

Surviving Hardship Through Religion: Womanist Theology in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

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Abstract

In 2016, Beyoncé's Lemonade premiered during a time of high political, social, and radical tension. Knowles creates an album that is not just about her, but also exhibits pride in blackness while revealing her vulnerability. Beyoncé exposed issues surrounding not only her relationship to her husband but also the African American community. Viewing Lemonade through the lens of Delores S. Williams's definition of Womanist testimony regarding the struggles of identity and survival, it is possible to trace this message retroactively through biblical times. Religious tools like The Curse of Ham caused a generational trauma within the African American community that created a brokenness that continues to resonate. Beyoncé exhibits religious allegories and themes through Womanist Theology by confronting the brokenness of her relationship in Lemonade. This includes the process of forgiving her husband's infidelity and preserving her family unit.

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Introduction

Racial division became an increasingly incendiary debate during 2016. A major focus in the cultural landscape was police brutality; in the previous year, black men faced the highest rate of U.S. police killings,¹ which brought attention to the history of racism and discrimination within governmental institutions. The ongoing presidential race illustrated that “the political divide is much more about culture, identity, and race.”² Numerous people decried the rhetoric of Donald Trump, the Republican candidate, who they claimed spouted hate and bigotry. He incited passionate responses in large crowds regarding issues like immigration, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, and other controversial topics. At the launch of his campaign, Trump justified a wall along the Mexico-United States border stating that, “[Mexico’s] sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”³ The presidential race created an environment of polarization where the preexisting beliefs and opinions of the American populace were brought to the forefront; it became of great importance to identify people’s personal and political persuasions. The divisiveness of Trump’s rhetoric triggered intense reactions on both sides of the political spectrum. Amid these tensions, Beyoncé Knowles released music after a three-year hiatus. I postulate that Beyoncé composed and performed her music as an expression of Womanist Theology intended as representation for the African American community in response to a tense political era while also reflecting on the trials occurring in her personal life.

On February 6, 2016, Beyoncé dropped the song and music video for “Formation” from the album *Lemonade*; it openly celebrated black history, black beauty, and illustrated a clear political and personal opposition to police brutality. She would go on to perform the song at the Super Bowl 50 halftime show with Black Panther Party-themed outfits, celebrating “black power.”⁴ Beyoncé released the full album on April 23, 2016, and it immediately sparked controversy. The collection of twelve spoken word poems followed by lyrical songs revealed that Beyoncé’s long-time husband Shawn Carter, better known as Jay-Z, had cheated on her with another woman. This revelation was one of the most personal pieces of information that the superstar had ever given to the public. Before the release of her album, tensions between the couple had been evident: for example, the infamous 2014 elevator fight between Shawn and Solange (Beyoncé’s sister) brought much speculation about the couple’s relationship. Beyoncé, an infamously private individual, explains in detail the emotional cycle she went through in dealing with Carter’s infidelity in the duration of her album through 12 poems: intuition, denial, anger, apathy, emptiness, loss, accountability, reformation, forgiveness, resurrection, hope, and redemption. Each

poem is accompanied by a song detailing the emotional experience. The seeming conclusion of *Lemonade* is that forgiveness is the most significant outcome; it is perhaps the ultimate message being conveyed throughout the album. Beyoncé employs the concept of a generational curse and used the music and poetry of *Lemonade* to exemplify the pain men have historically caused their spouses within her family. She also created various cultural connectivity for her audience that revealed the frequency of male infidelity within the African American community.

In *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Bruce Forbes describes the four ways in which religion and popular culture relate to each other: religion in pop culture, pop culture in religion, pop culture as religion, and religion and pop culture in dialogue. He argues that religious pop culture artifacts “might appear on different levels: through explicit representations, allegorical parallels, and implicit theological themes.”⁵ Beyoncé shows allegorical parallels and implicit theological themes in relation to the story of Hagar, which serves as a narrative to many struggling African American women. However, the biggest theological theme within *Lemonade* is Womanist Theology.

Womanism is a framework that prioritizes the intersectionality of gender, race, and class. This theological framework “draws on sources that range from traditional church doctrines, African American fiction and poetry, nineteenth-century black women leaders, poor and working-class black women in holiness churches and African American women under slavery.”⁶ In 1979, author and poet Alice Walker was the first to use the term “Womanist.” In the 19th and 20th century, Womanist scholars (like Katie Geneva Cannon, Dolores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes) “explore ordinary Black women’s activities for survival and community progress as practices that coincide primarily with the generalized racial uplift steam in Black religion.”⁷ Although Womanist Theology applies to slavery, I use this theology in a primarily social context, focusing the relationships black women encounter and experience with men within their community and private lives. At its core, Womanist Theology is survival. Williams defines Womanist Theology as “a prophetic voice concerned about the well-being of the entire African American community, male and female, adults and children” and “challenges all oppressive forces impeding black women’s struggle for survival and for the development of a positive, productive quality of life conducive to women’s and the family’s freedom and well-being.”⁸ In Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* album, the song “Sandcastles” signifies the pain of the generational curse put upon the African American community and the outcome of forgiveness being the pinnacle to Womanist Theology.

The Curse of Ham

If there is one story most associated with the history of slavery justification, it is the biblical story of Noah's son, Ham.

The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah; and from these the whole earth was people. Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father's nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said "Curse be Canaan; a slave of slaves he be to his brothers."⁹

There is debate regarding the translation of Genesis 9:25 pertaining to whether Ham himself or Canaan was cursed; however, as Christianity became widespread, many associated Ham as the sole carrier of the biblical curse for several reasons. Ham is described as:

...the father of four sons: three...who became the ancestors of various dark-skinned African people and...only Canaan, the nonblack ancestor of the Canaanites, was cursed with slavery....there are two ways that once could, by manipulation of text, link blackness and slavery: either push the curse of slavery onto a genealogically and etymologically black Ham, or make the biblically enslaved Canaan the ancestors of black Africans.¹⁰

In his book *The Curse of Ham*, David Goldenberg explains how "when Bible readers began to see Ham, in place of Canaan in Noah's Curse, we have an implicit link between blackness and slavery...serving to maintain—by divine mandate—the social order."¹¹ J.J. Flournoy, a proslavery author, wrote in 1838, "The blacks were originally designed to vassalage by the Patriarch Noah."¹² The belief that Ham was black (or at least the darkest of the brothers) is evident in the use of Christianity to justify the institutional racism against African Americans. This Biblical view of black Africans carried true impact when brought over to the West. Goldenberg mentions a 1969 study conducted on educational materials from the American Lutheran Church and found that "the church interpreted

Gen 9:25-27 in a way that justified Black slavery and/or segregation, and it had done so both intentionally and inadvertently.”¹³ James Baldwin, a prominent African American writer, said “I knew that, according to many Christians, I was a descendant of Ham, had been cursed, and that I was therefore pre-destined to be a slave.”¹⁴ The strong racist ideals that became integrated into various institutions of America causes black people to be systematically oppressed. In his book, *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West sees that “the ways in which the vicious legacy of white supremacy contributes to the arrested development of American democracy.”¹⁵ Due to how intertwined racism and religion became, the line between the two were blurred. Jim Crow laws created more trauma on the black community with second-class citizenship, segregation, and violations of human rights. Due to the continuous disadvantages faced by the black community, the black community faced many different obstacles.

The trauma experienced by the black community creates a different psychology compared to other races. With the Curse of Ham having such an effect on modern society, the generational trauma passed down creates a stressful and disadvantaged life for African Americans. This creates distrust and psychological distress within the black family. In a study conducted by the Institute for Family Studies, cheating rate among men is highest in black males at 28% while white men are at 16% and Hispanic men at 13%.¹⁶ The noticeable difference of black men's rate of infidelity exhibits a sign of brokenness specifically with the African American couple.

At the beginning of *Lemonade*, Beyoncé is suspicious of her husband's behavior in “Pray You Catch Me.” In “Denial,” Beyoncé, seemingly to Shawn, speaks of how Jay-Z reminds her of her father. The song “Daddy Lessons” gives insight to Beyoncé's relationship with her father, Matthew Knowles. Beyoncé sings of the nostalgic memories of spending time with her father and the advice of strength he gave to her. Her father warns her to stay away from men like him. This, of course, relates to her relationship with Shawn. The Knowles family experienced their own struggles with infidelity; Matthew Knowles cheated on wife Tina (Beyoncé's mother) and fathered another child during their marriage, ultimately resulting in divorce. The generational curse within her family gave Beyoncé a lens through which to view the distrust between romantic partners in her bloodline; she felt that she was inevitably cursed to fall in love with a man who would share tendencies with her father.

From this juncture, Beyoncé shifts into a contemplation, recounting Shawn's feelings of inadequacy that caused him to believe himself undeserving of love. Ultimately, Beyoncé sees Shawn Carter as the love of her life, and in coming to this realization, Beyoncé declares to listeners that “if [we] are going to heal, let it be glorious.”¹⁷ She opens herself

to the possibility and determination of forgiving her unfaithful partner, and in doing so Beyoncé declares that “[this] is a curse that will be broken.”¹⁸ The song that signifies this transition is soulful, employing a simple piano ballad accompanying Beyoncé voice. The song contains three verses which can be summarized as movements of resolution.

“Sandcastles” Lyric Analysis

The eighth track of *Lemonade* serves as an example of how the entire album deals with the issue of infidelity and how it impacts the family unit. In the first verse of her song “Sandcastles,” Beyoncé employs a metaphor of an ephemeral structure to represent the foundational underpinnings of her marriage that she previously considered secure.

We built sandcastles that washed away
I made you cry when I walked away, oh
And although I promised that I couldn't stay, baby
Every promise don't work out that way
Every promise don't work out that way.¹⁹

Beyoncé admits that their promises to each other, along with various aspects of the relationship, are on a weak foundation. She leaves because the issues that arise between the two are overwhelming. Beyoncé admits that though her decision to separate from Carter seemed final, she was ultimately able to return because of their bond. The second verse goes on to display how tension between the two turned violent and hostile; there are depictions of dishes being smashed and pictures torn “when every promise don't work out that way”²⁰ demonstrating how she cannot “[scratch] out” the name, face, and memory of her romantically infidelitous partner although she is seemingly frustrated with the question of why she still holds tightly to his memory and ultimately, their relationship.

In the third verse of the song, Beyoncé sees her husband and wants him to emotionally reveal his vulnerability; her hope is that he will trust her. She is emphasizing the renewal of her commitment towards what she has originally promised: to be there for better or for worse. The song brings raw emotions and vulnerability into Beyoncé's album and shows how she is letting forgiveness enter her relationship and life.

And your heart is broken 'cause I walked away
Show me your scars and I won't walk away
And I know I promised that I couldn't stay, baby
Every promise don't work out that way, no no no no
Every promise don't work out that way.²¹

This song, so intently focused on the healing process, reflects the need for healing in the African American community. This extends to the communal relationship between people of color as well as family bonds impacted by the systemic results of discrimination.

Significance of Representation & Forgiveness

Redefining the representation of black women of the Bible in Womanist Theology brings empowerment and motivation to black women who experience trials from sexism and racism. A prime example is Hagar, a slave in the book of Genesis. Williams argues that Hagar is a true representation of the pain and struggle of black women, especially for black mothers. Hagar was a slave of Abraham and worked as a servant to Sarai (Abraham's wife). When Sarai could not conceive, she forced Hagar to be her surrogate. To Sarai, being a mother is a privilege that she cannot have and does not see the issue with "offering" her servant to have Abraham's child. In her status, Hagar had no choice but to obey Sarai's order and soon finds herself pregnant. Due to conflict in the family, Hagar flees into the wilderness and liberates herself. Her absence "means that Sarai cannot become a mother as she had planned. There will be no son to carry on Abram's posterity and inherit the family fortune."²² Hagar goes into the wilderness pregnant and with no support when God appears to her. God promises to Hagar hope for "the survival of her generation [and also] hope for the possibility of future freedom for her see"²³ if she returns to Abraham and Sarai. Hagar's wilderness experience "holds in solution a woman's self-initiated liberation event, woman's alienation and isolation, economic deprivation, pregnancy and a radical encounter with God, which empowers the female slave of African descent to hope and to act."²⁴ Although she could not have freedom in her life, Hagar's descendants can have the privilege of living a life better than hers. Williams argues that Hagar connects so strongly to the African American community due to the relatability of her story.

Hagar has 'spoken' to generation after generation of black women because her story has been validated as true by suffering black people. She and Ishmael together, as family, model many black American families in which a lone woman/mother struggles to hold the family together in spite of the poverty to which ruling class economics consign it. Hagar, like many black women, goes into the wide world to make a living for herself and her child, with only God by her side.²⁵

Beyoncé also uses her lifetime experience to broaden the scope of black representation. In "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," Cornel West explains the notions of

“the real Black community” and how black women have been at the forefront of critiquing and criticizing the colonized world in which the black community lives. He says, “the decisive push of postmodern Black intellectuals toward new cultural politics of difference has been made by powerful critiques and constructive explorations of Black diaspora women.”²⁶ Using her platform, Beyoncé contributes to the effort that Womanist theologians are working towards to create a broader understanding of what it means to be black, to be woman, and to be a black woman.

The power of forgiveness is what truly allowed Beyoncé and her family to not only to survive but also to thrive. Forgiving Shawn brings Beyoncé into a space where they can both grow and supersede the expectations of her own familial traditions as well as the stereotypes of a prejudiced society. Instead of adversaries, they find that they have become equals and are stronger as a unified force. In Womanist Theology, the importance of survival is key to the black woman. Beyoncé was by herself in the first half *Lemonade* and wandering in the wilderness. She was confronted with the past generations before her who failed in relationships and with the potential future of her daughter where she will be prone to fall in love with the same man and continue the cycle of infidelity just as her foremothers did. However, she decides that it is necessary to stop the cycle of distrust and separation; she ultimately chooses to forgive her husband. It is not an easy process, but it is necessary to avoid repeating a destructive pattern.

Conclusion

Beyoncé becomes extremely political with messages about police brutality targeting black Americans in *Lemonade*. She shows “stereotypical” black behavior and takes pride in who she is and where she comes from, saying “my daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana. You mix that negro with that Creole, make a Texas ‘bama. I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros. I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils.”²⁷

Beyoncé’s experience and her representation of being unapologetically black resulted in her album becoming a defining musical achievement of 2016. It is not unlikely that the impact of *Lemonade* will be felt for generations to come. The publication *Rolling Stone* named *Lemonade* the #1 album of 2016, calling it “a sign of hope amid all the emotional and political wreckage.”²⁸ *Lemonade*’s success is significant due to the political climate of 2016, with the presidential election and social strife, and the album was widely hailed as brilliant because of its overt confrontation of controversial issues such as race, gender, and class. It brought attention to the issues African Americans face in a systematically racist society and does not shrink away from difficult conversations.

In sharing her experience, Beyoncé tells the story that too many black women relate to and opens a conversation within the African American community. Addressing the

pain between black man and woman encourages both to be viewed as equals and, much like Beyoncé's relationship, allows them to heal together against a deeply racist society. Beyoncé shows in her *Lemonade* film the origin of the album's title. In the spoken word piece "Redemption," Beyoncé gives voice to a piece written by poet Warsan Shire that evokes a near religious mysticism to the generations of women who have come before her. "Grandmother," she says, "The alchemist. You spun gold out of this hard life. Conjured beauty from the things left behind. Found healing where it did not live. Discovered the antidote in your own kitchen. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed them down to her daughter, who then passed them down to her daughter."²⁹ This moment in *Lemonade* reflects the strength that black women have shown; despite hardships, they continue their lives and prosper. In "All Night," Beyoncé sings a ballad of sacrifice and true love, promising her husband that they will heal and make it through this. Like a true Womanist, Beyoncé was served lemons, but she made *Lemonade*.

Endnotes

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