

Jahangirnagar University Journal of Journalism and Media Studies
Vol 1 • 2014 • ISSN 2409-479X

Beyoncé: Identity, Stereotypes and Cultural Roots of a Southern Diva

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Abstract

Black identity has always been the acknowledgement of a common history that generated the sense of African-American uniqueness along with the stereotyping notions. My focus will be the issue of the African-American identity as it has been evolved through the years, as well as racial and gender ideologies that formed this identity. And Beyoncé the singing Diva of the American South pompously conforms to these ideologies. The focal point of this paper is based on the construct “Beyoncé,” the persona that has been created in terms of Southern perspective and history. A distinctive part of the American history, the American South, expanding geographically and temporally, has become more of a notion than just a region; in these terms, it is necessary to recognize the African-American contribution as vital for the existence of the diverse Southern culture and the profound historical past. This paper will analyze that Beyoncé has been a significant persona not only within concepts of music with her transition from superstar to icon but also as a symbol of past and present African-American heritage; it is reasonable to assume that the singer is the South incarnate, since the trajectory of the black culture is reflected upon and further reinforced by her presence. Like the Southern mentality, the diva embraces the myths of the black body and through her lyrics, music and image sustains their existence. In terms of identity, she carries the black power that pays tribute to the Southern history of early oppression and later segregation in an attempt to identify her black “self” as unique and unified at the same time.

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. . . Boy, this beat is crazy
This is how they made me
Houston, Texas, baby . . .

This is what Beyoncé sassily utters in her song “Run the World (Girls)” and as we shall see further on in this paper she triumphantly proves it. The Texas born-and-bred diva has been established in the global music pantheon for the last two decades and has been ranked third in VH1’s list of “100 Greatest Women in Music”² behind Mariah Carey and the list’s queen, Madonna (cite). Beyoncé Gisele Knowles burst into the music scene as a member of the R&B girl group Destiny’s Child in the 1990’s and her career thereon counts endless hits and highly-cost produced albums. Core theme of the singers’ successful anthems has always been the female empowerment, a subject that I will elaborate on in my analytical axis. However, the nodal point of this paper is based on the construct “Beyoncé,” the persona that has been created in terms of Southern perspective and history. A distinctive part of the American history, the American South, expanding geographically and temporally, has become more of a notion than just a region; in these terms, it is necessary to recognize the African-American contribution as vital for the existence of the diverse Southern culture and the profound historical past. With the aid of this discourse, therefore, I will deconstruct Beyoncé’s portrait and iconicity, providing a deep understanding of the Southern stereotypes of the past behind the creation of a mainstream music diva of today; my main focus will also be the issue of the African-American identity as it has been evolved through the years, as well as racial and gender ideologies that formed this identity. Moreover, I will focus on the traces of African influence that affected the Southern notion and have been made visible upon the singer’s stage reflection. The iconic portrait of Beyoncé, thus, is a mirror of the black woman, who, despite being a feminist and racial advocate,

² The information is taken from VH1’s list of “100 Greatest Women in Music”. [http://www.vh1.com/music/tuner/2012-029-13/vh1s-100-greatest-women-in-music-complete list](http://www.vh1.com/music/tuner/2012-029-13/vh1s-100-greatest-women-in-music-complete-list).

carries all the ideological background and stereotypical representations that the American South commands, and stands as an emblematic symbol of black power that derives from the ancient African glory.

Before proceeding into a deeper examination, I would like to provide a short preview of the themes that comprise the body of my argumentative structure, as well as the tools needed for my observation. First of all, I will focus on the subject of identity as it has been viewed by African-Americans and how it is realized in cultural terms, and music specifically; vital segments constructing the identity perspective will concentrate on the Southern background not only of segregation of the later years, but also of slavery that served as the starting point in defining the black “self.” In relation to that perspective, specific attention will be paid on the place of black women and their differentiation from the black men, since the female “self,” deriving from the oppressive past, developed a unique comprehension of identity that has little in common with the male one; this will also be understood in terms of feminist and racial advocacy that Beyoncé entailed in her lyrics and iconicity. The second major theme that my paper will attend is the trajectory of stereotypes that originate from the Southern plantation era and extend in time and space by being entrenched in the American mind; these stereotypes, which are heavily based on the portrayal of black woman in the past, will be illustrated in the way Beyoncé has materialized them throughout her career via image and performance. Last but not least, I will scrutinize the reign of African elements that were established in the American cultural territory with the influx of the first African slaves and have now turned into notional landmarks that our diva always pays tribute to and draws her inspiration from; this session will focus on the rhythmical as well as the corporeal conception of the African culture and how these are presented in Beyoncé’s sound, videography and style.

To begin with, it is of major significance to inspect on the subject of identity and how this has been conceived by the African-

American community. The oppressive past and the later years of segregation have come to form a duality in the perspective of black identity, which was quiet evident in the Civil Rights era through the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X; the former, supporter of a smooth integration, and the latter, in favor of black supremacy, could not meet halfway, first and foremost, due to the bipolar of the black identity. Tommy Shelby in his work *Foundations of Black Solidarity: Collective Identity or Common Oppression?* defined this polarity in terms of the “common oppressive theory,” which focuses on tackling “anti-black racism,” and the “collective self-determination theory,” which appears more radical promoting “black nationalism” (232); both theories originate from the oppressive past of the black race in the Southern reign of chattel slavery and both call for a common goal in order to terminate any racial discriminations. As the first theory upholds “anti-black racism” by calling for black union, the second theory also calls for black union by deciphering this collectivity as black supremacy and reflecting that “blacks who are committed to emancipatory group solidarity must embrace and preserve their distinctive black identity” (233). Although, Shelby rejects the second theory in favor of the first one, Winston A. Van Horne in his work *The Concept of Black Power* defends black exceptionality by attributing it a potency that gives black people an “autonomous will:” according to the writer, “autonomous wills draw out of Blacks the self-respect, self-esteem, and dignity that transform their intrinsic value and worth into extrinsic or empirical value and worth” (369); this experiential value installs in black people not only a sense of self-respect, but a broader sense of respect which has been fermented through the oppressive relations in the race’s past. “Black power is thus,” Van Horne concludes, “grounded in the integrity of Black life, set in the context of the value and worth of all human life” (370). Nevertheless, what has been central in all these doctrines of black identity is the acknowledgement of a common history that generated the sense of African-American uniqueness.

In regards with my analysis of Beyoncé's background construction as an icon, it seems obligatory that the singer also acknowledges her historical past in order to promote this black uniqueness. Beyoncé was one of the fieriest supporters of Barack Obama's rise to presidency back in 2008 and recognized the renowned "change" that came for the American racial history. In the Piers Morgan Tonight show in June 2011, after her acclaimed performance in the Glastonbury Festival as the first woman, and, by extend, the first African-American woman ever to headline, she was asked what her parents are most proud of her in terms of career moments; she decisively responded that her parents were deeply touched when she covered Etta James' "At Last" in Obama's Inaugural ball in 2009, and further explained why: "You know... my father and all of his sisters grew up in Gadsden, Alabama and he was escorted to school every day, because he was one of the first African-Americans in his school," she mentions and continues, "my mother, you know, in her day, she couldn't ride the front of a bus [...] and it's great to see the growth [...] and it's great that my parents could live to see that." Beyoncé just recently was present in President Obama's second Inauguration, this time performing the National Anthem; "Vice President Biden and I are honored to have these wonderfully talented musical artists perform at the Inaugural ceremony," stated President Obama, "Their music is often at the heart of the American story and speaks to folks across the country" (Condon, CBS News). It becomes apparent then that the choice of Beyoncé to perform the National Anthem is not coincidental at all, since she carries all those characteristics that render her a genuine African-American who fuses her historical roots with the current racial "change" the American policy soundly promotes.

Apart from racial advocacy, womanhood is also paid tribute through Beyoncé's essential presence which, in particular, remains intact with the power of black womanhood. The singer owns a variety of songs which stand as feminist anthems for women all over the world; from the Destiny's Child 2000 hit "Independent Woman" to the latest chart-toppers, such as 2008's "Single Ladies

(Put a Ring on It)" and 2011's "Run the World (Girls)." These songs celebrate womanhood in a way that men are usually the ones to be blamed and, more often than not, are overshadowed by the female empowerment; and, even though they were written for global appeal, they ultimately embodied a side of womanhood that can only be traced in the African-American female. As Kimberly Springer accurately points out, "one reason that young people focus on writing and music forms of protest," which in our case are feminist protest, "is because we need fresh modes for developing collective consciousness" (1077); these songs, therefore, work on a dual level of collectivity that responds both for gender and racial identity. Black women have established a different identity not only from white women but also from black men, as the years of oppression crafted a unique mold out of which the black woman came a powerful and all-attentive individual; Springer, commenting on the views of feminist writers about black womanhood, states that "[Joan] Morgan situates the standard of strongblackwoman³ in the history of slavery and the ways that black women were expected to persevere under any circumstances" (1069). Moreover, the identity of black women has as prerequisite the bonding among the female network that originates from the Southern past when fugitive female slaves found shelter in other oppressed women, a fact that Harriet Jacobs made evident in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; it is not accidental, then, that Beyoncé's supporting band, "The Suga Mamas," are all African-American females. Consequently, Beyoncé, either purposefully or not, managed to reflect the collective consciousness needed for embracing both African Americans and women, fighting as a result the racial and sexist controversies at the same time. Has the singer, therefore, found the way to blend history and collectivity under one identity successfully?

In order to answer this question we need to look on the way Beyoncé is viewed from the white perspective. Her success, despite

³ "Strongblackwomen" appears inseparable and often abbreviated as SBW in order to signify a one and cohesive identity (Springer 1069).

its short lifespan, has brought her next to the popular icon of Madonna. We can understand that the common denominator for the two artists is the amalgamation of skilled performance, versatility and power pop hits; but, deep down, reconsidering the racial background, is there a common link between the two successful divas? Sophie Elmhirst, assistant editor of the British magazine *News Statesman*, praised Beyoncé for her Glastonbury performance in June 2011 and placed her “on a golden throne next to Marilyn and Madonna:” the columnist states that Beyoncé with her performance “made an almost imperceptible transition from superstar to icon.” This imperceptibility could only be defined in terms of racial background, since the latter two came to stand as the iconic blond, pure-white American girls, while the former derives from the black milieu where the dark color of the skin was always perceived as the un-American “other.” Beyoncé’s rise to pure American icon signifies the “change” that we talked about; however, “like most other woman of color,” as Signithia Fordham supports, “African-American women are compelled to consume the universalized images of white American women, including body image” and “styles of interacting” (8); the writer extends by observing that “women from social groups who do not share this racial, ethnic, or cultural legacy are compelled to silence or gender ‘passing’” (8). Undoubtedly, Beyoncé carries the African-American legacy, but this solely would not grant her access to an American iconicity; is it possible, then, that the singer adapted in and adopted a white perspective in order to “pass” to stardom?

The situation is reminiscent of the notorious mulatto case according to which the mulattoes were always struggling between two identities, white and black. In order to understand the relationship between Beyoncé’s black roots and white environment we need to investigate the duplicity interms of her alter ego, a persona she herself created and came to call “Sasha Fierce.” The singer in 2008 presented her third studio album, named *I Am... Sasha Fierce*, which consists of two discs and actually works on two levels; the *I Am...* disc includes soft songs and sensitive ballads

exposing the emotional side of the artist, while the *Sasha Fierce* disc entails power pop tracks and rough R&B beats which explore her aggressive and sexual side (Caitlin, CBS News). Beyoncé and Sasha are the two sides of the same coin and both of them have a background formation based on Southern stereotypes, but I will elaborate on that further down. As far as the double identity is concerned, we can see the striking results of Beyoncé’s association with the white woman of kindness and purity, and Sasha’s allusion to the black woman of lust and amorality; the singer ultimately admitted that she finally “killed Sasha” as she realized she grew confident and managed to “merge the two” into one and only Beyoncé (Crosley, MTV). This final blend of the diva’s “self” is what carries both black and white elements, reminding us the mulatto case as I previously mentioned; as light-shaded mulattoes took advantage of their skin color in order to escape being treated like common black people, it is only reasonable to think that the “white” side of Beyoncé outmatched her “black” one only to conform with the American ideals of iconicity. Nevertheless, Sasha Fierce plays an important role in the singer’s iconic imagery, since the contradicting two “egos” relied on Southern imaginations of the black woman as they were perceived in the slavery past.

Entering the second major part of my analysis, I will now investigate on the Southern stereotypes that have been subliminally established in Beyoncé image and performance. First and foremost, focusing on the Beyoncé “ego,” the counterpart of Sasha Fierce, it becomes quite obvious that in order to portray this image, and by extend highlight the differentiation from the aggressive side, the signer had to adopt a diplomatic policy of holiness and non-violence; as we already mentioned these attributes are the exemplary basis of mainly white values. Therefore, what instantly comes to our mind is the icons of black people that were closely engaged with the white mentality and, as a result, came to project the same values regarding purity and piety; these iconic figures are, of course, the domestic slaves that used to uphold not only the Southern economy, but also the Southern white morale. “Chattel

slavery,” as Patricia Hill Collins observes, “produced [this] class of Black workers who allegedly formed a better class of Negroes” (57); “[i]n essence, domesticated African Americans were the ones who had been stripped of their predilection for unrestrained sexuality and violence (in other words, their stereotypical Blackness),” Collins suggests and realizes that “[t]hese were the slaves who inhabited behaviors that made them suitable to serve whites” (57). The singer therefore has domesticated her other side in order to appear gracious and approachable, a fact that is more apparent in the photography and videography of the *I Am...* side of the album; always in black-and-white concept, the videos of “Halo” and “Broken-Hearted Girl” depict Beyoncé fragile, vulnerable and asking for protection. This also steps on the stereotypical degradation of black people into childlike status “in need of white paternalism” (Shelby 257).

Within the frames of this domestic slave portrait, Beyoncé embodies the core essence of the Southern household that mirrors the image of the black Mammy. According to Jessie W. Parkhurst, Black Mammy’s “interests and those of her owner were so inextricably one that she is associated in the public mind more with the members of the white group than with those of her own race” (352); the writer also mentions that the mammy was distinguished from other slaves in terms of values and moral attributes, since she was viewed as “self-respecting [...] loyal [...] affectionate, true [...] good, pious [...] proud [...] queenly [...] sensible [and] devoted” (353). In addition, Collins reiterates that in order “[t]o justify the exploitation of domestic servants, White elites created controlling images of Uncle Tom and Mammy as prototypes of asexual, safe, assimilated, and subordinated Black people”(57). What really attracts our attention, though, is the theme of religion evident in the *I Am...* side of Beyoncé; the songs “Halo” and “Ave Maria” originate from the Christian doctrine of how pure love is perceived. The images of Uncle Tom and Mammy can be the explanatory basis for the pious element in the singer’s emotional side of the album and the stereotypes behind it; a sensitive portrait of faith is always

conceived in terms of religion and, in regards with African-Americans, the domesticated images of Uncle Tom and Mammy always reflected the religious virtues of white perspective upon a black body. The deeply entrenched stereotypical representation of these two core figures of the Southern past have escaped their temporal and regional barriers, as they became one with the African-American history. However, we have just seen the one side of the bipolar Beyoncé/Sasha which conforms to the domestic ideals and is not as evident as the aspect we will see now.

Sasha Fierce incarnates the dark side of Beyoncé’s “self,” the one who is in absolute control of her body and can be hardly tamed. The image of Sasha mirrors the stereotypical promiscuous slave girl upon whom the white master displayed sexual power but was ultimately seduced by her beauty; “the sexual siren,” as has been called by Jennifer Baily Woodard and Teresa Mastin, “represents negative portrayals of the Black woman as bitch or whore,” a representation that has been created because “[w]hite males fostered this image of Black women during slavery to excuse their sexual abuse and rape” of them (272). This “institutionalized rape of enslaved Black women,” explains Collins, “spawned the controlling image of the jezebel or sexually wanton Black woman,” defining their bodies “as sites of wild, unrestrained sexuality that could be tamed but never completely subdued” (56). Beyoncé, describing Sasha in her own words, labeled her as “too aggressive, too strong, too sassy, too sexy” and distinguished herself from her: “I wouldn’t like Sasha if I met her offstage,” states the singer and continues, “I’m not like her in real life at all [...] I’m not flirtatious and super-confident and fearless like her” (Caitlin, CBS News). Obviously, the *Sasha Fierce* side of the notorious album contains songs like “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It),” “Diva” and “Sweet Dreams” where the artist utters she “need[s] no permission” and that “diva is a female version of a hustla;” “the female hustler,” Collins claims, “a materialistic woman who is willing to sell, rent, or use her sexuality to get whatever she wants constitutes this sexualized variation of the ‘bitch’” (128). Inher effort to promote racial and female

independence via her alter ego, has Beyoncé got it right? “The prostitute who hustles without a pimp and who keeps the compensation is a bitch who works for herself” and this actually delivers to the artist’s female fanbase the wrong message, since what is implied is that a woman can indeed stand on her own, but only by exploiting her sexuality (Collins 128). The case with the alter ego’s promotion did not start that late in Beyoncé’s career though; the siren Sasha Fierce lied inside Beyoncé long before she knew she owned her and long before she introduced her onstage.

The Southern siren, commonly known as Jezebel, can be traced in Beyoncé’s iconicity even from the beginning of her singing pathway in the Destiny’s Child group. Before engaging in the analysis of the R&B group, it is of major significance to bear in mind that the portrayal of Black sexuality derives from the field slaves of the Southern plantations and contain elements of animalistic behavior; white masters’ abuse of the field slaves resulted into “objectifying Black women agricultural workers as mules,” a fact that “justified working them as if they were animal” (Collins 56). The newly-imported-in-America African body that was unknown then to the common mind was instantly connected with the African primitiveness and wildness, but these are issues that I will deal later on in my paper; for the time being, it is obligatory to understand this connection of the black woman body with the animal. Collins informs us that “[t]he photo insert for *Survivor*, Destiny’s Child third CD, shows the three African American women standing legs akimbo, holding hands, and dressed in animal skin bikinis” (24); in addition, the lyrical content of the song “Survivor” suggests that these women are “gonna make it” no matter what, a fact that reminds us that slaves were meant to endure due to their physical strength. Interestingly, these pieces of information do not come as a surprise, since the music industry has managed to exploit such stereotypes to the utmost for the sake of lucrative incomes; the sexualized images, though, are reduced to levels of objectification and serve as financial transactions, a situation not far from the Southern mode of sexual commodification.

These ways of exploitation for the sake of financial income have also created another image that Beyoncé, even though she is not identified with, has pompously promoted through her songs. This iconic figure is the well-known breeder woman who would give birth to many children – most of whom were usually offspring of the white master due to his sexual appetite – and would continue, of course, to work hard in the plantation; this controlling image of the breeder woman “emerged to defend the reproductive policies of slavery,” since a plantation that was in constant demand for new workforce ought to be augmented and the most effective way to achieve this was to exploit the female slaves (Collins 56). Beyoncé’s songs “Upgrade U” and “Run the World (Girls)” contain lyrics that have been formulated with the essence of the breeder woman behind them; in the former, the singer proudly asserts: “You need a real woman in your life/ That’s a good look/ Taking care, home is still fly/ That’s a good look/ I’m gonna help you build up your account.” In the latter though the situation becomes even more palpable as the singer brags about women’s competence for being a care-taking housewife and a successful business woman at the same time: “Boy, I know you love it/ How we’re smart enough to make these millions/ Strong enough to bare the children/ Then get back to business.” As we move away from the Southern plantation era this stereotypical image of the breeder woman acquired a new status in the later years; Woodard and Mastin define this new woman as an updated form of the breeder and label her “welfare mother or queen” (273). The writers comment that “[t]his new version of the welfare mothers as breeding animals who have no desire to work, but are content to live off the state, positions Black women as ‘a costly threat to political and economic stability’” (273); yet, I would argue that the new version is quite distant from the breeder image due to the fact that the welfare mothers appear passive and inactive in the business world, while the breeder women were vital parts of the plantation, despite being under oppression, and, therefore, constantly engaging in the Southern economy. Consequently, the reason why Beyoncé utilizes the

breeder image instead of the welfare mother can be justified as a promotion of a working class that enhances the state economy and does not take advantage of it.

The final stereotypical representation on Beyoncé's portrayal could not be other than the African-American Sapphire woman. The initial derivation of this term comes from *Amos 'n' Andy* radio and television shows of the 1940s and 1950s depicting an aggressive and hostile towards her husband woman (Wally-Jean 70); this image however is reminiscent of the matriarch figure who is depicted as "overly aggressive, not maternal enough, too outspoken, and overly controlling toward both her husband and children" (Woodard/Mastin 272). The character of the Sapphire has led her husband towards emasculation and departure from the familial environment, and, as a result, the task to carry both the male and the female role has turned her into an "unfeminine matriarch" and has generated frustration and anger towards herself and her children (Wally-Jean 70). In terms of control, Beyoncé has proved through her song "Suga Mama" that she can handle the financial demands of her boyfriend, a fact that shows the subversion of the dominant roles: "It's so good to the point that/ I'd do anything to keep you home/ Baby, what you want me to buy?/ My accountant's waiting on the phone/ Just the thought of making love to you." As far as the aggressive behavior is concerned, the singer, along with her Destiny's Child "sistas," in the song "Bills, Bills, Bills" ends a relationship with a "good for nothing type of brother" who finally proved unskillful and took financial advantage of her: "Now you've been maxing out my card [...] Can you pay my bills? [...] If you did, then maybe we could chill/ But I don't think you do/ So, you and me are through." Even though Tricia Rose attributed "these revenge fantasies against black men" to female rapper (174), who appear in the music foreground more masculinized than R&B divas like Beyoncé, the information above are proof of a broadened aggression that also becomes evident in more feminized Black women models. Consequently, we could argue that in the current years the Sapphire image, or the earlier matriarch, retains her feminine side without

losing the hostile attitude, though, towards the black male patriarch.

The analysis of the stereotypical images of the African-American women helped us realize that the Southern setting has been the nodal point whereupon these stereotypes based their creation. However, as we transcend the temporal and regional borders we observe that, despite the transformation of those images into more up-to-date reflections of the black female, the initial standards retain their power within the new versions. According to Joan Morgan, "the myths of the superwoman, the mammy, the jezebel, and the sapphire," of the Southern past "have metamorphosed into the contemporary figures of, among others, the 'Ghetto Bitch... Hoochie Mamma... Skeezer... Too independent... Don't need no man... [and] Waiting to Exhale' women" (qtd. Springer 1069); "the older myths justifying slaveowners' brutality against Black women," extends Morgan, "metamorphosed into contemporary conservative welfare myths" (qtd. Springer 1069). This primarily happened due to the major migration of African-Americans from the Southern region; Collins reiterates that "in the early twentieth century, many Blacks simply left the rural South, moving to rural areas of the West, to cities of the South, and with large numbers continuing on to cities in the North" (67). As the problem of racial discrimination intensified, black people who moved towards metropolitan centers, like New York or Oklahoma, found themselves degraded, underpaid and ultimately restricted in ghettos (Collins 69); even though far from the Southern era of oppression, the stereotypes were sustained with the racial segregation, becoming further-on intact with the African-American identity and culture. Nowadays, despite the fact that the social conditions have changed and racial discrimination is not that evident anymore – with the exception of some rural areas in the South that still prolong not-outspoken, yet subtle indications of racism –, the stereotypical images of black men and women are subliminally promoted through media lifestyle and popular icons; as has been made clear so far, Beyoncé is simply one of these popular constructs. Nevertheless, the Southern state of mind that gave birth

to these stereotypical images relied on even older conceptions of the black culture, a fact that our diva has also made visible throughout her career.

I will now proceed with the final part of argumentation in which I will scrutinize the African-oriented elements that Beyoncé infused in her musical compositions, videography, performance and promotional image. To begin with, it is vital to signify the origins of the African-American music within the context of African heritage; according to Robert Fink “African American musicians and publics have made real affective connections between the distinctive rhythmic practices of the African diaspora and positive, empowering images of racial difference” (184). This connective link of the African-American culture with their past has been conceived as the medium through which black people preserved their distinctiveness and promoted their original identity. However, such an issue raised ambiguities and made the African-legacy subject a field of contestation; Ronald Radano questioned “the notion of an essentialized ‘African music,’” by “tracing the long historical process of projection and identification across the color line (‘lying up a nation’) that constructed modern musical blackness and yoked it irrevocably to a secondary musical parameter like ‘hot’ rhythm” (183). Whether myth or fact, whether ideological construct or essential link between past and present culture, it is undeniable that the African music influenced the cultivation of a genuine black genre the traces of which can be found even in today’s R&B, hip-hop and soul rhythms. Beyoncé employed her African legacy most evidently in her song “Run the World (Girls);” the sound of the drums and the rhythmical cheers are reminiscent of ancient African tribes, which in fact reflect the collective consciousness that we examined earlier in this paper. For Vijay Iyer the “rhythmic asynchrony,” that can be achieved through beat drum, “contributes both to the heterogeneous sound ideal and to the sense of collective participation” (401). Apart from the composition of the song, its videography incorporates a desert setting with lions lying

around and a scene of “Queen B”⁴ holding two chained hyenas, scenes that are an evident allusion of the African savannah territory.

Apart from the wild scenery in “Run the World (Girls),” the fierce African animals played a much more important role in the development of the Southern history and, by extend, of the African-American culture. As has been previously mentioned, black slaves in the Southern plantations were exploited to the extreme, since their white masters compared the strength of their body to that of animals; this bestialized perception, of course, was created due to their African origins. Collins suggests that “[d]ehumanizing Black people by defining them as nonhuman and as animals was a critical feature of racial oppression” (55); in regards with the female slaves, these animalistic features were defined in terms of sexuality and corporeal understanding. The wildness of the African continent and the curiosity to explore it was also reflected in the black female body, since its exotic and alien to the white eye features intrigued the American – male – interest; white slaveowners and medical scientists of the time, thus, conceived themselves as conquistadors or, as Collins put it, “*voyers extraordinaire*” in an attempt to explore the African body (101). The African animalistic traits thereon were established within the Southern constructs of, mainly, the Jezebel and, by extend, her current reflection of the Ghetto Bitch. Beyoncé unleashed her African animalistic wildness not only in the artwork of Destiny’s Child “Survivor” album that we saw, but also in the video of her song “Kitty Kat,” as well as in a segment of her “I Am...” World Tour in 2009. In the “Kitty Kat” video the singer appears in a leopard bodysuit riding a magnified black cat with a golden collar; with her feline moves, the singer seduces the black cat in order to ride it, a scene that could easily allude to the sexual domination of the black promiscuous woman over the enormous black man. In the *I Am... World Tour*, the singer, before proceeding to perform “Diva,” was portrayed in a video vignette as a robotic figure exploring a new planet where the only living creature was, accidentally, a leopard; as

⁴ Beyoncé is also called “Queen B” by her fanbase.

the video was culminating, Beyoncé's face was transformed into an aggressive leopard as well, a signifier of Sasha Fierce's possession of Beyoncé's body. Revisiting my argumentation on Sasha Fierce as Jezebel, we now see that both images stepped on the African representation and further stereotypical conception of the black femalebody as a symbol of wild, yet fascinating terra incognita.

This sexualized image, however, has been additionally specified by concentrating upon distinctive parts of the black female anatomy. The common conception of the black body was usually accompanied by descriptions of excessively overstated body parts, including lips, hips or bottoms. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders chronicles the beginning of this conception in the first stories of early European travelers on the African continent: "The males were said to have only one testicle and the females a large vaginal flap called a tablier and a fatty enlargement of the buttocks called steatopygia" (17). Later on, with the first influx of Africans in America and, particularly, in the American South, this conception stood as a scapegoat for white slaveowners to take advantage of the black body; as the black male was exploited for the power of his hands, the black female as we saw was utilized for different body parts: "[i]n other words, it was the exploitation of the Black woman's body – her vagina, her uterus, her breasts, and also her muscle" (Wallace-Sanders 30). The buttocks however constitute a significant part of the black body, because, due to the stereotypical exaggerated depiction, their image has passed through the centuries and have always been at the heart of current media lifestyle. Many popular icons, including Jennifer Lopez, Nicki Minaj and even earlier Janet Jackson, have sexualized their iconicity through the augmentation of their bottoms. Beyoncé's case, thus, is not different, since her curves remain at the center of attention and are essential for her career; from the beginning, Destiny's Child's song "Bootylicious" not only became international hit, but, surprisingly, the coined word "bootylicious" itself, due to high popularity and usage, entered "the 2002 edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*" (Collins 26). "The constellation of terms that surround the term *booty* not

only suggests that women of African descent are ground zero for the meanings associated with the term *booty*," explains Collins, "but also that historical meanings of Black promiscuity are alive and well in contemporary popular culture" (151). The enlarged bottoms, consequently, came to be realized as sexual targets of black and white male conquest.

Despite this sexualized mystification of the black body, there is also the other side of the matter which showcases the image of African woman as an exhibited "freak." With the emergence and burst of the minstrel shows in the middle of the 19th century, the Negro body was popularized as caricature through the blackfaced white performers; the later fusion of the minstrelsy with elements of freakshows incorporated female impersonations that led to a mongrelized iconic perception of the black body (Sundquist 259). However, the notion of the "freak," especially the female one, dates back to Africa and remains intact with the notion of the bestialized African body; the case of the South African Saartjie Baartman, as known as Hottentot Venus, stands as the explanatory basis for the rise of this notion. According to Wallace-Sanders, the Hottentot Venus was "exhibited with an animal trainer" around European capitals, such as London and Paris (18); as the writer informs us, Baartman "emerged from a cage on a raised platform, was presented as an animal" and "was gazed at, heckled, objectified, caricatured and dehumanized" (18). Wallace-Sanders continues that Venus' genitalia further perpetuated "the European connection between lasciviousness, sexuality, and animal passion among Africans in general, but particularly among African women" (18). Concerning Beyoncé's performance, the singer's burlesque-oriented video for "Naughty Girl" features a scene of her dancing inside a giant glass filled with champagne, placed on the stage of a crowded club bar; in addition, the lyrics describe that Beyoncé is "feelin' kind of n-a-s-t-y" and "the rhythm's got [her] fellin' so crazy." The exposure of the black body derives not only from the Hottentot Venus case, but also from the Southern slave trades where plantation masters used to exhibit their slaves in auction blocks in

order to be touched and examined. We therefore realize that the black female – more than the male – body was always conceived as scenery of attraction, a notion that has reached out of Southern and African mentalities of the past.

It becomes apparent then that the American South stands in-between the African origin and the current African-American identity. We observed that Beyoncé has been a significant persona not only within concepts of music, but also as a symbol of past and present African-American heritage; it is reasonable to assume that the singer is the South incarnate, since the trajectory of the black culture is reflected upon and further reinforced by her presence. Like the Southern mentality, the diva embraced the myths of the black body and through her lyrics, music and image has sustained their existence. In terms of identity, she carries the black power that pays tribute to the Southern history of early oppression and later segregation in an attempt to identify her black “self” as unique and unified at the same time. More interestingly, it is ambiguous whether she falls for the stereotypical images of black women, as they have leaped the temporal barriers, or steps on them in order to augment the notion of black exceptionalism. In conclusion, Beyoncé is the living proof that the South is not just the region of the American past, but is a state of mind that, just like the black people who mystified its history, managed not only to survive, but, as William Faulkner uttered, to ultimately prevail.

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