

The Death and Resurrection of Oshun in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*: Subverting the Institutionalized Borders of Western Christian Thought in American Popular Culture

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THE ADVENT OF EUROPEAN COLONIALISM FACILITATED THE DEMISE OF indigenous African religions. Colonialism, Africana studies scholar Wunyabari O. Maloba argues, was oriented by “the racist principle that barbarism pervaded Africa and therefore there was no culture to be salvaged” (11). Motivated by the prejudices of this sentiment, Christian missionaries, with the support of their respective European states, infiltrated most of the African continent and delegitimized indigenous religions by likening them to medieval era demonic imagery and the malevolence of the Christian devil (Garraway 146–47). Across the Atlantic Ocean, in the North American colonies, a similar approach was being practiced. Because traditional African customs and beliefs were often viewed by the dominant white culture as “superstitious beliefs of primitive people” (Mullen 626), there was a push by conversionist advocates to evangelize African slaves. Some Christian ministers and landowners were reluctant to enforce conversionist practices for a number of reasons. Overworked ministers, for example, were not willing to take up the extra burden

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of evangelizing an increasingly large population of African slaves (Scherer 627). Most importantly, some slave owners believed “blacks did not have the mental or moral capacity for Christianity” (627) and others were worried that Christianity’s message of salvation would embolden slaves and make them “impudent, insubordinate, and perhaps violently rebellious” (627). Conversionists reacted to these concerns by creating the “theology of slavery,” which stipulated:

God permitted Christians to hold Africans as slaves even after they had converted to Christianity . . . that Christian instruction could be tailored to the blacks’ supposedly inferior abilities by using special homilies and catechisms; and that their conversion in this manner made them more useful as slaves, not rebellious but diligent and loyal.

(Scherer 627)

This theology would later become profoundly intertwined with the institution of slavery, and despite several generational attempts by African slaves to cling to their old worldviews, indigenous African religions inevitably failed to flourish in the new world as there were no durable structures capable of upholding and promoting their values (Scherer 627–28).

The democratization of thought in contemporary popular culture, due to manifold avenues of expression, such as social media and online articles, has allowed unorthodox perspectives like pop star Beyoncé’s visual album *Lemonade* to flourish. *Lemonade*, I argue, is a comprehensive and groundbreaking body of work that subverts the institutionalized borders of Western Christian thought by challenging the hegemony of Christian mythology and seeking to resurrect the agency of indigenous African religions through the process of legitimization. *Lemonade* opens with a submerged Beyoncé using Christian iconography (the Holy Bible and a cross) to seek redemption from God. We then see two versions of Beyoncé confronting each other. One version later disappears and the other awakens in a blindingly yellow dress as the Yoruba Goddess Oshun, a precolonial African Goddess typically associated with water, purity, fertility, and love. Beyoncé, functioning as Oshun’s medium, seeks to reacquaint the African consciousness with the spirituality of indigenous African religions. Oshun thus operates as a genealogy thread that links

precolonial African culture to contemporary African diaspora communities, and the pride that comes with discovering the vitality of one's past is reflected in *Lemonade*'s pro-black anthems like "Formation." Most importantly, Oshun dismantles the borders of Western Christian thought by appropriating the Christian doctrine of salvation. Beyoncé's existential salvation in *Lemonade* (accessing her newfound agency as a black feminist in contemporary America) only happens when the old Beyoncé dies and the new Beyoncé morphs into a radiant African Goddess. The implication here is that true salvation is only possible by reconnecting with the authenticity of one's roots.

During the epoch of European exploration, Christians had a profound aversion to the non-European religious practices they encountered abroad (Garraway 146). The "bizarre" manifestations of these often-labelled "occultist" practices symbolized, they claimed, the Christian devil's demonic forces (146). As a result, combating this "unmitigated diabolical influence" (146) through the process of evangelization and conversion became a prioritized mission. The zenith of European exploration, from the fifteenth to mid-seventeenth century, also coincided with the zenith of Europe's witch hysteria (146). In Europe, the widespread suppression of women accused of being witches was precipitated by a religious epistemology called demonology, "the science of demons . . . which described witch-craft through treatises, manifestos, trial transcriptions, and literary works" (146). Therefore, as missionaries attempted to identify, characterize, and eradicate the practices of indigenous African religions, they "drew on early modern European conceptions of witchcraft and diabolism to create a new discourse" (146–47), a new discourse colonial ethnography scholar Doris Garraway calls "colonial demonology" (147). The legacy of colonial demonology is conspicuous in our contemporary time. In Nigeria, for example, the once flourishing Igbo traditional religion is currently on the brink of extinction. Igbo Christians, due to centuries-long conversionist practices, are now the dominant group, and their condemnation of the Igbo traditional religion as demonic magic has led to widespread hostilities such as destroying the indigenous religion's artifacts and the property of its loyalists (Okeke et al. 6–9). Associating demonic forces with indigenous religions, first, denies moral legitimacy to indigenous practices and, most importantly, scares off believers and potential converts because being associated with the malevolence of the Christian devil in

predominantly Christian societies inevitably leads to persecution and ostracization. Demonic associations, a legacy of colonial demonology, are hence an effective eradication tool. This exponential growth of African Christians at the expense of indigenous religions is not only happening in Nigeria; as traditional shrines continue to disappear, “The number of ‘Christians’ in the African continent has grown from 8,756,000 in 1990 to 382,816,000 in 2004, with projected growth by 2025 of 640,460,000 professing Christians. That would make the Christian Church in Africa the largest of the six continents” (Gehman 4).

A similar trend is occurring in the United States of America. In 1863, during the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, declaring the abolition of slavery. After the Civil War, freed slaves sought to express their new-found freedom by creating their own churches, spaces that would allow them to congregate and strategize:

It was at long last possible for them to establish church organizations, conduct their meetings and engage their ministers without the supervision and the control of their former masters. The Black preachers were the ones who had the most learning. The people looked to them for leadership, not only in religious matters, but in all other areas of life as well.

(McKinney 458–59)

This infiltration of the black church into every aspect of African American life, both secular and nonsecular, explains why the black church quickly became a place for social cohesion and civil rights organizing throughout the subsequent years and even centuries (McKinney 466–68). A conspicuous example of the black church’s indispensable role in civil rights activism and community building is the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama (1955–56). When civil rights activist Mrs. Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to move to the back of a bus in segregated Montgomery, meetings were held in a local black church to address the issue and minister Martin Luther King Jr. later agreed to lead and organize the now historic Montgomery bus boycott that forced the Supreme Court to outlaw segregation practices in public transportation (McKinney 466–67). These social cohesion successes of the black church have made African

Americans overwhelmingly loyal to Christianity, and their loyalty to the monotheist Christian faith means the near extinction of indigenous African religions in America. Findings by the Pew Research Center in 2018 revealed that African Americans are more likely to be Christian than other major ethnic groups (Masci et al.). Unlike Americans of European heritage, most African Americans trace their lineage to regions in Africa that, a few centuries prior, were “not primarily part of the Christian world” (Masci et al.). Today, however, “Nearly eight-in-ten black Americans (79%) identify as Christian . . . By comparison, seven-in-ten Americans overall (71%) say they are Christian, including 70% of whites, 77% of Latinos and just 34% of Asian Americans” (Masci et al.). Christianity is thus an integral component of contemporary African-American life.

On April 23, 2016, pop singer Beyoncé released her visual album *Lemonade* to widespread acclaim. *Rolling Stone* gave the album a rare five-star review, declaring:

It’s . . . a major personal statement from the most respected and creative artist in the pop game. All over these songs, she rolls through heartbreak and betrayal and infidelity . . . Yet despite all the rage and pain in the music, she makes it all seem affirming, just another chapter in the gospel according to Beyoncé: the life-changing magic of making a great loud bloody mess.

(Sheffield)

Billboard’s review was also congratulatory, hailing *Lemonade* as “a revolutionary work of black feminism” that redefines authorship by historicizing the vulnerability and strength of black women (Bale). Scholarly analyses echo similar ideas, often conceptualizing the visual album an intermedial aesthetic (Hartmann 2-3) that uses alleged autobiographical references to betrayal in Beyoncé’s own marriage to rap mogul Jay-Z to explore themes of “family, infidelity and the black female body” (Hess). My article, I must emphasize, is not interested in the alleged autobiographical elements of *Lemonade*. I view the album as a piece of visual and textual art that uses multimodal aesthetic productions to articulate its distinct point of view.

While talking points like infidelity have dominated mainstream analysis on *Lemonade*, an arguably more radical discourse about the institutionalized borders of Western Christian thought brews beneath

the surface. *Lemonade* opens with a submerged Beyoncé zipping open her black sweatshirt to reveal a scaly and fleshcolored undergarment. She is in the process of metaphorically shedding her skin. This section of the album is titled “Denial,” and Beyoncé, the narrator, recounts in a poetic monologue the ordeal of trying to conform to an idealized aesthetic of womanhood, one in which she tried to be more quiet, softer, prettier, and less awake. She then encounters another submerged Beyoncé lying still on a bed with her eyes closed. We get a close-up shot of the still Beyoncé’s face, and she is visibly not awake. This short scene, only thirty-two seconds, is of profound significance. In addition to hegemonic conformity, another central theme is the idea of consciousness. Beyoncé’s efforts to conform by being “less awake” implies the suppression of her consciousness. Thus, strict conformity to hegemonic standards can be interpreted as the loss of consciousness. The lifeless Beyoncé is the Beyoncé without consciousness, the Beyoncé in denial, submerged and sound asleep. The Beyoncé shedding her skin, on the other hand, is the Beyoncé resisting conformity, also submerged but desperately fighting to keep her consciousness awake. In the subsequent scene, awake Beyoncé, seemingly more resolute, stares intently at her dormant counterpart. She proceeds to transport her consciousness into dormant Beyoncé and both entities become one. The inactive consciousness of dormant Beyoncé is immediately vanquished, and the now whole Beyoncé opens her eyes.

As the enlivened Beyoncé tussles and struggles to adjust to the awakening of her consciousness, the narrator continues to recount her ordeal of trying to conform. In a society governed by hegemonic dogma, refusing to conform is inherently sinful and morally distressing. This explains why Beyoncé had previously attempted to subdue her urges of defiance by seeking redemption from the hegemonic authority. In this section, Beyoncé describes her experiences attempting to conform to Christianity with images of confession, baptism, self-flagellation, taking communion, and Bible reading. These specific references to Christian beliefs and practices make it very clear that the hegemonic authority Beyoncé is referring to is Western Christian thought. This argument is visually confirmed with a shot of a conspicuous cross on a dog-eared Holy Bible floating, listlessly, next to the awakened Beyoncé. In biblical scriptures, God is described as an omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient deity: “All the inhabitants

of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'" (Daniel 4:35, New American Standard Bible). Questioning the legitimacy of God's authority is therefore a sinful, and even sacrilegious, act: "Do not put the LORD your God to the test" (Deuteronomy 6:16, New International Version). Awakened Beyoncé has an epiphany. She realizes that despite repeatedly praying, fasting, and pleading, she can never subdue her urges of defiance. In brief, she cannot conform, so she must swim to the surface. She closes her monologue repeatedly asking if she's being cheated on, and when she reemerges on the surface, water gushing at her feet, she assumes a new form as the Yoruba Goddess Oshun and majestically gaits down a flight of stairs.

Publicly and confidently asking the question "Are you cheating on me?" epitomizes liberation because she is no longer the subordinate wife who attempted to appease hegemonic power structures by keeping her mouth closed. She is now a new woman, and her newfound agency has emboldened her with the courage to challenge the status quo by asking difficult and uncomfortable questions. This is another deceptively simple scene operating on multiple discursive levels. There is the literal infidelity interpretation. Beyoncé is "submerged" in distress because she suspects her husband is unfaithful. Her desire to confront and investigate these suspicions are stifled by the hegemonic pressures of being the idealized subordinate wife who is "soft" and "pretty" and "less awake," but after wrestling with thoughts of subversion, she finally accrues the courage to confront her husband, "Are you cheating on me?" Although this reading satisfies the insatiable tabloid interest in the often-concealed personal life of Beyoncé, the larger than life pop star, there is also a meticulously layered connotative interpretation that subverts institutionalized borders of Western Christian thought.

In *Lemonade*, conventional interpretations of Christianity represent subjugation. This is emphasized when Beyoncé has to seek atonement from God for attempting to independently interrogate the state of her reality, describing herself on her knees saying amen after a number of failed attempts to change on her own. It is therefore no coincidence that the liberated Beyoncé, the Beyoncé who swims to the surface and subverts hegemonic power structures by boldly asking

“Are you cheating on me?” is reincarnated as the Oshun, a deity belonging to a pantheon of indigenous African Gods who were actively persecuted and delegitimized by Western Christian thought. Adjectives like “the African venus,” “river goddess,” and “fertility goddess” are often used in Western religious discourse to describe Oshun (also spelled Osun) (Murphy and Sanford 1). Theology and African studies scholars Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford label these descriptions as “ethnocentric and reductive” (1) because they do not “convey the multidimensionality of her power: political, economic, divinatory, maternal, natural, therapeutic” (1). Oshun is not just a goddess; she is a religion that encompasses complex sociopolitical thought processes that negotiate the intersection of social identity and spirituality (2). Oshun is a revered orisa (deity) belonging to an elaborate and sophisticated religious system (Abiodun 10). The origins of her traditions can be traced back to the Yoruba territory of Ijesa, “a region of West Africa that since 1991 has been known as Osun State, Nigeria” (Murphy and Sanford 4). The name Oshun means a source that “runs, seeps, flows, moves as water does” (2). This explains why Oshun often takes the form of freshwater springing from the parched earth, an image that evokes hope sprouting from challenging circumstances (2). The fact that Oshun’s elemental power is water reveals her unrivaled importance to her devotees because water not only creates life, but it also preserves it (2).

Moreover, it is believed that she has the power to heal both man and the Gods: “Osun . . . is believed to have the power to influence the destinies of men, women, and the orisa” (Abiodun 11). This makes her an omnipotent orisa with extraordinary powers: “When she is invoked her presence is felt to bring lightness and effervescence to illness, want, and gloom. Osun’s ability to heal is based on her sovereignty and her compassion. She is a warrior who can fight for her children and vanquish enemies visible and invisible” (Murphy and Sanford 8). Oshun is the only female deity of the seventeen orisas who came to earth at the dawn of creation (Abiodun 18). Her ability to assert her feminine agency amongst formidable male orisas is frequently attributed to her “power and influence” (18). As a feminist trailblazer in the male-dominated orisa pantheon, she probably has a profound understanding of what it means to be different and estranged. This explains why she is arguably the most compassionate

orisa, always keen to defend the defenseless. Every year, the Osogbo festival celebrates Oshun's vital role in the Ijesa territory of Osogbo, the capital city of Nigeria's Osun State (Murphy and Sanford 4). The Osun River, where the festival takes place, is believed to have healing powers because it is the holy home of Oshun (Alarcón 733). Furthermore, festival attendees pay homage to Oshun's purity by wearing white (733). Oshun originally assumed the color white but "a popular story . . . says that she was very tidy and would go to the river constantly to wash her white garment. Eventually, the dress turned yellow from washing in the water, and this is how yellow became one of her colors" (733). The Osogbo festival is unquestionably Nigeria's largest event "dedicated to a traditional deity and has become an international tourist attraction drawing thousands to witness the grandeur of the festival and give praise to Osun" (Murphy and Sanford 4). Due to the enslavement of a significant population of Yoruba people during the transatlantic slave trade, some of Oshun's practices traveled across the Atlantic Ocean and resettled in the Americas (4). The systematic efforts by Western Christian thought to delegitimize Oshun's practices were largely successful; however, in countries like Cuba, Oshun became an integral part of a religious subculture, and she is now strongly identified with Cuba's patron saint, Our Lady of Charity (4-5).

Oshun is strategically summoned and referenced in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. When the submerged Beyoncé chooses to disavow the hegemony of Western Christian thought, she sheds her old skin and reemerges from beneath the surface in a gorgeous yellow gown, the color of Oshun. Beyoncé here is appropriating the cornerstone Christian practice of baptism. According to religious scholars Gordon Geddes and Jane Griffiths, "Many Christians believe the gift of the Holy Spirit is given at baptism. The Holy Spirit enters the baptized person and gives new life, which is dedicated to God. The ceremony marks a new beginning in the Christian's life. It is a fresh start" (65). Additionally, water is the central symbol during the act of baptism. "Water is used in all Christian baptisms" because it represents life and thus evokes the notion of eternal life, and it is used to cleanse the subject of sin (65). In *Lemonade*, what gives Beyoncé "new life" and "a fresh start" is not the anointing water of the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is the healing stream of Osun River, the sanctified abode of Goddess Oshun. Submerged Beyoncé only acquires the courage to

challenge Western Christian thought's hegemony when she rises to the surface as Goddess Oshun. The water therefore cleanses her from the constraints of subjugation, and the new Beyoncé on the surface is no longer the meek and submissive wife trying to close her mouth more and be "less awake." This new Beyoncé is enraged, and she demands to know if her partner is unfaithful.

More clues that Beyoncé is now a reincarnation of Oshun are revealed in "Hold Up," the first song she sings after reemerging from beneath the surface. Coalescing the conflicting emotions of elation, rage, and betrayal, Beyoncé sings about her husband's philandering activities with a cheeky smile while smashing objects with a baseball bat. As Robert and Downs explain, Yoruba folklore describes Oshun as having a "malevolent temper and sinister smile when she has been wronged. They continue, "in 'Hold Up,' a smiling, laughing and dancing Beyoncé smashes store windows, cars and cameras with a baseball bat nicknamed 'Hot Sauce'" (Roberts and Downs). These cinematic visuals of Beyoncé in a gorgeous yellow gown, the color of Oshun, wearing a sinister smile while malevolently smashing objects and crooning about her husband's infidelities substantiate the argument that the new Beyoncé on the surface is a reincarnation of Oshun. At this point in *Lemonade's* narrative, reincarnated Beyoncé, fully embodying the essence of Oshun, no longer questions if her husband is cheating on her. She is now certain that he is unfaithful, and she angrily questions why he would jeopardize the happiness and fidelity of their sacred union by getting involved with women who will never love him as she does. The power and influence of Oshun endows Beyoncé with clarity and assuredness. While submerged, she tried to conform to patriarchal standards of subservient femininity and, as a result, suppressed the urge to openly confront the degradation of her marriage. Now on the surface, and emboldened by the healing powers of Oshun, she not only allows herself to come to terms with the state of her disintegrating marriage, but she also recognizes the value of her self-worth. She boasts of her acumen in "the game," and when she hops out of her bed and turns her "swag on," she reminds herself that an accomplished woman of her caliber should not tolerate adulterous behavior from her partner.

This newfound confidence also allows Beyoncé to access and manifest her agency as a black feminist. In the prelude to the song "Sorry," she agonizes in another poetic monologue over the betrayal

of her black husband, wondering in the lyrics what he might say at her funeral considering it was him who killed her when he broke her heart. There is a traumatic historical precedent to this betrayal. At pivotal moments in African-American history, black men have often abandoned and betrayed the interests of black women. In the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, for example, although black women played critical roles like leading marches, coordinating boycotts, and feeding volunteers, the black male leaders of the movement often viewed them as subordinates (Associated Press), and the specific gendered interests of black women were, as a result, sidelined or dismissed entirely (Martin et al. 103). Moreover, some members of the black community allege that black masculinity's attraction to whiteness is another concrete example of the betrayal of black women by black men. According to data from the US Census Bureau (2005), "African American men had white wives 2.65 times more often than black women and white husbands. In other words, in 73% of black-white couples, the husband was black" (Hattery and Smith 50). Some scholars argue that this attraction is mostly due to upward social mobility aspirations; because white women are more desirable to mainstream white society than black women, having a white spouse might afford black men plentiful socioeconomic privileges (Judice 23). Black men's alleged attraction to white femininity is underscored in Beyoncé's "Sorry" when her black husband cheats on her, debatably the world's most glamorous and talented pop star, with "Becky" [slang for a "basic" white woman] with "good hair."

The implication here is that even the most universally lauded representations of black womanhood are no match for the banality of a random unremarkable white woman. Beyoncé chooses not to wallow in self-pity. Rather, she congregates with a group of her girlfriends, their faces beautifully and intricately painted in the sacred Yoruba tradition of Ori, and they uplift each other by singing and dancing. The use of Ori here is consequential: "Ori in Yoruba literally means head but . . . it also refers, in the spiritual sense[,], to one's intuition, destiny (ayanmo), essence, and their consciousness that's part of them" (Klein). The art of Ori allows Beyoncé to embrace her new empowered consciousness, and she develops the courage to assert her self-worth and leave her philandering black partner. She sings a jubilant recommendation to say good-bye to boys with her girlfriends and toasts the "good life." Her congregation with black women here

is also consequential. Because these women are able to uplift and support each other, the implication here is that black women must rely on each other to champion their unique interests at the uncomfortable intersection of race and gender. By using Oshun and Yoruba practices to access her agency and exorcize her rage, Beyoncé illustrates how her liberation as a black feminist stems from reconnecting with the spirituality of her African roots and congregating with other black feminists.

Lemonade's Oshun and Yoruba references would have easily gone unnoticed by mainstream media outlets, often unaware of the latitude and depth of indigenous African religions. However, due to the democratization of thought in our contemporary time, advocates for African divinity now have a plethora of platforms on the internet to broadcast their beliefs. Five days after the release of *Lemonade*, on April 28, 2016, black feminist writer Zandria F. Robinson briefly mentions Beyoncé's allusion to Yoruba orisa Oshun in her *Rolling Stone* review of *Lemonade*. The following day, race and social issues content creators Kamaria Roberts and Kenya Downs published an article on *PBS NewsHour*, extensively and persuasively chronicling various references to Oshun and other aspects of African divinity in *Lemonade*. The conversation about these references quickly permeated the internet and set social media ablaze (Alcantara). For example, Maximiliano Goiz's Facebook post about the aestheticization of Oshun in "Hold Up" was "widely shared across social media" (Alcantara) and sparked a conversation about the visibility and validation of African divinity in Afro-Latinx communities. Goiz, a half-Cuban half-Mexican Oshun devotee who grew up with Lucumí and Santería practices, feels "privileged that although #Lemonade is not necessarily directed at me [but rather at black women], it still [somehow] connected to my Cuban roots and the Afro-Diaspora at large and that I was able to see myself reflected in it, even in the simplest way" (Alcantara). As previously mentioned, Oshun's practices were introduced to the Americas by the transatlantic slave trade: "This culture arrived in the Americas specifically because enslaved black people were stolen from what is now Southwest Nigeria and Benin in West Africa. Oshun is particularly popular in Brazil through the religion of Candomblé, and in Cuba through Santería" (Alcantara). For Afro-Latinxs who are marginalized by mainstream Christian society due to their steadfast belief in the spirituality of indigenous African

religions, *Lemonade* gives them “a sense of validation as part of the larger African diaspora” (Alcantara).

Beyoncé’s artistic decision to juxtapose subjugation, represented by the patriarchal authority of Christian dogma, with liberation, represented by the feminist agency of Oshun and the validation of precolonial African spirituality, can be persuasively read as a deliberate attempt to subvert the institutionalized parameters of Western Christian thought and legitimize the sacredness of indigenous African religions. But *Lemonade*, I must underscore, is not anti-Christianity. In the song “Daddy Lessons,” for example, there is a shot of a vivacious New Orleans-style funeral procession marching out of a black church, blowing trumpets and clanking on drums, swaying the decorated coffin from left and right. The vitality in this moment is palpable, and the contrast between the sadness of death and the joy of life is amplified. As previously stated, the black church played an indispensable role in the development of African-American life. During periods of intense racial hatred like the Jim Crow era, the black church was still able to celebrate the vivaciousness of African-American culture and function as a hotbed for social cohesion and civil rights activism (McKinney 458-68). This contrast of vivaciously thriving in the midst of adversity is honored in *Lemonade*’s funeral procession scene. The black church, I therefore argue, does not entirely replicate the repressive anti-African ideologies of Western Christian thought. While it is fundamentally informed by Western Christian doctrine, it has historically prioritized issues that uniquely affect the black populace of North America. Furthermore, in one of *Lemonade*’s many monologues, an unidentified black woman, a representation of the dignity of everydayness, rhetorically asks how the community should lead their children into the future. Her response is love, specifically love for Jesus. Beyoncé is, once again, honoring and accentuating black people’s profound connection to the black church. For many black people, the black church, the only recognizable Christian institution that speaks directly to the black experience, still represents the way forward. Looking at these examples, it is apparent that *Lemonade* is not dismissive of Christianity. Beyoncé’s priority, I argue, is reconciliation and not necessarily division.

Reconciliation is a central theme in *Lemonade*. In the melancholic ballad “Sandcastles,” Beyoncé’s philandering black husband comes to her, penitent, reformed, and desperately begging for another chance.

The image of rap mogul Jay-Z, an icon in hip-hop's hypermasculine culture, bowing down and kissing Beyoncé's bare feet epitomizes the difficult journey to reconciliation and the chastening efforts by black male leadership to address their alleged generational betrayal of black women. The song that follows "Sandcastles" is a stirring but short ballad called "Forward" featuring images of black mothers like Sybrina Fulton and Lesley McSpadden who lost their sons, Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown respectively, to police brutality. Placing the black husband's remorseful attempt at reconciliation next to these mourning mothers holding up pictures of their slain black sons is thematically resonant. Black women, this juxtaposition suggests, have always stood by black men, from the civil rights movement to the current Black Lives Matter marches against police brutality. Thus, black men must also be willing to stand by black women and support their unique causes at the often-contentious intersection of race and gender. This is the way "forward," and in the rousing ballad "All Night," Beyoncé apprehensively accepts her black husband's apology and decides to give reconciliation a chance. This reading, I argue, should not be interpreted as failing to hold philandering partners accountable. In "All Night," Beyoncé does not absolve the black husband of his past crimes. Instead, she implores him to shed his old skin, undergo his own "baptism," and prove that he is worthy of her trust. In brief, reconciliation can only be the way "forward" if the philandering partner is committed to his penance.

This emphasis on reconciliation highlights Beyoncé's strategic approach to handling the conflict between Western Christian thought and indigenous African religions. Although the black church has its roots in Western Christian thought, it evolved to become a champion of African-American issues. Thus, it is unrealistic to expect African Americans to sever ties, completely, with Christianity. With that said, the black church is still rooted in a Western Christian thought process that has historically promoted ideologies responsible for degrading and exterminating the vitality of indigenous African civilizations. Ignoring the richness and vitality of Africa's precolonial spiritual culture actively promotes the prejudiced narrative that nothing but "barbarism pervaded Africa" before European imperialism, and "therefore there was no culture to be salvaged" (Maloba 11). When Beyoncé disavows hegemonic power structures (represented by Christian symbols and metaphors) at the genesis of *Lemonade*, she is

disavowing the anti-African dogma of Western Christian thought. This dogma also takes the form of patriarchal policing because its conceptualization of womanhood as subordinate and submissive had previously discouraged Beyoncé from challenging the oppressive status quo. Beyoncé realizes that without an existential connection to the indigenous practices of her ancestors, a spiritual association to the past events that shape her current reality, she will never fully embrace the legitimacy of black womanhood. She thus refuses to gauge her value as black woman through the barometer of Western Christian standards, and, using Oshun as her inspiration, she swims to the surface where she is able to consciously assert her agency as a proud African-American descendant of indigenous African spirituality and also acknowledge the indispensable role of the black church in everyday black life. Because Oshun's function in *Lemonade* is to empower her African-American descendants, she chooses to acknowledge the legitimacy of institutions like the black church that also strive to empower African Americans.

This practice of using Oshun as a mechanism to navigate the complicated relationship between indigenous culture and Western Christian thought is not a novel concept. During the colonial epoch, the Roman Catholic Church successfully diffused Christianity in Latin America and established itself as "a dominant cultural institution" (Stump 184). According to religion scholar Roger W. Stump, this advantaged position gave the Church access to enormous wealth and political clout (184). As a result, the Church was able to extensively integrate its practices into the region's local cultures (184). The decision to pursue integration and not extermination was an effective strategy. If the Church pursued complete extermination of local cultures, they would have alienated the local population and made them more hesitant to embrace Roman Catholicism. The decision to integrate both cultures meant the Church acknowledged the dignity of some aspects of the local culture, and this arguably made the locals more likely to embrace Roman Catholicism. This practice of amalgamating dissimilar religious beliefs and practices is known as syncretism. In Cuba,

the most common form of syncretism became known as Santería. It fashioned a Roman Catholic framework around the traditions of the Yoruba people regarding the worship of orishas, animistic deities associated with forces of nature and human concerns.

Santeria worship retained African elements . . . but linked these practices to the veneration of particular Roman Catholic saints. Specific associations included . . . Our Lady of Charity, the patron saint of Cuba, with Oshun, the goddess of love.

(Stump 184)

Oshun can therefore be conceptualized as a mediator between indigenous African religions and Western Christian thought. Her survival in the African diaspora communities of Latin America is a result of reconciliatory efforts between African and European religious practices, and Beyoncé's decision to reincarnate as Oshun while still acknowledging the validity of the black church reveals similar reconciliatory efforts.

Lemonade, it is imperative to reiterate, does not call for the full boycott of Christianity. Rather, it implores black Christians to syncretize the spiritual authenticity of their African roots with the modern realities of their Western Christian citizenship. Syncretism is reinforced in "Formation," *Lemonade*'s final song. One of the first shots in "Formation" features a black priest proudly leaning over his pulpit with an enormous cross necklace around his neck. A few seconds after this shot, Beyoncé sings about honoring her black Southern heritage, cherishing the kinky texture of her daughter's natural hair and embracing the beauty of her "negro nose." Beyoncé's full acceptance of herself and her heritage, the historicity of her identity as an African-American woman, was only possible because she reconnected with the indigenous spirituality of her African ancestors. Without accessing the agency of Oshun, Beyoncé would have remained trapped beneath the surface, less awake and constrained by the prejudiced and patriarchal authority of Western Christian thought. By juxtaposing proud declarations of black identity with a proud black priest, Beyoncé is presenting a "new world" in which Christianity is able to syncretize with the cultural vitality of precolonial African heritage. Unlike the aforementioned example in contemporary Latin America, where Santeria and Oshun devotees are marginalized by the Eurocentric values of mainstream society (Alcantara), religious syncretism in this instance is somewhat equitable because both entities (the black priest and black pride) are venerated.

Syncretism in *Lemonade* echoes womanist theological ethics by divinity scholars Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and

Angela D. Sims. Like *Lemonade*, womanists in the theological sphere “critique sacred writings, philosophical formulas, and theological reflections” (Cannon et al. xv) by engaging with a plethora of perspectives, such as the historical and cultural tensions embedded in black Christianity. The exploration of these cross-cultural tensions attempts to unpack and understand how the black female viewpoint is influenced by “inequities in a social system that is anything but just” (xv). This is where, I argue, the similarities end. The foremost adjective Cannon, Townes, and Sims use to describe themselves is “Christian” (xv), and they admit to engaging with cross-disciplinary discourse in order to “translate womanist scholarship into the service of the church and community” (xvi). Although they attempt to rewrite theological hegemonies, their salvation remains primarily informed by Christian doctrine. For Christians, the concept of salvation is unquestionably the most important aspect of their faith. According to theologian John Wesley, salvation is the acquisition of God’s grace through Jesus Christ (274). A subject without salvation is “blind” and possesses an “unfeeling” heart that is “quite insensible of God and the things of God” (274). Without salvation, the grace of God, Christians are destined for damnation because they cannot be “saved from the guilt of sin” (274). This is the foundational belief of Christianity, and it is nonnegotiable. Thus, despite the cross-disciplinary discourse by womanists in theology, their core belief system remains oriented by Christian salvation, the procurement of God’s grace made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé’s deconstructs and appropriates the Christian doctrine of salvation by predicating her redemption on Yoruba Divinity. *Lemonade* cannot be described as operating from within the same religious framework as womanist theology because although Oshun, *Lemonade*’s central deity, acknowledges the validity of the church, she refuses to be fully absorbed into it by offering her own version of true salvation. Without Oshun reminding Beyoncé that she is the product of a sophisticated and spirited precolonial African culture, the full scope of her heritage would have remained unearthed and, as a result, she would have accepted her status beneath the surface as subordinate and subhuman, an inferior species unable to match the grandeur of Western civilization. Unlike the historical, and still ongoing, attempts by Western Christian thought to portray indigenous African spirituality as the heart of darkness, barbaric practices possessing no

salvageable culture, Oshun legitimizes Beyoncé's humanity by affirming her agency as a black woman of African descent. For Beyoncé, true salvation, the state of stepping into one's purpose and becoming whole, can only be achieved by moving beyond the "grace" of Western Christian thought and reconnecting with the authentic spirituality of her indigenous African roots.

Colonialism operated on the prejudiced principle that Africa was a barbaric continent without any discernible traces of a sophisticated culture (Maloba 11). This belief enabled European missionaries infiltrating the continent to discredit the legitimacy of indigenous African religions and liken African divinity to the demonic powers of the Christian devil (Garraway 146–47). In consequence, systemic efforts to convert Africans to Christianity, both on the continent and in the diaspora, were relentlessly pursued (Scherer 627–28). The diverse avenues of expression in contemporary American culture have allowed underrepresented perspectives that exist beyond the institutionalized realm of mainstream discourse to find an engaged audience and challenge the status quo. A comprehensive example of these underrepresented perspectives is pop star Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*. While mainstream coverage on *Lemonade* focused almost exclusively on its alleged autobiographical references to infidelity, feminists and African divinity advocates used online articles and social media to unpack more subversive themes like the intersection of feminism, blackness, and indigenous African spirituality.

Lemonade, I argue, is perhaps American popular culture's most visibly defiant case for the legitimacy of indigenous African religion. Although Western Christian thought is not presented as entirely injurious in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé problematizes Christianity's historical, and still ongoing, tendency to marginalize devotees of indigenous African spiritual practices. At the genesis of *Lemonade*, a submerged Beyoncé is oppressed and silenced by the prejudiced and patriarchal dogma of Western Christian thought. However, with the help of Oshun, the Yoruba Goddess of water and love, she is able to reconnect with the feminist vitality of her precolonial African heritage. The pride that comes with discovering the sophisticated practices of African theology, practices that debunk the Western myth that precolonial Africa was nothing but a barbaric continent with no salvageable culture, unshackles Beyoncé's consciousness from Christianity's prejudiced ideologies and allows her to embrace and access her agency

as a black feminist in contemporary America. Although *Lemonade* honors the progressive legacy of Christianity in the African-American community, it ultimately argues that the African-American soul can never be truly whole unless it is existentially in conversation with its precolonial past.

This article, I must point out, is not an attempt to characterize indigenous African spirituality as a foolproof cultural system. The practice of twin murder in the Igbo tradition, for example, due to a superstitious belief that twins are inherently evil, is abominable and inexcusable. This practice was widely publicized by Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and it remains controversial to this day (Bastian 13). The reaction, however, to such gruesome acts should not be a complete disregard and delegitimization of indigenous Igbo culture because by doing so the many positive aspects of Igbo traditions are overlooked and ultimately erased. From the fifteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries, Christianity was burning women at stakes, and in our contemporary times, an avalanche of sexual abuse and pedophilia scandals are rocking the Catholic Church. None of the systemic responses to these indignities, at government and policy levels, called for a complete disregard and delegitimization of Christianity. Rather, the focus has invariably been on ameliorating Christianity's practices because there is a recognition that the fundamental principle guiding religion is the desire to do good. The same dignity and recognition should therefore be afforded to the intentions and morality of indigenous African religions.

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