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# THE MUSIC VIDEO'S COUNTER-POETICS OF RHYTHM

## Black Cultural Production in *Lemonade*

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### Introduction

Although it has been three years (and counting), I still think about the image of Beyoncé wearing cornrows, a gold ankh necklace, a fur stole, a two-piece grey bodysuit with matching ankle boots flicking her braids back as the sound of the tapping cymbal emerges before she turns to the camera and states, “Who the fuck do you think I is?” This arresting audiovisual moment of Black American vernacular dialogue (the “incorrect” is versus am) with visual “urban” aesthetics (cornrows) made me reconsider my understanding of Beyoncé’s work, and it is a moment that I have repeatedly come back to in the years since my encounter. This study will examine Beyoncé’s 2016 visual album *Lemonade* to see how Black cultural production, as a global diasporic practice, works through alternative (and often experimental) audiovisual images (like the music video) utilizing television’s expansive digital properties to reconfigure our engagement and understanding of Blackness. Informed by Stuart Hall’s seminal article “What is the Black in Black Popular Culture?”, this chapter examines the global circulation of *Lemonade* to assert that the expansive technological changes of television work dialogically across the Black diaspora to alter the quotidian experience of Blackness. My use of quotidian here and throughout refers to what Sharon Holland writes in *The Erotic Life of Racism* (2012) as the unremarkable encounters of racism, the encounters that are diminished because they are not spectacular in nature and thus go, literally, un-remarked. Such quotidian encounters demonstrate that many people in their day-to-day encounters with Black individuals “don’t create meaning as much as [they] reproduce it” through racist acts. Thus, television, and its growing digital expansive properties via phone and computer applications, is a medium ripe with the potential of transforming (and impacting) those daily (quotidian) encounters. As media studies scholar Herman Gray notes in *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* ([1995] 2004), television creates “spaces and practices where Black artists and cultural workers use the new digitally based technologies, old forms of representation, the articulation of markets, the brand, and the logo to construct different notions of Blackness and Black cultural practice” (xxiii). The combination of digitally based technologies and old forms of representations offer Black cultural producers possibilities for reconfiguring and manipulating these mediums to present alternative, technologically innovative explorations of Blackness (Wynter, 1992). Black cultural production defines the practice of

making culture that collectively speaks to spaces, subjects, and experiences that are racialized as Black. This may include a globally dispersed Black diaspora of the people who have been or are descended from the kidnapped, forcibly removed, exiled, and migrated people from common geographical zones, such as Africa, the Caribbean, Australia, etc., stemming from similar encounters with European colonial invasion. Black culturally produced music videos eschew the question of global community and outreach, instead taking that as a given, considering the conditions of the Black diaspora. In this way, then, Beyoncé, as an international popular Black artist can deliver a specifically Black televisual film to a global audience in ways that other artists cannot. She is therefore in a critical position, as a renowned Black cultural producer, to, as Hall writes, create a dialogue of the shared histories and cultures that Black individuals have following the (ongoing) period of European colonialization, with *Lemonade*.

*Lemonade* is a visual music album that chronicles the reconciliation of a marriage following suspicions of infidelity, produced as a collaborative directorial effort between Beyoncé and Kahil Joseph (with added artistic contribution by director Melina Matsoukas and others). Told over eleven chapters that feature spoken word interludes (“Intuition,” “Denial,” “Anger,” “Apathy,” “Emptiness,” “Accountability,” “Reformation,” “Forgiveness,” “Resurrection,” “Hope,” and “Redemption”), the film accompanies Beyoncé’s sixth solo studio album *Lemonade*. Aesthetically, *Lemonade* draws from the wealth of global Black diasporic culture (and not just Black American culture) to reflect upon the expansive and quotidian nature of Blackness as a site for continual possibility and reconfiguration. Temporally speaking, *Lemonade*’s use of Black diasporic culture—including the Igbo landing/flight, Nigerian culture, Yoruba mythology, police brutality in the United States, and much more—demonstrates how Blackness disappears into memory while remaining firmly in the present (Lepecki 2006, 127). This reflects what film theorist Kara Keeling (2007) notes as the “problem” with the visual representation of Blackness. The colonial memory-imagery renders Black images as “problems” available to public memory via perception (Keeling 2007, 43). This is to say, that Black images operate as troubling encounters whose occupation and bodies are always made “known” to viewers via public (colonial) perceptions of Blackness. *Lemonade* troubles this “memory-image” of Blackness by presenting images, movements, and content that work in dialogue with the myriad songs to destabilize the standard, seemingly known, images of Black bodies that are not available to public memory based on perception alone.

The distinction that the music video has within Black culture is worth threading out in further detail as it provides Beyoncé a historical legacy to which the aesthetic, narrative, and distribution innovation found in *Lemonade* can be traced back. I view this as a necessary point to address as it moves Beyoncé away from the singular, individual artist and places her in explicit archival history of a larger Black audiovisual collective. The formal aesthetic innovation found in *Lemonade* is pulled from Black expressive culture. Therefore, the formal gathering of expressive cultural practices across the Black diaspora help us view *Lemonade* as an example of what Sylvia Wynter writes as the “counter-poetics of rhythm” (Wynter 1992, 260).

Counter-poetics, an undertheorized term by Sylvia Wynter first appeared in a 1992 essay on Black film aesthetics and critique, “Rethinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes Towards a Deciphering Practice.” In that article, Wynter points to Black music videos by way of arguing that a more experimental approach to film’s aesthetic is needed to break the current model that reproduces hegemonic meaning through its symbolic coding of whiteness as a positive “true” value and Black bodies as death or a “zero value” (1992, 252–253). The hybridity of the music video, then, in addition to pulling from the rich long history of rhythm and blues (from the Black diaspora) provides a unique space to see contemporary depictions of Black bodies directing, crafting, producing, and circulating a refusal of cinema’s coding system of value through its counter-poetics of rhythm. In Wynter’s article she examines how storytelling has constantly been (re)made to repeat the image of white bodies as the dominant, “accurate” body at the exclusion and erasure of indigenous, Black, and Brown bodies (Dozier 2017, 4).

Counter-poetics defines the work of individuals commenting, engaging, and challenging hegemonic structures of being in the world, that is questioning the argument and construction of whose body and history are coded with “positive” values that work in the service of reproducing colonial discourse and images. Such work is not meant to provide answers but rather is to question what we as individuals have “inherited from imperial Europe, the possibilities and limitations of purely Western science and knowledge systems, and how humanness can be recognized as connective and interhuman” (Mignolo 2015, 122). The rhythm in Wynter’s statement refers to Black studies’ relationship with rhythm, specifically how rhythm informs and makes up Black expressive culture, which in turn extends itself to our manner of speech, appearance, etc. Beyoncé’s look for “Don’t Hurt Yourself” recounted at the beginning coupled with her use of Black Vernacular English (also known as African American Vernacular English) is an aesthetic audiovisual interrogation of the audience’s awareness of not only who Beyoncé is but the rich Black diasporic histories, traditions, and cultures that would beget her and her work.

*Lemonade* works as a significant Black cultural production to place itself in dialogue with digital technology and “old forms of representation” through its use of the digital visual album format. The music video provides a space for Black cultural producers and artists to manipulate audiovisual’s formal and narrative aesthetics to experiment with the (re)presentation of Blackness and Black culture—where they can work through the historical significations of Black identity and culture utilizing contemporary technological advancements and modes of dissemination. This is not to suggest that film does not do this, but rather that television is at the vanguard of new practices in mass media dissemination to a global audience. As Elizabeth Jacka, John Sinclair, and Stuart Cunningham write, the invention of the satellite television enabled an increase in global media content that could appear in the home, this increase of global content becomes more pronounced by the ways in which bodies, cultures, identities, histories, can now be mediated to us via the privacy or confines of our homes and bedrooms (1996, 4).

The increase of global dissemination of Black American music videos while effective in reaching a global audience could be viewed as problematic. Noted Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins asserts that some culturally specific music videos are then stripped of their histories when presented abroad (2005, 31). Hill Collins expresses her dissatisfaction with the music video genre through a critique of Black masculinity in hip-hop videos. She writes,

Camera angles routinely are shot from a lower position than the rapper in question, giving the impression that he is looming over the viewer. In real life, being this close to young African American men who were singing about sex and violence and whose body language included fists, angry gestures, and occasional crotch-grabbing might be anxiety provoking for the typical rap and hip-hop consumer (most are suburban White adolescents). Yet viewing these behaviors safely packaged within a music video protects consumers from any possible contact with Black men who are actually in the videos. Just who are these videos for?

(2005, 31)

While Hill Collins is correct to assert that this global dispersal can create conditions of white exploitation of Black bodies and culture, such an analysis erases Black consumers from the “perceived” global audience. It also denies the power of the music video in combining body movements, camera angles (formal aesthetics) with the sonic properties of the song itself to expressively portray an encounter that, in many ways for Black bodies across the diaspora, could only creatively perform via the music video. Much of Hill Collins’ critique is, rightfully, centered on the repetition of images of Black culture that reproduce hegemonic discourses around the subordination of the Black body. In her focus, though, we lose the possibilities in which Black

artists creatively use the musicality of the music video to aesthetically embed and work through Black expressive culture in a manner that questions those histories. In this way, I argue that *Lemonade* does not reproduce meanings but creates new meanings, narratives, and histories to emerge around Black women through the use of counter-poetics of rhythm found in the narrative and formal experimentations of the music video. Like my arresting moment with Beyoncé during the song “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” *Lemonade* confronts its audience head on by questioning what we *really* know about Black women in the diaspora and how much of what we know is based on the repetition of hegemonic discourse.

### **Black Cultural Production, the Music Video and Its Counter-poetics**

Through their hybrid audiovisual format, music videos have served as an opportunity for Black entertainers to experiment with their identities and cultural histories since the late 1970s. Black artists have long been invested in utilizing the music video to exercise space or freedom of movement as it was a genre that was, as media scholar Carol Vernallis writes, “*the laboratory: while commercials and films ... tended toward tightly controlled client-author supervision and careful storyboarding, a music video director or editor might try anything*” (Vernallis 2013, 5). In its experimentation with the form, Black artists doubled that freedom and extended it to the portrayal of the Black body as well, this experimentation of the body was an affordance as music video’s audience has always been rooted in the home consumer and not the theaters (although this is changing). As Black feminist scholar Aisha Durham writes, the music video offered potential for a “repeated performance that increasingly mirrors radio airplay due to media synergy. The formal and content aspects of the music video—fashioned as performance and seduction—is layered to encourage multiple viewings as well.” This structure has contributed to the success and transformation of numerous Black artists including Beyoncé (Durham 2012, 38). In so doing, music videos, even amateur ones, have enabled the increased visual presence of Black bodies onscreen and has thus been used to challenge harmful stereotypes and affirm Black culture, such as *Lemonade*.

The MTV origins of the production, promotion, and circulation of the music video may appear to be a dated history or of a bygone era to a contemporary music video audience. Many scholars have noted that while the history of the music video predates the invention of the television set, it was MTV—which still stands for music television despite its recent shift toward scripted young adult content and reality TV—who ushered in the mainstream visibility of the music video in the early 1980s (Durham 2012, 37). Like mainstream radio stations, music videos that appeared on MTV dictated the success and visibility of an artist. Thus, like all forms of mainstream media engagement then, the struggle over the production of Blackness was fraught within the genre of the music video. For Black cultural producers, the unique hybridity of the music video via its ability to create immersive content that enabled the production of Black images with a song was nothing new (Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday all created music film shorts in the 1930s [Durham 2012, 38]). What was new about the MTV platform was the increased visibility and distribution of such audiovisual material and, in that way, Black artists saw the music video of MTV as a way to wrestle control of the audiovisual image of Blackness by producing clips that complicated and transformed the limits and awareness of the Black body via film’s aesthetics (some examples include; Grace Jones’ “La Vie en Rose” [1977], Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” [1982], and Prince’s “When Doves Cry” [1984]). Initially, MTV suppressed its playing of Black artists but, after much public ridicule and pressure from other artists, MTV began incorporating videos by Black artists into its rotations, which would change the trajectory of the genre in the years to come (Tannenbaum and Marks 2011, 168).<sup>1</sup>

Nowadays, the production, promotion, and circulation of the music video is far more, what Vernallis would state as, “unruly” in her book *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the Cinema* (2013). The platforms by which individuals consume the music video is a far cry from

the centralized network and distribution of MTV, which at one point included the popular *Making the Video* program (a reality show/docu-series on the making of a music video). Instead, individuals can rely on multiple platforms to watch the latest music video. In this age of dissemination, the music video itself has begun to mirror the distribution platform it is on, such a mirroring has been argued by some scholars to be an effect of digital technology/media upon the creation of audiovisual content (Shaviro 2017; Vernallis 2013). In *Digital Music Videos* (2017) Steven Shaviro, for example, writes how the use of digital intermediate (DI) affects and shapes how directors capture color and texture in music videos because DI, a process that only became common after 2005, can control and transform color and texture on a pixel by pixel basis (2017, 13). Vernallis additionally writes that the quick editing shots and sensory overload that is featured in the video are a direct result of shooting digitally (you shoot more information in a quicker fashion), and that this information overload found in the music video is meant to, on one hand, destabilize the viewer by immersive means while additionally using the multiple shots to demonstrate that there is more to the world established in the music video (2013, 94).

Additionally, the distribution platform of YouTube (and other similar sites such as Dailymotion) affects how music videos are conceived. YouTube, as a hosting platform, presents an archive of the ordinary and spectacular. Such a hybrid gathering of information (in which anything can become viral) bleeds into the assemblage and creation of contemporary music videos, which begin to mirror that content. For example, Beyoncé's music video for "7/11" (2014) was inspired by the YouTube dance videos by Pinoy, Gabriel Valenciano. This brief outline of the effect digital technology has upon the contemporary music video reveals how it is affected by its circulation properties and, in turn, is becoming a genre with the explicit purpose of creating embodied responses, reactions, and choreographies in relation to what we have seen.

The circulation of the music video format allows for a shared public dissemination of Black representation in spaces where they are often prohibited or legislatively locked out. In the case of *Lemonade*, the film was initially broadcast on the network HBO (Home Box Office) in the United States on April 23, 2016 during a 72-hour period where access to their content was free (this also coincided with the season six premiere of *Game of Thrones*). It was then again broadcast on HBO's international services on television (but not via its digital on-demand platforms of HBO NOW or HBO GO) on June 18, 2016. While numerous consumers across the world experienced *Lemonade* before its international premiere, either via its appearance on Tidal (a global music and entertainment monthly streaming platform co-owned by Beyoncé and her husband Jay Z), album purchase, or illegal download, the second premiere emphasized what its initial tagline stated as a "world premiere event."

The medium of television and by extension new global digital platforms that feature serial content such as Netflix, premium television apps, Hulu, and YouTube, have the power to impact the quotidian nature of individuals' media consumption habits and thus potentially steer audiences' creative ambitions toward the creation of new meaning as opposed to the repetition of established meaning. It is no surprise then that this medium has historically been a site that Gray has described as the "struggle for Blackness," or the representation of Blackness. The digital shift in television platforms (as described above) means that the televisual representation of Blackness now shapes and informs our interpretation of Black existence on a global scale. *Lemonade* demonstrates an overt attempt to insert alternative (re)presentations of Black womanhood on television and thus, emphasize and utilize the power that televisual images "take on at the level of everyday life and common sense" (Gray [1995] 2004, 7). Beyoncé's focus on Black womanhood throughout *Lemonade* is informed by how Black women's bodies and labor bear the "gross insult and burden of spectacular exploitation in transatlantic culture," and yet are subsequently rendered by "hegemonic hermeneutics" as known, simplistic sites of inquiry (Brooks 2006, 7). *Lemonade* reveals that Beyoncé is "not just another Black woman with traceable African roots, but a woman who wants her audience to know that she understands and appreciates that her essence is drawn from an ancient and eternal pool of rich, cultural manifestations" (Okoroafor 2016).

The prestige of releasing an entire visual album onto the premium network channel HBO was a tactful move by Beyoncé. By premiering the film there (then making it available via her co-owned streaming service Tidal later that evening), Beyoncé was placing her film in dialogue with “high culture.” When scholars, critics, producers, and actors discuss the “golden age of television” as a central locus where quality storytelling can be found, HBO is consistently listed as one of the channels that produces and distributes “high quality” work that contributes to that narrative. What is unique about Beyoncé’s decision to screen *Lemonade* on HBO is that the channel serves merely as an (initial) hosting site, not unlike the use of hosting a video on YouTube (or, in recent years, Apple Music, another monthly music and entertainment streaming service). HBO does not own *Lemonade* and it was swiftly pulled from their on-demand services (such as HBO GO and HBO NOW) within a week of its release in the United States. This model eschewed the traditional or even contemporary digital model by which a platform distributes and circulates the music video by way of receiving profits from ad revenue. It reveals that Beyoncé was far more invested in casting a wide net of (prestige) visibility and media attention toward her film before directing that attention toward the digital circulation properties (television apps and Tidal) that enable free flow of content and dissemination to occur in a more pronounced manner. Vernallis notes that these distinctions of platform or network viewing ultimately blur in our digital era, creating a swirl by which information travels up and down, sideways and then up again and across platforms, truly immersing us for a moment as we can be consumed by the music video’s ability to not only transfix us but transfix our bodies at any moment in time: on your phone, on your home screen, on your laptop, etc. (Vernallis 2013, 2).

The musicality further adds to the music video’s ability to transfix our bodies in a specific moment based on music’s ability to stop us in our tracks. The editing, body, and narrative aesthetics are all organized in relation to the rhythm of the beat. The musicality of the music video and its manipulation of formal and narrative aesthetics to match the sonic thumping of the beat has begun to bleed into our televisual and cinematic experiences as well, as entire scenes in a film or tele-series are organized by a sonic arrangement that starts with a tick or beat by way of highlighting to the audience that you need to pay attention to what you hear in this next sequence (two examples are the use of synth music in *Stranger Things* [2016–] and Led Zeppelin’s “The Immigrant Song” in *Thor: Ragnarok* [2017]). Vernallis states that rhythm drives the aesthetics of the music video, which in turn often “avoids a ground because the sound wafts it along,” meaning that establishing a sequence of events between cuts is not necessary because the beat dictates the next image, even if it is out of sequence (2013, 5).

An evocative example of the above-mentioned sonic “cueing up” in *Lemonade* can be heard in the song “Freedom.” The song starts by matching the crackling thumping of the horns with restless images; Beyoncé trying to navigate the ruins of a plantation, a thunderstorm, and a newborn baby on a bed, before going silent to a black and white shot of Beyoncé on a stage in front of the mothers of victims of police brutality (or gun violence) in the United States (Sybrina Fulton, Lezley McSpadden, and Gwen Carr) and emerging Black actresses and singers from across the diaspora (Chloe x Halle, Zendaya, Amandla Stenberg, Lisa-Kainé Diaz and Naomi Diaz). The silence cue from the cacophonous cluster of horns and images alerts the audience to listen carefully now. And we do, as we hear an emotive a cappella rendering of “Freedom” by Beyoncé before the horns are foregrounded once again during the chorus. The lyrics of this first verse state:

Tryna rain, tryna rain on the thunder  
Tell the storm I’m new  
I’m a walk, I’m a march on the regular  
Painting white flags blue

Lord forgive me, I've been running  
Running blind in truth  
I'ma rain, I'ma rain on this bitter love  
Tell the sweet I'm new  
I'm telling these tears, "Go and fall away, fall away"  
May the last one burn into flames

The emphasis on Black Vernacular English (or slang) found in the usage of "I'ma" and "tryna" instead of "I'm a" (or "I am a") and "trying to" is an effective way in which Beyoncé weaves culture through all facets of the film. The distinct emphasis of cueing up to listen to her sing these words in this manner creates a dialogue for thinking critically about the ways in which Blackness is policed in the public, from image to speech.

The rhythm dictating the flow of the images is pertinent to the music video as it structures the frequent split images and sequences that simply appear within the video without context. These seemingly random images that appear and disappear suggest a larger world in the video that is populated by other bodies beyond our viewing experience. This immersion tactic has been skillfully used by Black artists, long before the digital, to suggest a larger world within the video, between cuts, populated by other Black artists via the cameo appearance. The cameo appearance by another Black artist in the music video would be a blink and you miss it moment, forcing the audience to watch it again and to imagine the relationship between these artists (that of the singer/rapper and the cameo artists) in the video. The relational use of a cameo appearance by another Black artist in a music video would also convey to the audience that this was an artist in conversation with other Black artists (Lil Kim's 1996 music video for "Crush on You" features a blink and you miss it cameo by the late Aaliyah). This type of cameo appearance appears in *Lemonade* several times over, from the twerking of Serena Williams in the song "Sorry," to the slew of Black actresses and singers that appear in the "Freedom" segment of the film.

If rhythm structures the arrangement of the images that appear, the specific use of that rhythm plays a crucial role in shaping how we receive the music video as a whole. Sound possesses the ability to temporally pull listeners' emotions into the fold as they may "wish to hold onto what has unfolded in the past, while simultaneously staying in the saddle of time and reaching for the future" (Vernallis 2013, 6). The music video's musicality immerses audiences into the visual temporal rhythms of the song itself. For *Lemonade*, a Black culturally produced video, the long-form music video pulls the audience into a web of diasporic hauntings, abuse, betrayal, reconciliation, and, ultimately, healing. The images do not always flow together, but they flow in service of the rhythmic structures of the film, the music, the poetry, and the voice (speech). The emphasis on rhythm's dictation of filmic structure and the fact that *Lemonade*'s rhythm is grounded in Black culture demonstrate how the film creates an immersive experience for creating new meaning around Black women's histories through the aesthetic use of a counter-poetics of rhythm.

### **Rhythm and Culture in *Lemonade***

If the music video was a laboratory in the 1980s, its current Prometheus-like genre of rhythmic hybridity and cinematic fluidity is a productive way to convey the destabilizing function of spatial hauntings. By spatial hauntings, I am referring to the structures of feeling that preserve and remain in place after trauma. The music video in the context of Black culture is a prime example of how the counter-poetics of rhythm are used to create a doubling effect that simultaneously destabilizes us from normative poetics in the world and urges us to invent new truths around bodies, representation, and their history instead.

While there are numerous arresting scenes in *Lemonade*, one sequence effectively conveys the performance of spatial remembrance. During the song “Love Drought,” Beyoncé and her dancers conduct a processional march on the Igbo (also spelled as Ibo by some) landing, the space where the mass suicide of captive Nigerian Igbo people occurred on the shores of St. Simons Island, Georgia in 1803. Just prior to this song, Beyoncé recites a poem by British-Somali poet Warsan Shire, whose poetry threads the interludes between songs together in *Lemonade*. Beyoncé speaks,

He bathes me until I forget their names and faces.  
I ask him to look me in the eye when I come  
home. 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.

The last stanza is spoken over a shot of a crying Beyoncé in the empty Superdome in New Orleans, a place known for football games and concerts but also known as the refuge center following Hurricane Katrina where three people died during the storm. When the beat and chord progression is heard in the opening notes of the song, the film swiftly cuts to a series of feet walking through water. The editing of this march is in synch with the backing drum beat heard throughout the song. Even when Beyoncé begins to sing the lyrics, the camera does not break its gaze on watching these women march into the sea from afar. The beat in “Love Drought” guides the formal and narrative aesthetics for that moment. As the song continues, we encounter a series of disjointed shots of Beyoncé in a bed of flowers covered in gold dust, laying on a reclined chair, the marshes and Spanish Mosses of the island, and several shots of Beyoncé interlocking hands with her dancers with their arms outstretched as they face the ocean. By the end of the first chorus of “Love Drought” the beat takes a drastic left turn and we hear a heavy 808 drum, this sonic change is marked by a distinctive visual as well. Suddenly, we are swooped away from the lush colors of Beyoncé covered in gold dust on beach at sunset surround by red and pink flowers to an extreme close-up of Beyoncé’s face with facial markings in Black and white. As the beat drums along the camera begins to shift and turns upside down around Beyoncé before returning to match her eye level. This shift is followed by a brief two second clip of women reaching out their hands toward Beyoncé (in the same B&W sequence) as if she were a golden calf of some sorts. The film swiftly moves us to the next chapter, “Forgiveness.”

Beyoncé dives deep into the pool of Black culture to weave it into her film, as Okoroafor (2016) stated, *Lemonade* revealed that Beyoncé was “not just another Black woman with traceable African roots, but a woman who wants her audience to know that she understands and appreciates that her essence is drawn from an ancient and eternal pool of rich, cultural manifestations.” One of the citations of Black culture that Beyoncé manifests in the film quite clearly is Julie Dash’s film, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). *Daughters of the Dust* holds significance in film and Black culture as it is the first feature film (let alone experimental film) by a Black woman to be distributed in theaters in the United States. The film is told from the perspective of the unborn child who recounts the last time her family were together before they migrated from Georgia to the North at the turn of the twentieth century. The family are descendants from the surviving members of the Nigerian Igbo tribe, those who were prevented from committing suicide in 1803. The movie further makes this connection by taking place on St. Simons Island in Georgia. *Daughters of the Dust* relies heavily on experimental aesthetics to convey shifting time and movement onscreen. Dash stated in an interview that her use of experimental aesthetics was in dialogue with the fact that, for her, traditional narrative and formal aesthetics (such as continuity editing, and the clear introduction of characters) would not



be of service to a narrative on Black women who, often, do not see themselves accurately represented in those traditional aesthetics (Dash 1992). *Lemonade* cites key frames of *Daughters of the Dust* in dialogue with music to create a new interpretation behind that citation. The chapters “Reformation,” “Resurrection,” and “Hope” show the influence of Dash’s film through the mise-en-scène of the plantation, women sitting in the Spanish moss trees, and the setting of St. Simons Island for “Love Drought.” These aesthetic citations also serve the purpose of furthering our awareness of the original source and, additionally, place Beyoncé and her film in a shared dialogue with the aesthetic intentions and impact of Dash’s film.

The late Toni Cade Bambara offers some sage words for the opening shot of *Daughters of the Dust* that I believe are necessary to repeat here for they immediately frame Dash’s experimental aesthetics in dialogue with the creation of a new, alternative visual history to emerge around Blackness, specifically with regard to Black women. Bambara writes:

Following the credits, a boat glides down a thick, green river. Standing near the front of the boat is a woman in a long white dress and a large veiled hat. The image is familiar from dominant cinema’s colonialism-as-entertainment genre. But we notice that this woman stands hipshot, chin chocked, one arm akimbo. These ebonics signify that filmmaker Dash has appropriated the image from reactionary cinema for an emancipatory purpose. She intends to heal imperialized eyes.

(1992, xii)

Bambara’s words can be applicable to making sense of how Black women received *Lemonade*, in that the dissonant images, the citations, the music, the free-flow aesthetics spoke to many with an intention of creating a new narrative on our lives as opposed to the repetition of hegemonic images that structure our quotidian interactions. Bambara’s words also capture my immediate response toward Beyoncé’s arresting look, sound, and question directed at the audience of “Who the fuck do you think I is?” This specific arresting scene in *Lemonade* in dialogue with the cornrows and Black Vernacular English heard in that scene and throughout the film was a counterpoetic of rhythm meant to destabilize our colonial perception of Black women by embedding Black expressive culture into the music video’s audiovisual aesthetics. The re-materialization of Black culture and memory into the film’s aesthetics in *Lemonade* offers an opportunity to make sense of Black subordinate positions and its colonial histories and spaces in the world (Hall 1992). By placing herself on the plantation, the Igbo landing, and other spaces specific to Black culture, Beyoncé is tapping into the feelings left behind on the land to make amends or to transform those energies into something new in her film.

## Conclusion

Digital platforms have ushered in a new set of global television politics and options for Black individuals across the diaspora to shape and construct their (re)presentational bodies. Prior to this increased global circulation of television content, the daily audiovisual representation of Blackness circulated through the music video by mirroring radio play with the visual. The fact that music videos were *the* primary channels in which Black individuals could occupy television is not accidental as anti-Black racism informs what type of Blackness can be portrayed and consumed on the small screen (Durham 2012). Since the mid-1980s, music videos for Black individuals provided a crucial space to re-work and navigate the global (re)presentation of Blackness. Outside of cinema, music videos presented an opportunity to persuade and counter global anti-Black representations of Black bodies for Black Americans largely, but not exclusively.

Given this history, Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* works through this fraught contestation of visual Blackness to present an exploration of Black womanhood informed by the Black diaspora. Beyoncé's performance allows her to work through Black culture and spirituality, in addition to conveying the unliveable states of haunted feelings, like suspension but also trauma and pain. The energies that remain from these sites and feelings are transformed via *Lemonade* into a document of reconciliation for Black women in the diaspora. Performance and hybrid audiovisual forms for Black culture are pedagogical practices for navigating colonial rule, but it is a negotiation that needs to exist in the popular sphere while speaking to a global subordinate group. The counter-poetics of rhythm in *Lemonade* refer to the aesthetic embedding of Black expressive culture (music, voice, image, etc.) into the film in a manner that does not repeat hegemonic constructions of Black bodies but forces us to invent new histories instead by questioning what we know about Black histories in the world and how we came to know it. The colonial memory-imagery renders Black images as "problems" available to public memory via perception (Keeling 2007, 43). The musicality of the music video, then, is a unique position to aesthetically convey Black expressive culture in a manner that communicates such a counter-poetic of rhythm that momentarily disrupts the prior colonial perceptions of Blackness through its creation of new histories mimed from Black culture. This is not specific to the United States and Black cultural production works to tap into a type of intra-African dialogue in the hope of creating a discourse that can speak to Black individuals on a global scale. The music video and its contemporary digital iterations such as *Lemonade*, demonstrate Black culture's ability to adapt and pioneer innovative hybrid technological forms while using a medium that maximizes their visibility as Black artists to reach, more importantly, a global Black audience.

### Film References

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- Thor: Ragnarok*. 2017. Directed by Taika Waititi. Produced by Marvel Entertainment. Burbank: Walt Disney. DVD.

### Note

- 1 In an interview with Carolyn Baker a former programmer at MTV she states: "I said, 'We've got to play James Brown'. And Bob said, 'The research says our audience thinks rock n' roll started with the Beatles'. I came through the civil rights movement. I was a member of SNCC. I believe in opening doors. The partial line at MTV was that we weren't playing Black music because of the 'research'. But the research was based on ignorance. I told Bob that to his face. We were young, we were cutting edge. We didn't have to be on the cutting edge of racism" (Tannenbaum and Marks 2011, 168).

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