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## Still Haunted: Tending to The Ghosts of Marriage And Motherhood in White Feminist Critiques of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Michelle Obama

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## Still Haunted:

# Tending to the Ghosts of Marriage and Motherhood in White Feminist Critiques of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter

Lucy Short

My haunted lungs, ghosts in the street.  
I know if I'm haunting you, you must be haunting  
me.

-Beyoncé, *Beyoncé*, "Haunted"

### Introduction

The public, mutual adoration between Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter first gained national attention in May 2012. People magazine asked Michelle Obama if she could trade places with anyone in the world, whom she would choose. Obama responded laconically, "Beyoncé".<sup>i</sup> Just months later, Beyoncé recited a love letter to the First Lady for the 2012 Obama campaign. Since these declarations of love, the American public has been vocal about their perceptions of both the female R&B star, and as the First Lady. Many white feminists criticized Michelle Obama, contesting that she admired a hypersexualized, less educated celebrity. Articles such as "Did Michelle Obama Make a Major Misstep with Beyoncé?" claimed that Obama set a bad example for young Black girls in America by expressing her love for Beyoncé.<sup>ii</sup> Critics argued that Beyoncé's focus on sexuality limited her ability to be a truly feminist role model, because she was still adhering to heteropatriarchy and traditional notions of femininity. They further suggested that Michelle's admiration for Beyoncé compromised her ability to remain a role model. However, I argue that there is nothing inherently anti-feminist about femininity. In their unyielding attempts to reclaim their femininity Black love and Black motherhood, Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter actively tend to ghosts of Black women that have haunted the national imagination for centuries.

A little over a year after reciting her letter to the first lady, Beyoncé publicly came forward as

a feminist. From performing with the word "feminist" in all caps as a backdrop, to releasing a stealth album which contained hits such as "\*\*\*flawless" featuring Chimamanda Adiche Ngozi, she has unapologetically claimed feminism in her music. Nonetheless, critics have argued that she is unable to locate both the position of pop star and feminist. I attest that Beyoncé is a human being who is fallible, but most importantly, who has claimed an identity that fellow human beings, and fellow feminists, should honor and respect. Beyond that, seeing Beyoncé as a person, and not a symbol, acknowledges her complexity, subjectivity, and her history as a Black woman.

Michelle Obama has also claimed feminism. I urge white feminists to take a step back, look at the historical and current material conditions of Black women, respect self-labels, and honor a multiplicity of Black feminisms as valid, even those that make room for patriarchal notions of gender roles and nuclear family structures.

### Literature Review

The scholarly discussion pertaining to both Knowles-Carter and Obama is absorbed in analyzing their bodies. Overwhelmingly, the discussion implicates their bodies in one of two ways: either empowering or disempowering, feminist or anti-feminist. Interestingly, nearly identical rhetoric is used to discuss each of their bodies. The literature surrounding Knowles and Obama depicts their bodies exclusively as either sites of women of color liberation or perpetuations of antiquated Euro-centric ideas of femininity.

### Beyoncé: Anti-Feminist

Barbara Read places Beyoncé's body in the latter, more disparaging category. In "Britney,

Beyoncé, and me - Primary School Girls' Role Models and Constructions of the Popular Girl," Read focuses on the contradiction between passivity and power that she claims Beyoncé occupies. Though Read notes that Beyoncé challenges traditional femininity in some ways, she attests that Beyoncé ultimately perpetuates damaging ideas of womanhood. In being seen and viewed as attractive by her audience, Beyoncé simultaneously strives for agency among other women and invokes a rhetoric of female idealization.<sup>iii</sup> Read claims that Beyoncé's pretty, hypersexualized demeanor which she flaunts is thus harmful to feminism, in that it correlates with the recent rise in eating disorders and self-harm.<sup>iv</sup> As such, Read suggests that the hypervisibility of Beyoncé's body could be dangerous, unhealthy, and disempowering among both girls and women. In labeling Beyoncé as the face of the popular Black girl, Read associates female popstars like Beyoncé with unhealthy competition between girls and women.<sup>v</sup> As such, every young girl's desire to become popular is embodied by Beyoncé, her beauty, her femininity, and her stage presence. Read does not view Beyoncé as an empowering role model, but rather as a powerful source of female manipulation, reflective of the Euro-Centric ideal of the young popular woman. Therefore, Beyoncé's performance of femininity is, according to Read, both anti-feminist and potentially harmful to young women.

### **Beyoncé: Feminist**

For years, Daphne Brooks has praised Beyoncé for her embodied feminism. In "All That You Can't Leave Behind," Brooks argues that Beyoncé's performance of femininity through her body has the capacity to liberate many women of color. As Black women have historically been stripped of their femininity, the discussion surrounding Beyoncé's body is indicative of modern repercussions of the oppression of the Black female body.<sup>vi</sup> In asserting her self-worth and the worth of other women of color, Beyoncé

embodies an unapologetic expression of Black womanhood. In doing so, Beyoncé "marks a new era of protest singing that resists, revises, and reinvents politics of black female hypervisibility."<sup>vii</sup> Furthermore, Brooks analyzes Beyoncé's second album *B'Day* as a site of reclamation and empowerment. Brooks argues that the timing and lyrics of *B'Day* serve as a response to Hurricane Katrina survivors.<sup>viii</sup> Released on the one year anniversary of the catastrophe, *B'Day* employs a lyrical rhetoric of evacuation which values the self and encourages repossession of property which has been lost: sex, money, and power.<sup>ix</sup> Meanwhile, Beyoncé embraces her body and uses it to inspire all women of color whose bodies have been policed. Beyoncé sense of "entitlement and the rejection of disenfranchisement,"<sup>x</sup> is nothing short of a political statement about the historic policing of Black women's bodies under a new name. According to Brooks, Beyoncé is not reduced to her body; she is using her body as a bridge to equality for all Black women. Thus, the historical context surrounding Beyoncé's body makes her embodiment acceptable among some feminist scholars.

### **Michelle: Anti-Feminist**

In the same manner as Beyoncé's critics, Farah Jasmine Griffin labels Michelle Obama's body a cite of conforming to staunch definitions of femininity and promoting traditional first-ladyhood for the sake of her husband. Griffin pinpoints the end of Michelle's honest rhetoric to the backlash surrounding Michelle Obama's controversial statement: "For the first time in my adult life, I am really proud of my country."<sup>xi</sup> Following that comment in February of 2008, Griffin argues that Michelle Obama became the "lightening rod, the persistent reminder of [Barack's] race."<sup>xii</sup> As such, white America adopted very negative views about Michelle Obama, perceiving her as unpatriotic and angry.<sup>xiii</sup>

Since then, Griffin asserts that Michelle Obama has attempted to distance herself from the

trope of the angry Black woman by presenting herself in a more Euro-centric feminine manner. At the 2008 Democratic National Convention, Griffin claims that Obama promoted herself as empathetic, patriotic, and visionary.<sup>xiv</sup> Furthermore, Griffin suggests that Obama presented herself as soft and feminine and grateful to the civil rights and women's movements.<sup>xv</sup> As such, Griffin suggests that, in conforming to the American public's ideas of traditional femininity, Michelle Obama was able to garner more support for her husband's presidency. As such, Griffin argues that Michelle Obama's performance of femininity is a disingenuous attempt to appeal to white America. Further, Michelle Obama's embracement of the title "Mom-in-Chief"<sup>xvi</sup>, Griffin asserts, is within the "safe-zone"<sup>xvii</sup> of being a First Lady as she avoids being labeled as Black. As such, Michelle Obama's performance of ladyhood is an attempt to erase her racial identity from the mind of white America. Griffin even argues that Michelle Obama's "conservatively coiffed"<sup>xviii</sup> hair and "floating-feminine white gown"<sup>xix</sup> are attempts to diminish her blackness. Griffin states, "[Obama] has chosen to reveal and/or hide particular aspects of [her] history in order to move more easily into the American mainstream."<sup>xx</sup> In an effort to become more popular, Griffin claims that through her appearance and femininity, Obama flattens her racial identity. Griffin argues this act is disempowering to Black women across America.

### **Michelle: Feminist**

On the other hand, Brittney Cooper illuminates the historical importance of Michelle Obama being viewed as a lady, similar to Daphne Brooks' positive analysis of Beyoncé. In her article "A'n't I A Lady?" Brittney Cooper draws upon civil rights activists such as Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells who have voiced the critical importance of embodied rhetoric and discourse in defense of "black humanity and black womanhood."<sup>xxi</sup> Within a historical context, Cooper argues that Michelle Obama continues to use her

body to reclaim femininity. Though many Americans hold narrow ideas about true womanhood often centered on whiteness, Cooper notes that Obama has "embraced and celebrated her roles as mother and wife, refashioning herself into the role of Mom-in-Chief."<sup>xxii</sup> Cooper attests that Obama's role as mother is expanding the existing definition of motherhood to include Black mothers. In promoting a positive representation of a Black mother, Michelle Obama battles tropes of Black motherhood.<sup>xxiii</sup> By embodying an idealized mother and wife, Cooper asserts, "Michelle Obama has used her public platform to expand notions of womanhood and ladyhood and open the White House to communities of color."<sup>xxiv</sup> In personifying a less oppressive and more inclusive representation of the American public, Cooper is certain that Michelle Obama has made extensive feminist and racial progress. Furthermore, Obama uses her femininity and body to promote her political platform. In fact, Obama utilizes the public's fascination with her body to further her Let's Move campaign, a national push to end childhood obesity.<sup>xxv</sup> Thus, Cooper asserts that Obama not only includes Black mothers and women in the idea of American ladies, but also utilizes her body for political gain. In being recognized as not only a lady, but a "fashion icon outside the realm of fashion modeling . . . she is actively transforming beauty discourses among all Americans."<sup>xxvi</sup> Thus, Cooper suggests that Obama's adoption of Euro-centric ideals of femininity (i.e. ladyhood) can be considered feminist and progressive when viewed through a lens of race and history.

### **Merging Femininity and Feminism**

Read, Brooks, and Griffith fail to recognize that there is undeniable power in both sexuality and all presentations of womanhood, neither of which should be diminished through a narrow definition of feminism. The discussion surrounding both role models assumes that there is something inherently anti-feminist about embodying femininity, sexuality,

or traditional gender roles. I do not believe that femininity and feminism are mutually exclusive. In fact, *Women of Color Feminism* affirms the power of the erotic and argues for the reclamation of femininity for women of color. As exemplified in the scholarly discussion, our historic and current understanding of what it means to be a feminist in America is exclusionary and counterproductive. While embodying femininity, Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter have become feminist forces to be reckoned with. As they demonstrate, we need not reinforce staunch definitions of ladyhood, but rather must expand our national understanding of who can claim a feminist identity to include traditional and non-normative femininity. In promoting their own feminist ideals, Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Michelle Obama reveal multiple facets of feminism at once. Simultaneously, we must honor histories of racial oppression and white supremacy and think about gender performance within a historical context. However, regardless of her history, every woman, cis or transgender, should be able to perform gender in any way she pleases. We must strive to honor a multiplicity of feminisms, which should include, but not be limited to, presentations that fit within traditional notions of femininity.

### **Intervention and Limitations**

Both Beyoncé's most recent album, *Beyoncé*, and her previous album, *4*, as well as Michelle Obama's recent Democratic National Convention speech exemplify inclusive versions of feminism and explicit femininity. Through lyrical and literary analysis, I will analyze their music and speeches, as these were both central in creating these texts. Even though they have been highly visible, I have chosen not to analyze images of the two women because I chose to steer the conversation away from their physical bodies and toward their words. I will interpret their songs and speeches through a lens of Black Feminism(s), in order to tend to intersectionality, or the interlocking nature of oppression. It remains

crucial to analyze not only race, but also gender, which Black Feminism(s) allow. That being said, my identity as a white girl at a liberal arts school in Minnesota is integral to understanding both my perspective and my audience. My privilege, in tandem with my adoration for both Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and Michelle Obama, may hinder my ability to understand multiple facets of their work. As such, I aim to talk back to fellow white feminists whom I believe must investigate the historical context of marriage and motherhood to understand the possibilities of unapologetic representations of those roles for Black women.

### **bell hooks, Beyoncé, and Brittney Cooper**

Recently, comments by bell hooks, a prominent Black feminist, about Beyoncé's sexuality sparked a national debate. hooks called Beyoncé "anti-feminist" and a "terrorist to young girls," which many women, regardless of political beliefs, felt was a harsh misstep. Many Black feminist bloggers have responded to hooks's comments, including Crunk Feminist Collective's co-founder, Brittney Cooper (crunktastic). Through the Black feminist leadership model, cyberfeminisms, and resistance to respectability politics ward a politics of respectability, the Crunk Feminist Collective places values on dialogue and multiple perspectives. Further, the CFC promotes discussions dialogue about a wide-range of relevant and accessible topics, such as Beyoncé and her latest visual album. Brittney Cooper pushes back on hooks' comments in her piece, "On bell, Beyoncé, and Bullshit."<sup>xxvii</sup> Additionally, Cooper spoke back on Fusion about her disagreement with bell hooks Cooper argued:

She trots out the 'what about the children argument' as a way to police how Beyoncé styles and presents her body. Black women should be able to be publicly grown and sexy without suffering the accusation that our sexuality is harmful, especially to children.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In her CFC article “5 Reasons I’m Here for Beyoncé, the Feminist,” Cooper voices support for Beyoncé and her journey with feminism. She defines Crunk Feminism as “percussive, a refusal to fit into particular boxes, a willingness to ‘fuck with the grays.’”<sup>xxxix</sup> As such, crunktastic blurs the staunch boundaries of feminism that are often reinforced by critics of Beyoncé. She pushes back specifically on the notion of academic feminism: “Academic feminism ain’t the only kid on the block. I’ll take a feminist that knows how to treat her homegirls before one who can spit the finer points of a bell hooks to me all day erry-day.”<sup>xxx</sup> Thus, crunktastic places value on lived experiences and critical consciousness. In fact, she contests the value of academic feminism by placing “homegirl” feminism above academic feminism. In doing so, crunktastic centers the material realities of Black womanhood and embraces a spectrum of Black feminism(s).

crunktastic continues to resist the hypercriticism toward Black feminists. She explains how Beyoncé faces a unique scrutiny in pop culture, one that her white counterparts do not experience:

We don’t always bring our A-game, since we spend a whole lot of time trying to figure who’s in and who’s out as if that is going to get us anywhere. Time’s out for the WOC feminist meangirls shit. Sometimes folks just be hating. Real talk. Cuz if you ain’t critiquing Katy Perry and Pink and alla dem for being pro-capatlist and in league with the establishment then back up off Bey.<sup>xxxi</sup>

crunktastic urges against the heightened scrutiny fueled by the intersection of racism and sexism. Further, she argues that a more inclusive feminism that allows everyone to participate would be more productive to the larger goals of crunk feminism. Instead of consuming space or spending time with hateful critique, crunktastic argues that accepting

self-defined labels— for example, Beyoncé has defined herself as a feminist— is more constructive in working toward justice. Finally, crunktastic urges all feminists to take themselves less seriously and have more fun. She says:

More to the point, sometimes we take ourselves too seriously. If laughing and dancing aint a part of this revolution we’re building, then you can keep it.

In Beyoncé’s words “Haters hate and I get better.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

In other words, feminists could all learn a lesson from Beyoncé and spend more time working toward their own goals and their own pleasure. Further, crunktastic argues that feminists should spend less time breaking down the actions and desires of Black women. Though bell hooks provides many generations of feminists with ample work and inspiration, the CFC urges readers to recognize a multiplicity of feminisms as valid.

### **Black Love in the Media**

Despite its abundance of odes to her husband, Beyoncé’s fourth album, *4*, contains lyrics that are both feminine and empowering. As six of the eleven songs on the album are explicitly dedicated to Jay-Z, some feminists might be appalled at the amount of space her relationship with Jay-Z takes up on the album. His overwhelming presence on the album could be interpreted as Beyoncé’s dependency on men, or rather one in particular, and thus, a perpetuation of sexism and heteropatriarchy. However, I argue that it can also be read as space to reclaim Black marriage, as so few representations of Black love are prominent in pop culture. Thus, Beyoncé’s focus on her marriage and the joy it provides her could stand to reclaim Black relationships as a space of connection, empowerment and pleasure.

Though the United States would like to identify as post-racial, racist ideas about Black couples remain pervasive. In a modern sense, the

stereotypes that surround Black couples are that the men are abusive and unfaithful, and the women are jezebels. Though these tropes of heterosexual Black relationships are both misleading and racist, the media continues to perpetuate these images through its hyperfocus on instances which line up with these prejudices to the exclusion of other representations. The eagerly consumed narratives of couples such as Rihanna and Chris Brown, Whitney Houston and Bobby Brown, and Usher and Tameka Foster are omnipresent on the internet. The popularity of these articles reflect of the media and society's prejudices, and the popular desire to consume stories that align with the national imagination. They do not speak to or reflect Black relationships. Nonetheless, when these narratives are both hypervisible and believed, there is little space for deconstructing representations of Black love. In highlighting her marriage, Beyoncé confronts the national imagination concerning Black love, and sheds light on the intrinsic possibilities of connection and love.

### **Marriage: A Divided Duty**

For over a century, white feminists have worked against heteropatriarchy by discounting marriage as a source of empowerment. In doing so, they often reject marriage, and women who are married, as a part of feminism. Historically, white feminist's dismissal of marriage has excluded Black feminists, such as Ida B. Wells, from the movement in framing marriage and feminism as mutually exclusive. In her autobiography, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, Wells recounts a divisive interaction with Susan B. Anthony at an African-American League meeting in Chicago in 1912:

Again, I was the guest of Susan B. Anthony. I had been with her several days before I noticed the way she would bite out my married name in addressing me. Finally I said to her, "Miss Anthony, don't you believe in women getting married?" She

said, "Oh, yes, but not women like you who had a special call for special work. I too might have married but it would have meant dropping the work to which I had set my hand." She said, "I know of no one in all this country better fitted to do the work you had in hand than yourself. Since you have gotten married, agitation seems practically to have ceased. Besides, you have a divided duty. You are here trying to help in the formation of this league and your eleven-month old baby needs your attention at home. You are distracted over the thought that maybe he is not being looked after as he would be if you were there, and that makes for a divided duty."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

As Wells depicts in her story, white feminists, such as Susan B. Anthony, argued that marriage detracted from her commitment to feminism. Anthony believed that Wells could not be both a good activist and a good mother at the same time; she had to choose. In framing a dichotomy between marriage and feminism, Anthony suggested that one must decide between being married, being a feminist, or being torn between the two. Through both conversations and scholarship, white feminists framed marriage and feminism as mutually exclusive lifestyles. As such, white feminists have historically undermined marriage as a source of love, power, and survival for over a century.

In fact, white feminists have gone so far as to compare marriage to slavery starting in the French Revolution. The British (white) feminist Mary Wollstonecraft makes extensive metaphors of womanhood and marriage as slavery in her 1798 text, *The Wrongs of Woman*. "Was the world not a vast prison, and women born slaves?"<sup>xxxiv</sup> This reading of all women as inherent slaves erases the lived experiences of Black women who actually experienced and overcame the sexual, racial, and embodied oppression of chattel slavery. Nonetheless, several white feminist scholars such

as Wollstonecraft have ignorantly invoked slavery as a universal condition of womanhood, and attributed this subjugated condition to marriage: “But a wife being as much a man’s property as his horse, or his ass, she has nothing she can call her own.”<sup>xxxv</sup> When Wollstonecraft invokes marriage as slavery, she negates the privilege that marriage still currently provides, in terms of economic and social capital, and a wealth of access to other benefits (i.e. hospital visits, military benefits, education benefits, etc). Further, she fails to address intersectionality, and the privilege that her white womanhood occupies by erasure of the real experiences of slavery for Black women.

### Whiteness as Property

Cheryl Harris, in her article “Whiteness as Property”, illuminates the value of whiteness both historically and presently. As Harris explains, whiteness allows access to both legal rights and property in the United States. Harris outlines the historical relevance of whiteness as a basis for property rights.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Then, Harris explains how whiteness ensured livelihood because of the access one had to basic rights if they could be perceived as white:

Becoming white meant gaining access to a whole set of public and private privileges that materially and permanently guaranteed basic subsistence needs and, therefore, survival.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

While occupying the privilege of whiteness, white bourgeois feminists failed to see the matrix of domination that is white supremacy. While white women absolutely hold less power than white men, it is important to understand the frameworks of white and Black feminisms. Mainstream white feminism often aims for equality, battling for equal footing-- usually in terms of economic oppression-- to their white male counterparts. Black feminists, however, urge for a paradigm shift. They are not fighting to gain the rights of white men; they are

fighting for a change in the system. They are fighting for justice. Often fighting for justice means not treading on the backs of other marginalized people. As such, Black women have historically supported others along the way, and bringing the Black men with them. Mary Church Terrell coined the Black feminist concept of lifting while climbing in her address before the National American Women’s Suffrage Association:

And so, lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go, struggling and striving, and hoping that the buds and blossoms of our desires will burst into glorious fruition ere long. With courage, born of success achieved in the past, with a keen sense of the responsibility which we shall continue to assume, we look forward to a future large with promise and hope. Seeking no favors because of our color, nor patronage because of our needs, we knock at the bar of justice, asking an equal chance.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

As Mary Church Terrell explains, collaboration and support were central tenants of the Black Feminist leadership model to achieve social justice. With regards to the partnership that marriage offers, Black feminists have always urged for utilizing connections in order to strive toward justice and resist oppression together. Though a wide variety of connections can produce meaningful coalitions, such as church, clubs, and identity collectives marriage can be just as empowering and liberating. Through marriage, Black women often used the social and political leverage to work together toward ending interlocking systems of oppression. As such, we must understand marriage and love as potentially productive partnerships for justice.

### Beyoncé and the Power of the Erotic

Another aspect of 4 which could appear reductive to women is the hypersexualization apparent in nearly every song on the album. Though sexual objectification is often problematic,

Beyoncé displays an entirely different sexual prowess which is a central tenant of Women of Color Feminism. Despite the frequent mislabeling of the erotic as pornographic, through a Women of Color Feminist lens, the erotic can also be viewed as the forming of deep, sensual connections to the beings around us for the sake of coalition— which is sometimes, but certainly not always sexual. In her essay “Uses of the Erotic,” Audre Lorde recognizes the undeniable agency in recognizing a passion for life through our relationships:

I find the erotic such a kernel within myself. When released from its intense and constrained pellet, it flows through and colors my life with a kind of energy that heightens and sensitizes and strengthens all my experience.<sup>xxxix</sup>

Many of Beyoncé’s songs on her fourth album display this quality of sexual empowerment and passion.

Three of the four singles featured on 4 exhibit Beyoncé’s power as a feminine, heterosexual woman. On the surface, the final single, “Love On Top” praises Beyoncé’s husband Jay-Z. Upon closer examination, we understand that she is celebrating their relationship as it relates to her power and her happiness. The song begins with a forceful cue from Beyoncé, “Bring the beat in!” From there, it invokes grandiose metaphors of the sun and the stars:

Honey, honey  
I can see the stars all the way from here  
Can’t you see the glow on the window  
pane?  
I can feel the sun whenever you’re near  
Every time you touch me I just melt away<sup>xl</sup>

Suggesting an intense proximity and relationship to celestial bodies implicates Beyoncé as transcendental. Through her deep connection with

Jay-Z, Beyoncé has achieved a sense of synergy with the planets and the stars. As such, Beyoncé’s relationship with Jay-Z serves as an empowering reminder of her connection to the forces of the universe. In conjunction with Lorde, Beyoncé’s newfound network of love emanates a sense of power and self-love which cannot be found elsewhere:

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.<sup>xi</sup>

Beyoncé’s refusal to resort to self-denigration through a multiplicity of coalitions, with bodies like Jay-Z and the sun, has elevated her understanding of herself and her surroundings. While simultaneously gaining power and empowering others, Beyoncé gains a deeper sense of feeling. She implies that her agency in her marriage increases her capacity to feel invigorating life forces like love, light, and warmth. As such, the erotic serves as a source of inspiration and courage, which can result in systemic change. As Lorde says, “recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world.”<sup>xlii</sup> This energy weaves throughout the album, but presents itself unapologetically in the song “Run the World (Girls)”, an anthem which encourages women to express and own their power:

My persuasion can build a nation  
Endless power, a love we can devour  
You’ll do anything for me<sup>xliii</sup>

Beyoncé suggests becoming in touch with the erotic widens women’s sense of possibility. She implies that when people are in touch with their longings, they feel invincible and powerful, and have the potential to rule the world. Beyoncé’s repetition of the question and answer: “Who run

the world? *Girls* illustrates her utopian vision of a women-centric world. Through her lyrics, Beyoncé explicitly encourages women to not only engage in patriarchal relationships, but also fight for more power in society. This power can be located through a lens of the erotic, which requires being in touch with our deepest desires. Lorde reiterates the power of recognizing our cravings: “For not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.”<sup>xiv</sup> Thus, that which is deeply personal becomes extremely political, underscoring every person’s capacity for liberation. Furthermore, in understanding our inner-selves, we increase our capacity of confidence and feeling.

Beyoncé’s aroused senses are then further exemplified through the second verse of “Love on Top”:

I can hear the wind whipping past my face  
As we dance the night away  
Boy your lips taste like a night of  
champagne  
As I kiss you again, and again, and again,  
and again<sup>xv</sup>

Lyrically, Beyoncé utilizes taste and hearing to illuminate her desire for Jay-Z. Her focus on the five senses throughout both verses of “Love on Top” accentuates another key component of the erotic: living sensuously. Through her relationship with Jay-Z, Beyoncé has discovered her deepest feelings which she measures her life against. In being hyperaware of her senses, Beyoncé has discovered her agency and happiness and refuses to accept anything else. Lorde attributes power to recognizing our feelings: “For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”<sup>xvi</sup> Through her

empowering sensuous knowledge, Beyoncé relentlessly demands a fair chance at happiness.

Knowles-Carter highlights her capacity for joy throughout “Love on Top.” As she sings, “Now everybody asks me why I’m smiling out from ear to ear,” Beyoncé confidently depicts her ability to feel the joy that her romantic connection to Jay-Z has uncovered. As such, the song’s focus on the power of sexuality and the happiness it creates echoes Audre Lorde’s interpretation of the erotic:

The erotic functions for me in several ways. The first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. Another important way in which the erotic functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy.<sup>xvii</sup>

Through declaring and underlining her own happiness, Beyoncé refuses to compromise her humanity for the racist ideals of society. In fact, she encourages other women to use their sense of strength and happiness to create healthy, empowering relationships, which allow women to be at the top of the totem pole. As such, the lyrics of “Love on Top” undeniably align with the agenda of Audre Lorde’s interpretation of the erotic: female liberation through love.

### **Michelle Obama: Mom-in-Chief**

Michelle Obama’s twenty-five minute speech at the 2012 Democratic National Convention warmed hearts across the country. She spoke of motherhood, marriage, and social justice, through the lens of her family and her past. Her husband and her children were the central focus of her speech. As she voices concerns for her family, she invokes the rhetoric of the American

Dream. This can be interpreted as reductive as it flattens oppression across identity. However, I argue that her speech can also be read as a reclamation of Black motherhood. As scholars have mentioned, we must remember that, for the Obama family, the personal is often overtly political. In emphasizing the importance of her role of “mom-in-chief” and her family, Michelle Obama disproves harmful myths about Black mothers.

### Confronting The Myth of The Welfare Queen

Though the 2008 election of Barack Obama may have caused many Americans to think that our country is colorblind, our ideas of family are both racialized and racist. Much of the mainstream discussion of Black mothers depicts them as financially dependent on welfare and violent towards their children. In June 2012, the New York Times released an article by Kimberly Seals Allers on their parenting blog highlighting the virtual invisibility of Black mothers in Hollywood:

Because the “pictures in our heads” of black mothers depict them as crack heads, single mothers with deadbeat-dad issues, welfare queens, violent, uneducated or as neck-rolling sassy maids and smart-talking fishwives. Alternatively, we are being portrayed by a man. In a fat suit. And a wig. Nice! We are rarely seen as nurturing mothers or (gasp!) intentional parents with committed husbands, let alone successful women who don trendy shoes, fabulous handbags and have some of the same romantic-comedy-worthy struggles as any other parent or would-be parent. Hey, Hollywood, we even have fertility issues, despite the hypersexualized, baby-making-machine stereotypes you’ve come to believe.<sup>xlviii</sup>

In other words, the invisibility of positive Black mothers on the big screen is largely due to society’s racist construction of (white)

motherhood, which fails to align with our ideas of Black motherhood. By embracing femininity, health, fashion, and her role as a wife and mother, Michelle Obama single-handedly disproves the prominent stereotypes of Black mothers that exist in the United States.

Though the welfare queen myth was first invoked by Ronald Reagan in his 1976 presidential campaign, it is evident that she still exists in discourses of Black motherhood. In her speech at the 2012 National Democratic Convention, Michelle Obama engages with this stereotype through recounting stories of her and Barack’s childhood:

You see, Barack and I were both raised by families who didn’t have much in the way of money or material possessions, but who had given us something far more valuable – their unconditional love, their unflinching sacrifice, and the chance to go places they had never imagined for themselves.<sup>xlix</sup>

Firstly, Obama expands her discussion of family to be about more than economic standing. She establishes the core values of their families which include love, sacrifice, and hope. Obama then subtly identifies the distinction between hard work and financial success, which is a directly informed by social location. She reminisces about Barack’s grandmother, who was a white, working-class mother figure to Barack:

Barack’s grandmother started out as a secretary at a community bank...and she moved quickly up the ranks...but like so many women, she hit a glass ceiling. And for years, men no more qualified than she was – men she had actually trained – were promoted up the ladder ahead of her, earning more and more money while Barack’s family continued to scrape by. But day after day, she kept on waking up at dawn to catch the bus...arriving at work

before anyone else...giving her best without complaint or regret. And she would often tell Barack, “So long as you kids do well, Bar, that’s all that really matters.”<sup>i</sup>

By distinguishing Barack’s grandmother as a hard-working, selfless woman who experienced economic hardship not because she was lazy but because of sexism, Michelle Obama subtly disproves the American dream and Protestant work ethic. These ideals claim to allow success for anyone who tries hard enough. However, economic oppression results from the intersections of race, gender, class, sexuality, and able-bodiedness, and class marginalization thus remains out of the control of many dedicated, responsible mothers. Though Michelle only addresses gender in this speech, she addresses male privilege in the workforce. Even though she is analyzing a white woman, her focus on Barack’s grandmother’s values and how they are similar to her own illustrates the capacity for Black women to have similar morals when raising children. Michelle claims that their families have taught her and Barack valuable lessons about parenthood:

“And if our parents and grandparents could toil and struggle for us...then surely we can keep on sacrificing and building for our own kids and grandkids.”<sup>ii</sup> In presenting the connection as a passing down of values, Michelle locates her and Barack as loving, sacrificial parents within the discussion of parenthood in the US. In alluding to how capitalism strips women of their financial autonomy, Obama begins to educate the American people about an economic system that is inherently unequal. Beyond disproving the myth of the welfare queen, Michelle associates herself with the generous mothering techniques of Barack’s grandmother. Furthermore, the sheer amount of her speech that pertains to motherhood proves her dedication to being a giving mother, underlining the potential for wonderful, loving Black motherhood.

When it comes to public notions of Black motherhood, the media promotes few gentle, loving Black mothers. In fact, it frequently presents caricatures of angry, violent Black mothers. The overwhelming depiction of Black mothers as abusive has led various journalists to respond to such distorted representations. Essence published an article entitled “Black Moms Do More Than Cook, Cuss, and Beat Kids”. In this article, Janelle Harris discusses her reaction to the trending “Shit Black Moms Say” YouTube videos and the twitter handle #Blackmomscatchphrase as both unrealistic and damaging to public perceptions of Black motherhood across identity:

I thought to myself, do Black mamas say anything that doesn’t involve threatening physical harm? ‘Cause word on the street is we can’t communicate with our children without making cutting remarks or breaking some poor child’s spirit (or worse).<sup>iii</sup>

The fact that a prominent journalist has to respond to a cultural obsession with antiquated stereotypes of Black mothers illuminates the racism inherent within the American construction of motherhood. The widespread narrative of Black mothers as abusive, violent, and threatening is far from accurate and extremely prejudiced. Almost thirty years after Reagan’s campaign, Americans continue to participate in the same racist rhetoric surrounding Black mothers.

Throughout her DNC speech, Michelle Obama attempts to battle the portrayal of Black moms as child beaters. She repeatedly articulates the importance of her daughters and her desire to sacrifice anything for them, just as her grandparents and parents did for her. In giving up some of the “little joys” of her old life to become First Lady of the United States of America, Michelle Obama wishes for more for her daughters. She makes a constant effort throughout the speech to present herself as nurturing, gentle, and selfless:

And I say all of this tonight not just as First Lady...and not just as a wife. You see, at the end of the day, my most important title is still “mom-in-chief.” My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world.<sup>liii</sup>

By establishing her unyielding love for her daughters, Michelle Obama contradicts the violent Black mom trope. She presents herself as loving, before everything else. By declaring her primary role as a mother, she suggests that the well-being of her children is much more important than her position as First Lady. In embodying a nurturing, protective mother, Obama also makes huge strides for Black feminists and for future generations of Black women, such as her infinitely beloved daughters. In becoming the hallmark of ideal Black motherhood, Michelle Obama paves the path for countless Black women to be recognized as viable mothers. Though millions of loving Black mothers have come before her, Michelle Obama’s public, unapologetic adoption of the role is revolutionary.

### **Michelle Obama: Motherhood as Power**

Despite the immense impact that Michelle Obama’s embracement of the role of mom-in-chief can produce, many white feminists responded negatively to her self-identification. Among the critics of her DNC speech was Jessica Valenti, an American blogger and white feminist author of the books *Full Frontal Feminism*, *He’s a Stud She’s a Slut*, *Yes Means Yes*, and *The Purity Myth*. In regards to Michelle Obama’s speech, Valenti tweeted, “I long for the day when powerful women don’t need to assure Americans that they’re moms above all else.”<sup>liv</sup> As a white woman who has always had access to the idea of moral motherhood, Valenti has absolutely no right to critique Michelle’s primary presentation of herself as a mom. Due to her whiteness, Valenti has never been stripped of her ability to be viewed as a good mother. Beyond that, there is nothing anti-feminist

about being a mother. For decades, Black feminists have recognized motherhood as a place of power, love, resistance, and liberation. Written in 1982, the Combahee River Collective Statement establishes the critical importance of appreciating past generations of mothers who made substantial feminist strides: “Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.”<sup>lv</sup>

As such, Michelle Obama is paying homage to the generations of Black women who have paved a path for motherhood, while embodying motherhood to continue carving a path for current and future Black mothers. Obama’s attention to motherhood has the potential to be liberating for not only Black mothers, but all mothers of color because it widens our cultural understanding of motherhood. Jessica Valenti’s failure to consider how chattel slavery impacted motherhood neglects historical context. Thus, her analysis of Michelle Obama’s speech is indicative of white-centric second-wave feminist tactics, which often fail to address historical difference in promoting ideas of female liberation and girl power. In order to understand Obama’s social location in a historical context, we can learn from the Combahee River Collective statement on intersectionality:

We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives, they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is no such thing as racial-oppression which is solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.<sup>lvi</sup>

In tending to many aspects of social location, the Combahee River Collective highlights the multilayered types of oppression that Black women face in the United States. Reducing

Obama's speech to its adherence to Jessica Valenti's narrow idea of feminism erases the elements of Black feminism(s) and Women of Color Feminism that the speech contains. Obama's nod to past generations of Black feminists in both her and Barack's families illustrates not only the power of motherhood, but also the presence of the ghost of the welfare queen in our national imagination.

### Haunted Black Motherhood

Avery Gordon introduces the concepts of cultural hauntings in her book, *Ghostly Matters*. She voices the critical role recognizing those things which seem long gone, but still affect modern society plays. Gordon writes:

[T]o write about invisibilities and hauntings . . . requires attention to what appears dead, but is nonetheless powerfully alive; requires attention to what appears to be in the past, but is nonetheless powerfully present.<sup>lvii</sup>

Though we rarely use the phrase "welfare queen" in mainstream media, her ghost still haunts discussions of Black motherhood. Though she has been removed from public discourse, alternative media recognizes the way this figure-- the irresponsible, sneaky, welfare-dependent single mother-- is invoked. As such, we must understand that the myth Michelle Obama disproves in her 2012 DNC speech is not a character of the past at all. Though she was invented nearly thirty years ago, she lives on in our conversations of Black mothers.

### Conclusion: Bow Down

The racialized constructions of motherhood, love, and sexuality in the United States continually affect our lives. In *Aberrations in Black*, Roderick A. Ferguson, discusses the modern repercussions of stripping Black bodies of autonomy and labeling them as sexually deviant:

Sociology helped to establish African American corporeal difference as the sign of a nonheteronormativity presumed to be fundamental to African American culture. Marking African Americans as such was a way of disenfranchising them politically and economically.<sup>lviii</sup>

As a result of the ghosts that haunt Black bodies, Black Americans are faced with hypercriticism, as their bodies alone signify deviance to the national imagination. Through a lens of Women of Color Feminism, oppression can be understood through the intersection of identities. It is crucial that people in positions of privilege, such as white feminists, stop stripping Black women of their bodies and allow them to present gender in any way they like. When white feminists understand that Black motherhood and femininity has been buried and replaced with tropes, they can appreciate the impact of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles's unapologetic portrayals of their roles as wives and mothers. As white feminism fails to honor a spectrum of Black feminisms, it continues a cycle of oppression. If mainstream white feminism continues to erase Black history and not tend to ghosts, women will never be liberated. For the sake of feminism, white women must come down from our white pedestals of privilege and expand conceptions of feminisms to recognize the transformative possibility of motherhood and love.

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## Notes

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