72] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground,* 188

of these men rather than their deaths. In this sense, resurrection becomes not only an event made possible by the "Blues God," Jesus Christ, but by members of the black community taking action on earth. By displaying their son's portraits, Lezley McSpadden, Sybrina Fulton, and Gwen Carr demonstrate resurrection as "a refusal to allow the final verdict of a person's life to be a crucifying verdict."[73] They challenge narratives that try to reduce their sons to their deaths. In order to "resurrect" them, they must restore meaning to their lives, which they do through testifying to their sons' humanity as well as through social action to bring about justice.

One of the ways in which McSpadden, Fulton, and Carr, as well as Beyoncé and her *Lemonade* collaborators attempt this resurrection is through what feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson calls "subversive memory." According to Johnson, dominating powers attempt "to reduce a whole group to the status of non-persons, keeping them quietly in bondage" by re-writing a group's history and erasing their culture. If a group cannot maintain a shared memory, the identity of the group will not survive. However, subversive memory acts as an act of rebellion toward a dominating power that attempts to silence a group. Johnson states, "memory that dares to connect with the pain, the beauty, the defeat, the victory of love and freedom, and the unfinished agenda of those who went before acts like an incalculable visitation from the past that energizes persons."[74] By "daring to connect" with the loving and painful subversive memories of these men, Beyoncé and "The Mothers of the Movement" charge their audience with the "unfinished

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[73] Douglas, *Stand Your Ground,* 192

[74] Elizabeth Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: a Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints.* (NY: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2005), 165

agenda" of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and so many others. In keeping their memories alive, these men are "resurrected" as an "incalculable visitation from the past that energizes persons." Resurrection becomes the work of a community that utilizes subversive memory to bring redemption to the here-and-now.

The closing image of the chapter displays a Mardi Gras Indian girl walking around an empty table, hitting a tambourine in a slow rhythm. She appears to be engaging in a ritual. While the purpose of her presence is ambiguous to the viewer, the history of police brutality toward Mardi Gras Indians in New Orleans suggests a powerful defiance of the kind of abuse of authority that leads to the loss of black lives.[75] One interpretation of the scene is that the table is empty because these slain men are no longer able to have a "seat at the table." Along with their lives, they've lost the ability to share meals with their loved ones at the table, engaging in conversation and sharing their ideas with the world. They no longer have the opportunity to laugh with their families and build community. However, one can also see it as an "empty tomb," a sign that while Martin, Brown, Garner, and countless others are no longer here, their resurrections will emerge. If interpreted in this way, the scene evokes Luke 24: 5-6, in which an angel says to the women who encounter Jesus' empty tomb, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He isn't here, but has been raised."[76] Similarly, to the women of Luke's Gospel,

[75] Stephen C. Wehmeyer, "Feathered Footsteps: Mythologizing and Ritualizing Black Indian Processions in New Orleans," Social Identities 16, no. 4 (July 2010): 439. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost (accessed March 1, 2018).
[76] Luke 24:5-6, NIV

the women of *Lemonade* are tasked with witnessing to this resurrection and engendering redemption in the world.

"Freedom": Hoping in Redemption

This work of resurrection and redemption that the women of *Lemonade* engage in is by no means an easy task. On the contrary, it requires continual commitment to a hope in a better future. Although the blues is rightfully known for its tragic subject matter, many blues songs do possess the seeds of hope necessary for such an undertaking. This "blues hope" emerges as an important aspect of crossroads theology. Although blues artists are focused on the-here-and-now and do not typically sing of otherworldly, transcendent solutions to earthly problems, they can hope in a better future rooted in human action and an immanent God who identifies with blues people and their worldly struggles.

The idea of blues hope emerges in the tenth scene of *Lemonade*, which is aptly named "Hope" and includes the song "Freedom." It begins with an image of black women of varying ages preparing a meal together. As the music begins, the scene cuts to a stage in the middle of a clearing, where a large group of women wearing all white gather to watch a performance. The audience includes Lesley McSpadden, Sybrina Fulton, and Gwen Carr. At the center of the stage, Beyoncé sings a cappella, "Freedom! Freedom! I can't move/ Freedom, cut me loose! /Freedom! Freedom! Where are you?

/Cause I need freedom too!"[77] Although Beyoncé paints a bleak picture of her situation, as she "can't move" and is therefore confined by the societal conditions around her, she also expresses hope in her freedom and asserts her right to it. As Beyoncé sings, Sierra-Leonean ballerina Michaela DePrince dances in a white dress not only on the stage in the clearing but also around the empty table featured in the previous scene.[78] As DePrince demonstrates full control of her movement, this dance appears to represent an embodiment of the freedom that Beyoncé sings about. The video also features model Winnie Harlow, who dons a crown of thorns. This suggests an identification of Jesus not only with black men who have lost their lives to violence but with the plight of black women as well.

"All Night" and "Formation": Redemption through Relationship and Social Action

Lemonade's final chapter is entitled "Redemption" and it features the songs "All Night" and "Formation." These songs can serve to demonstrate a vision of a world redeemed. Insofar as *Lemonade* is read as a form of crossroads theology, redemption must include the acceptance and affirmation of the black body. In the prologue to the chapter, Beyoncé addresses her own grandmother, stating,

> Grandmother, the alchemist. You spun gold out of this hard life. Conjured beauty from things left behind, found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your kitchen, broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter, who then passed it to her daughter[79]

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[77] Knowles-Carter, "Freedom," *Lemonade*, 2016

[78]Desiree Murphy, "Ballerina Michaela DePrince on Her Personal Journey to 'Freedom' in Beyonce's 'Lemonade'," *ET Online*, May 6 2016, accessed February 20, 2018. http://www.etonline.com/features/188266_beyonce_lemonade_ballerina_michaela_deprince_set_secrets_personal_freedom_journey

[79] Knowles-Carter, *Lemonade*, 2016

The curse that Beyoncé refers to is the same curse that she introduces in the first chapter of *Lemonade.* On one level, this is the curse of infidelity of men that has plagued her family for generations. However, in the signifying tradition of the blues, the curse can also be read as referring to a much deeper societal curse: the evils of chattel slavery and its continuing impact on black bodies in America. Beyoncé looks back with a reverence to her grandmother, who was able to find healing in the midst of impossible circumstances. By honoring the wisdom that has been passed down for generations, Beyoncé once again establishes herself in relationship to the past and honors her historical rootedness. Just as her grandmother "found healing where it did not live," Beyoncé expresses hope that she and the black community can continue to do the same through the preservation of generational wisdom. The scene cuts to home-video footage of Jay Z's grandmother Hattie' White's 90th birthday party. Hattie tells her audience, "I've had my ups and downs, but I always find the inner strength to carry on. I was served lemons, but I made lemonade." This real-life example of one of Beyoncé's family members persevering through difficult circumstances roots "All Night" in her own experience. As Beyoncé imagines redemption, she does not do so in a detached, hypothetical, and impersonal sort of way. Rather, by featuring a home video of her grandmother-in-law, as well as subsequent home videos throughout the "All Night" music video, she makes it clear that redemption happens here on earth, amongst real individuals in real relationship to one another.

The first song of the "Redemption" chapter, "All Night," demonstrates what "making lemonade" looks like between individuals who strive to be in relationship

despite societal hardships that put strain on them. In line with the blues tradition, the redemption that Beyoncé envisions is fixed in the here-and-now of interpersonal relationships. In the "All Night" music video, Beyoncé envisions a world where physical, romantic love is celebrated and even salvific. As Beyoncé sings, she walks through the same fields of Fort Macomb as she did in the first chapter, but this time in a vibrant multicolored dress rather than a black hooded sweatshirt, demonstrating that she is no longer constrained but free to express her "true colors" or authentic self. As the song continues, the images alternate between home footage of Beyoncé's life and images of both heterosexual and homosexual couples of all ages in various New Orleans locations. These couples embrace one another and smile for the camera. Beyoncé sings, "Give you some time to prove that I can trust ya again/I'm gonna kiss up and rub up and feel up/Kiss up and rub up and feel up on ya/All night long..."[80] This is very physical description of forgiveness that demonstrates the importance of our bodies in interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Beyoncé sings, "I've seen your scars and kissed your crimes," indicating that it is through recognition and responsibility that forgiveness occurs. By describing forgiveness as an embodied experience, it restores the original sin of degrading the black body.

Beyoncé's celebration of sexual love echoes that of the blues singers before her. As stated previously in chapter two, blues artists sang about sex in positive ways that ran counter to a prevailing puritanical rejection of sexuality. Sex could even be linked to religious experience. According to John Michael Spencer, "As long as one's lover was a

[80] Knowles-Carter, "All Night," *Lemonade*, 2016

'good old sole' then as far as the permissive and merciful 'blues god' was concerned—as far as "the Lord," and the *loas* was were concerned— sexual love was open to be salvific."[81] Although their contemporaries may have considered this approach to sexuality idolatrous due the idea that salvation comes through God alone, blues people recognized sex as a gift from the blues God and a potentially redemptive act. Blues people recognize that divine reality intersects with human reality often through our most intimate embodied experiences of love with one another.

Theologian James Cone further expands on the theological significance of sexuality in blues, arguing that, "Theologically, the blues reject the Greek distinction between the soul and the body, the physical and the spiritual. They tell us there is no wholeness without sex, no authentic love without the feel and touch of the physical body. The blues affirm the authenticity of sex as the bodily expression of black soul"[82]This celebration of sex offers a counter to the "narrative of civility" and other attitudes influenced by white Puritan thinking. To celebrate sex is also to celebrate the black body as a whole, rather than condemning it. It is to recognize that to reject the body, including the sexual expressions of the black body, is to reject an essential piece of humanity.

Kelly Brown Douglas's crossroads theology also embraces the celebration of sex found in the blues. Douglas states, "As long as expressions of sexuality re-create bodies and foster harmonious relationships, they are not an affront to god. At the same time, a blues god contests any narratives that do not allow for the re-creation of bodies." For

[81] John Michael Spencer, *Blues and Evil*, 89
[82] Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* 47

Beyoncé's "All Night," the lyrics "re-create" bodies as she sings, "baptize your tears and dry your eyes."[83] For her husband, and countless others, to find healing through the love of another opens up the path to forgiveness, and allows one to undergo the "baptism" that offers a new beginning.

Theologically, this celebration of physical love found in "All Night" is foundational to "breaking the curse" of racism in America because at the very core of racism is the dehumanization of black people and the reduction of their bodies to chattel. Historically, among the weapons that white Americans used to ensure the objectification of black bodies were dehumanizing sexual narratives. At its deepest level, a new theological outlook must be rooted in restoring and asserting the dignity that white supremacy attempts to strip away. "All Night" offers a vision of this world in which the dignity of black people has been restored. Each of the couples shown, including Beyoncé and Jay Z as well as her mother Tina Knowles-Lawson and her new husband, Richard Lawson, demonstrate the love they have for one another and the freedom to live in this love. They are no longer constrained by lingering scars or self-hatred that stems from objectifying messages they have received from white society.

However, the freedom glimpsed in "All Night" gets further expounded upon in the final song of the film, "Formation." "Formation" serves as an epilogue to the film and a continuation of the vision of redemption. The music video acts as an exclamation point to the themes that have been developed throughout *Lemonade*: re-affirming the black identity and body, naming racial injustices, and demonstrating a blues-informed faith

[83] Knowles-Carter, "Freedom," *Lemonade,* 2016

grounded in action. Set in New Orleans, "Formation" features scenes of celebration of black identity while also calling attention to police brutality and the government's neglect of low income black Americans during Hurricane Katrina.

In "Formation," Beyoncé celebrates her black heritage through the lyrics as well as the visuals. In the first verse of the songs, Beyoncé sings, "My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana/You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma/I like my baby heir, with baby hair and Afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils"[84] Immediately, she asserts pride in her heritage and an unapologetic acceptance of her blackness. By focusing in on physical features such as "Afros" and "Jackson Five nostrils," she celebrates not only her lineage but also distinct aspects of the black body. Beyoncé makes clear that she will not tolerate any degradation of the body but instead demands an acknowledgment of her dignity and worth.

In line with the "Resurrection" chapter, Beyoncé also continues to engage with the concept of resurrection in "Formation." As the video begins, one hears the voice of the late New Orleans Internet personality Messy Mya boldly claiming, "Bitch I'm back, by popular demand."[85] Messy Mya, whose given name was Anthony Barre, was a queer comedian and rapper 'known for his deep New Orleans accent and his pronunciation of the word 'yes' as 'yas.'"[86] In 2010, he was shot to death in the 7th Ward of New Orleans

[84] Knowles-Carter, "Formation," *Lemonade,* 2016
[85] Knowles-Carter, "Freedom," *Lemonade,* 2016
[86] Laurise McMillian, "Formation's Representation of the Black Queer Community Inspired This Amazing All-Male Dance Cover." *Elle Magazine.* October 09, 2017. Accessed February 27, 2018. http://www.elle.com/culture/music/news/a35233/all-male-formation-dance-beyonce/.

and his killer was never identified. [87] By including his voice announcing his return, Beyoncé attempts to show how he, and other members of the black community who have lost their lives to violence, can live on in memory and stir their communities to action from beyond the grave. Additionally, the scene that features a young black boy dancing in a black hooded sweatshirt in front of a line of police can be interpreted as a resurrection of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old boy who was shot by police in Cleveland, Ohio, as well as other black men who have lost their lives to police brutality. By dancing in front of the line of officers with the message "Stop shooting us," on a wall near by, this young boy boldly claims his own humanity and demands justice for his community.

In blues woman fashion, Beyoncé is not afraid to face evils head on. Her imagining of redemption is not overly sentimental or otherworldly, but rather based in human action on Earth. This is redemption human beings must strive for with the help of a "Blues God." As she commands, "Okay ladies, now let's get in formation," she calls her fellow black women to stand together and to get in position to change society.

In the final scene of the video, Beyoncé rests atop a police car that becomes submerged in floodwaters, calling to mind both police brutality and Hurricane Katrina. As she is submerged, Beyoncé herself identifies with those who have lost their lives to senseless violence and the devaluing of their lives. However, paralleling blues songs that attest to the harsh reality of the world but also contain seeds of hope, the final shot of formation is of Beyoncé dressed in all white, flicking her wrist and forming a fist.

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[87] Christopher Rudolph, "Who Was Messy Mya?" *Logo*. February 09, 2016. Accessed February 27, 2018. http://www.newnownext.com/who-was-messy-mya/02/2016/.

Therefore, even Beyoncé herself does not allow death to have the last word but instead includes her own resurrection and redemption.

The final three chapters of the film have illuminated a vision of crossroads theology. Through the resources of the blues, which include a unified understanding of body and soul as well as a faith in a "crossroads god," that identifies with blues bodies, Beyoncé provides a hopeful message of forgiveness and redemption. Beyoncé demonstrates that through a synthesis of blues and faith, one can come to believe in an immanent God present in concrete, day-to-day-living that affirms the bodies of all individuals, and black women in particular. By attesting to a faith consistent with the kind of faith espoused in crossroads theology, Beyoncé has created a work of art that also reveals theological insights. When put into conversation with womanist theology, *Lemonade* serves as a resource for imagining this theological outlook in the world.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Beyoncé's *Lemonade* visual album can be viewed as an artistic rendering of "crossroads theology," insofar as Beyoncé adopts a blueswoman aesthetic to affirm black bodies and to imagine redemption. Like blueswomen before her, Beyoncé embarks on a journey to name the injustices black people face in society today. In particular, Beyoncé names the ways in which black people's bodies have been devalued by a white society that originally saw them as chattel, and undergoes a process of reclaiming the black body and insisting upon the humanity of black people.

First and foremost, Beyoncé's *Lemonade* is important because it marks one of the highest-profile films of its kind with a black female working as executive producer and overall creative visionary. Beyoncé places black women at the center and celebrates the diversity amongst them. While some of the women, such as Serena Williams and Zendaya, are famous, others are ordinary women. They are of all ages, body types, hairstyles, and complexions, but their commonality is the respect afforded to them. These images of black women are important in a day and age wherein black women do not get the same mainstream representation as their white counterparts.

However, although the images in *Lemonade* are striking, what Beyoncé does in the film is not entirely new. There have been numerous blues women throughout history such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, Big Momma Thronton, Nina Simone, and Lauryn Hill who have all named injustice and asserted the humanity of black women. What makes *Lemonade* different is the explicit connection to theology in the latter half of

the film. Not only does Beyoncé reaffirm the dignity of the black body, but she also presents Jesus' identification with the marginalized black community. While the assertion of the worth of the black body is a worthy pursuit in and of itself, Beyoncé does not just stop there. Instead, she takes it one step further by placing the reclaimed black body at the foundation of a vision of redemption. In this vision, people are restored to right relationships with one another through the recognition of the unity of body and soul rather than an adherance to bifurcating narratives. Included in this vision of redemption is an embrace of sexuality, as it is an essential aspect of humanity.

To reiterate an important point from M. Shawn Copeland, Christian theology "must go down to the crossroads, to listen and to learn from black vernacular culture, to the blues."[88] However, Christian theology would also do well to listen not only to the blues but to contemporary musicians such as Beyoncé, who, in the tradition of the blues has created music that voices 21st century concerns. Although some theologians may be wary of Beyoncé's massive fan following and near deification in American culture, she should not be dismissed as merely a celebrity pop star. Through the vision of resurrection and redemption she articulates in *Lemonade*, theologians can find an artistic portrayal of valuing embodied reality and action in the here-and-now on our earthly journey toward resurrection and redemption. In her art, Beyoncé communicates Jesus as a God in solidarity with the black community, and particularly those in the black community who have suffered their own "crucifixions." While she does not shy away from addressing very real personal and communal suffering, as she traces her own path to forgiving her

[88] M. Shawn Copeland, "Theology at the Crossroads: A Meditation on the Blues," 98

husband, she also artistically envisions the possibility of not only individual healing, but a social transformation.

What *Lemonade* can offer womanist theology is another avenue for communicating its questions and messages. No single discipline can claim to communicate its messages in ways that all people can access, and theology is no exception. Theology operates under certain constraints, and it is simply impossible to articulate all spiritual matters in an academic practice. Beyoncé herself is not a theologian, and many of the theological insights offered in *Lemonade* overlap with various the works of womanist thelogians that preceded her. Yet, what *Lemonade* offers is a way of understanding these theological concepts in manner that touches the heart. Theology is limited in its capacity to reach individuals who are not inclined to navigate all of the jargon and terminology associated even with contextual theology that concerns itself with human experience and history. But through music, theological concepts can be understood in another way. Music impacts us at our deepest level and reminds us of the oneness between our bodies and souls in ways that words cannot. It has the power to move us to action, and to experience God in song and in one another.

Moving Forward

As I prepare for life after college, I can't help but think of that thirteen-year-old who fell in love with Beyoncé's music almost a decade ago, and who watched her perfom Etta James' classic "At Last" at Barack Obama's inauguration a month later. That-thirteen-year old was filled with so much hope and so much excitement for the future to come would be shocked to learn of events such as the "Unite the Right" white

supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia last August, or even the daily pervasiveness of racist remarks on social media. As I've gotten older, I have come to understand that there is a lot of darkness in the world, and as a soon-to-be graduate of Regis, I'd like to think I have "lost the ability to plead ignorance" regarding injustice.

However, in a time that feels more divided than ever before, engaging with *Lemonade*, the blues, and womanist theology has reminded me that is possible to face evil head-on and choose to hope in a better future. We can acknowledge that although there are powers that are bigger than any of us can face alone, we can have faith in the notion that personal change intertwines with the political and spiritual. We can transform ourselves and society in our here-and-now, day-to-day realites, and find the places where the "blues God" dwells.

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