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Healing Familial and Historical Trauma Through the Lens of Generational Femininity and
Motherhood: Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

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In the visual album *Lemonade*, Beyoncé and poet Warsan Shire rework aspects of African folklore and oral tradition to create a multimodal work that explores the realities of black womanhood and motherhood in America. Through telling a story of infidelity and placing the black woman as both victim and heroine of her own story, *Lemonade* speaks to the duality and autonomy black women possess in the choice to heal historical and familial traumas.

Beyoncé interludes each song on *Lemonade* with spoken word poetry written by poet Warsan Shire. By including the aspect of spoken word, Beyoncé and Shire are imitating a long-standing practice in black communities; oral tradition. Oral tradition, by definition, is the act of passing down messages or stories via speech, song, poetry, folktales and fables, etc. “Broadly, oral history is more a comment than a record. It is a way of observing a society that reveals the way the community feels about itself. It preserves for posterity important moments in a cultural movement through time and does this by means of images that are often found in imaginative tales and poems” (Scheub 2). While oral traditions exist in a wide variety of cultures around the world, it has been and continues to be an extremely important and specific aspect of African American community and culture (Turner 1). Scheub also states that oral tradition tells a story that can only be effectively communicated orally, and through enactment; not only is oral tradition a form of spoken storytelling, but also in many ways it is an act of performance (2).

Spoken word poetry has evolved from this African oral tradition and in many ways preserves the important historical aspects of it while also incorporating more contemporary ideas and realities of black life in modern America. Spoken word is important in black communities today for many of the same reasons oral tradition was so important. “Because of the early limitations on their communication with one another, the concept of freedom of speech holds a special meaning for Americans of African descent” (Robinson 2016). Not only is it necessary for

African Americans to have a space to freely express themselves, but it is also important to have a place to feel validated as well. “Spoken Word is often described as a place where the subaltern have a voice and are free to express issues of inequality, disadvantage, and oppression. Moreover, not only are these marginalized identities accepted, but they are celebrated and deemed as particularly authentic” (Green 6). By using multimodal aspects like music, poetry, and visuals, Beyoncé and Shire are creating a contemporary oral history through the lens of feminine generational healing.

There cannot be a discussion of oral tradition without realizing the significant role women have played. “In African societies women are recognized as the preservers and disseminators of oral traditions” (Sheik 2018). Sheik also states that women are often the reciters/performers of oral tradition, and the continuation of the practice is highly feminine. Beyoncé intentionally chooses to highlight this aspect of African folklore to feminize her message of *Lemonade* with specific references to feminine deities. In the Yoruba culture specifically, there is substantial importance placed on femininity, womanhood and motherhood. “Among the Yoruba people, motherhood is said to confer privileges that give credence to the very foundations of society and women’s presumed roles in it and thus symbolize fertility, fecundity, and fruitfulness” (Akujubi 3). The act of being both a woman and becoming a mother is believed to endow women with a “mystical power”.

Beyoncé herself reflects and embraces these features of womanhood found in Yoruba culture both in *Lemonade* and her personal life. “My daughter introduced me to myself. You know, my mother and I are so close, and I always prayed that I would have that type of relationship with my daughter. And she’s still a baby, but the connection I had with her when I was giving birth was something that I’ve never felt before” (Knowles 2013). Motherhood, being

a principal value to Beyoncé, proves to be a depending factor in *Lemonade*'s investigation into what it means to heal specifically from infidelity.

In conjunction with the high status of motherhood in African folklore, women are also believed to be superior to men in the Yoruba culture because of their inherent ability to keep secrets. "The inscrutable nature of women's secrets intensifies their power in the minds of men" (Drewal 549). Both motherhood and secrecy are topics discussed in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, and the ties between Yoruba culture are stark. However, while it is true that women are pivotal in the creation and preservation of African oral tradition and are held to high or superior status in folklore, the dynamics of patriarchal society and rigid gender roles often situate woman as subservient and passive (Sheik 2018). Beyoncé and Shire choose to take the powerful feminine essence from the Yoruba culture and flip the historical sex/gender oppression found in oral tradition to situate the black woman as the heroine of her traumas.

The Yoruba female deity Oshun specifically appears in *Lemonade*, most notably in the track "Hold Up." Oshun is commonly known for her association with aspects of beauty such as purity, water, fertility, sensuality, and love, however she also exhibits human-like qualities such as vanity, spite, and jealousy (Jeffries 2017). Beyoncé has taken these aspects and infused them into both the lyrics and visual elements of "Hold Up." Oshun has been observed as not only the giver of life, but as a taker of life as well. Oshun is believed to have flooded the Earth in reaction to being "incensed by her devotees" in one Yoruba myth (Jeffries 2017). Beyoncé preludes "Hold Up" with a visual of water, as she is seen struggling underwater while she toils with ideas found in Shire's poem "Denial."

I whipped my own back and asked for dominion at your feet. I threw myself into a volcano. I drank the blood and drank the wine. I sat alone and begged and bent at the waist for God. I crossed myself and thought I saw the devil. I grew thickened skin on my feet, I bathed in bleach, and plugged my menses with pages from the holy book,

but still inside me, coiled deep, was the need to know ... Are you cheating on me?
(Shire 2016)

The imagery and poetry collaborate to situate Beyoncé as victimized by her uncertainty of infidelity, however, at the end of the poem on the visual album, Beyoncé can be seen opening doors and letting out a flood of water. At this point, Beyoncé chooses to present angrier characteristics such as jealousy, a humanlike trait belonging to Oshun.

Beyoncé challenges her victimization of “Denial” with the lyrics of “Hold Up,” appropriating characteristics of Oshun to reposition herself. With the entrance of Beyoncé releasing the flood, she is alluding to the power that Oshun possess in regard to her ability to call upon flood waters. Beyoncé also expresses feelings of jealousy in the lyrics of “Hold Up.” “What's worse, lookin' jealous or crazy? Jealous or crazy? Or like being walked all over lately, walked all over lately, I'd rather be crazy” (Knowles 2016). Beyoncé is seen destroying a fire hydrant resulting in another flood of water. In this scene, young black children dance in the water that spews out from the hydrant. By including these visuals, Beyoncé is reworking the idea of Oshun’s jealousy and destruction into a more positive and empowering light. As opposed to Oshun using water to scorn her people, Beyoncé uses water as a mode of liberation; as *Lemonade* focuses primarily on liberation from historical and familial traumas.

The themes of familial and historical traumas are quickly introduced in the first poem “Intuition,” with a direct address to trauma inflicted by the father. “You remind me of my father, a magician ... able to exist in two places at once. In the tradition of men in my blood, you come home at 3 a.m. and lie to me. What are you hiding? The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a fucking curse” (Shire 2016). The victimization of infidelity is reinforced from generation to generation. In Shire’s poem “Anger,” which precludes the song “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” there is another reference to familial trauma. “I

don't know when love became elusive. What I know is, no one I know has it. My father's arms around my mother's neck, fruit too ripe to eat" (Shire 2016). The lyrics of "Don't Hurt Yourself" cause an interesting duality, pitting generationally perpetrated trauma against Beyoncé's own heroinism.

"Don't Hurt Yourself" directly challenges this presumed victimhood found in the previous poems. Beyoncé explores her anger regarding the infidelity through the confidence of her lyrics.

When you hurt me, you hurt yourself, try not to hurt yourself
 When you play me, you play yourself, don't play yourself
 When you lie to me, you lie to yourself, you only lying to yourself
 When you love me, you love yourself
 Love God herself (Knowles 2016).

The transition from Shire's "Anger" into "Don't Hurt Yourself" is reflective of the duality that exists in the actualization of familial traumas. In the visual album, "Don't Hurt Yourself" is interjected with a sample of Malcom X. "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman" (Malcom X 1962). Beyoncé is revisiting and observing the role that historical traumas inherently play in affecting the personal familial traumas that black women can experience. The historical disrespect and neglect of the black woman within America is reflected within this instance of infidelity, which adds to her pain and victimization. Beyoncé includes this to observe that not only do black women face outside oppressions, but those oppressions can often be mirrored within their own personal relationships. At the end of the "Don't Hurt Yourself" music video, Beyoncé can be seen throwing her wedding ring as she states "This is your final warning. You know I give you life. If you try this shit again, you gon lose your wife" (Knowles 2016). Here, within the context of

not only personal trauma but also historical, Beyoncé establishes a sense of autonomy. While Shire emulates feelings of inadequacy, shame, and hopelessness, there also coexists personal empowerment in the lyrics, in spite of Beyoncé's victimization.

A similar pattern occurs in the following poem and song, "Apathy" and "Sorry," respectively. Shire reintroduces victimization through the angle of motherhood and shifts the inner guilt outward on to the perpetrator.

So what are you gonna say at my funeral, now that you've killed me?
Here lies the body of the love of my life, who's heart I broke without gun to my head.
Here lies the mother of my children, both living and dead. Rest in peace, my true love,
who I took for granted (Shire 2016).

Accompanying this spoken word is the video and song "Sorry," wherein Beyoncé does not reflect insecurity and inner guilt, but rather recognizes that she is not apologetic for the infidelity; this speaks to how there is a phasing between the dualities of victimization and heroinism. "Lookin' at my watch, he shoulda been home. Today I regret the night I put that ring on. He always got them fuckin' excuses, I pray the Lord you reveal what his truth is" (Knowles 2016). Within the song "Sorry," Beyoncé also reflects motherly autonomy, "I left a note in the hallway, by the time you read it I'll be far away, I'm far away, but I ain't fuckin' with nobody. Let's have a toast to the good life, suicide before you see these tears fall down my eyes, me and my baby, we gon' be alright, we gon' live a good life" (Knowles 2016). Here, Beyoncé addresses motherhood and her own autonomy in one, furthering the idea that motherhood plays a substantial role in healing. In the visual aspect, Beyoncé is seen dancing with black women while wearing traditional Yoruba white face and body paint, bringing in African folklore once again. In Yoruba culture, the sacred painting of Ori, or essence, is an articulation of holiness and power (Senbanjo). Beyoncé details this transition as a way to

showcase the act of community and historical healing between black women in face of their traumas.

Shire drives home the point of familial trauma in the poem “Accountability.”

You go to the bathroom to apply your mother’s lipstick. / ... / You must wear it like she wears disappointment on her face. / ... / Your mother is a woman and women like her cannot be contained. Mother dearest let me inherit the earth. Teach me how to make him beg. Let me make up for the years he made you wait. Did he bend your reflection? Did he make you forget your own name? Did he convince you he was a god? Did you get on your knees daily? Do his eyes close like doors? Are you a slave to the back of his head? Am I talking about your husband or your father? (Shire 2016).

In this poem, Shire and Beyoncé directly allude to the familial traumas inflicted by men that have been passed from mother to daughter. At this point in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé moves from the introduction and exploration of her victimization and heroinism to acceptance, and eventually forgiveness and healing. In the poem “Forgiveness,” Shire reintroduces autonomy as a result of generational womanhood. “If we’re gonna heal, let it be glorious. 1,000 girls raise their arms. Do you remember being born? Are you thankful for the hips that cracked? The deep velvet of your mother and her mother and her mother? There is a curse that will be broken” (Shire 2016). This introduction to autonomy is followed by healing that is further rooted in motherhood. “That night in a dream, the first girl emerges from a slit in my stomach. The scar heals into a smile. The man I love pulls the stitches out with his fingernails” (Shire 2016). Essentially, Beyoncé begins to heal and forgive through the lens of motherhood, while at the same time alluding to how the strength of her mother and grandmother aid in her own healing. This solidifies the importance of motherhood in healing from generation to generation, specifically within African and African American culture; the bond of womanhood strengthens as each woman encounters her inherited trauma.

The theme of healing is then reflected in both the context of familial and historical in the track “Freedom.” Beyoncé’s lyrics reflect her own freedom in the acceptance and forgiveness of infidelity, but also in the larger context of black oppression in the U.S. “I’m a walk, I’m a march on the regular, painting white flags blue. / ... / Freedom! Freedom! I can’t move, freedom, cut me loose! / ... / I break chains all by myself, won’t let my freedom rot in hell (Knowles 2016). The importance of womanhood and motherhood is revisited in Kendrick Lamar’s verse, “But mama don’t cry for me, ride for me, try for me, live for me. Breathe for me, sing for me, honestly guidin’ me (Lamar 2016). This is a testament to how motherhood has remained a cultural sacredness within black communities. Beyoncé takes this sacredness and reworks it into modern black existence, iterating that healing comes from the strength of ancestry through the mother.

“Freedom” leads into the final poem featured on *Lemonade*, “Redemption.” Shire reflects the importance of womanhood and motherhood within healing familial and historical traumas in this poem especially.

Grandmother, 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 kit. Broke the curse with your own two hands. You passed these instructions down to your daughter who then passed it down to her daughter (Shire 2016).

Shire is particular in the positioning of the grandmother as her own heroine in the healing of not only her familial traumas, but also historical traumas. Along with this theme of generational heroinism, “Redemption” also approaches healing as an intentional choice made by the grandmother. This is contemplative of the main theme of *Lemonade* as a whole. The idea that the black woman is victimized three times over by her forgiveness of infidelity is countered entirely. *Lemonade* manifests empowerment through the concept of complete autonomy in the decision to forgive and reconcile.

Throughout the visual album *Lemonade*, Shire and Beyoncé rework pivotal aspects of African folklore to create a multimodal oral tradition that is focused on healing historical and familial traumas. By calling upon Yoruba folklore and generational femininity, Shire and Beyoncé cast the black woman as being both the victim of infidelity and the heroine of her own healing. While emphasizing the cultural and historical importance of motherhood in the experiences of black women and the black community at large, *Lemonade* stands to prove that the black woman has full autonomy in the choice she makes to forgive and heal. *Lemonade* is an attestation to empowered black womanhood; and though trauma may be generational, healing can be too.