

Research Article

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Beyoncé's Slay Trick: The Performance of Black Camp and its Intersectional Politics

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Abstract: This article pays attention to African-American artist Beyoncé Knowles and her performance of black camp. Beyoncé's stage persona and performances invite multiple ideological readings as to what pertains to her interpretation of gender, sexuality, and race. While cultural theory around the icon of Beyoncé has focused on her feminist and racial politics as well as her politicization of the black female body, a queer reading applied from the perspective of camp performance will concentrate on the artist's queer appeal and, most importantly, on her exposition of black camp, an intersection of feminist, racial and queer poetics. By examining video and live performances, the scope of this article is to underline those queer nuances inherent in Beyoncé's dramatisation of black femininity and the cultural pool she draws from for its effective staging. More specifically, since Beyoncé plays with tropes and themes that are common in camp culture, her performance relies on a meta-camping effect that interacts with African-American queer culture. This article, thus, traces black queer traditions and discourses in the artist's praxis of black camp.

Keywords: Beyoncé Knowles, black camp, feminism, race, queer, performance

The history of camp, being associated with Western queer culture, largely points to a racially white past. When Susan Sontag intermingled with the pre-Stonewall American queer culture to formulate her seminal essay "Notes on Camp" (1964), the accruing perception of the then-existing camp catalog, reflected on the personae of Oscar Wilde and Christopher Isherwood, the starlets of Classic Hollywood, and the grandiosity of opera, attested to a white cultural production with marked European nuances. Even the post-Stonewall, i.e. post-Civil Rights Movement, critics of camp remained focused on the practice of camp as a solely gay male practice, where gay read white (Dyer 1976; Babuscio 1977; Bronski 1984). It was not until the late 1980s, which witnessed the advent of intersectional feminism and, most importantly, the rise of queer theory, when cultural critics thoroughly addressed the constructedness of gender by simultaneously challenging its ubiquitous whiteness. The 1990s literature on gay and lesbian expression attested to a racially vibrant queer culture existing in urban practices, such as Manhattan's drag balls that were gloriously captivated in Jenny Livingston's influential *Paris Is Burning* (1991). Camp critics started speaking of a racially-inflected camp aesthetics, which was mostly informed by African-American culture.¹ Progressively, the emergence of camp within pop culture and cultural studies scholarship has invigorated queer-of-colour critiques that seek to historicize an existent non-white camp past.

Black camp has been heavily energised through the culture-making of the queer African-American community and its engagement with the dominant culture. Envisioning a distinct dichotomy between white and black camp, though, presupposes that two separate cultures develop in parallel action, when, in fact, black and white cultures intermingle. What possibly distinguishes each and thus prompts a discussion on

¹ Consider Moe Meyer's camp reading of the politics of Joan Jett Blakk (1992) and Pamela Robertson's discussion of Mae West's camp that relied on black female performativity (1996).

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a black-inflected camp culture is the power dynamic between them: namely, the socio-cultural position black culture has historically occupied in American reality as juxtaposed to the dominant white one. When factoring in are the power structures delineating queer and heterosexual cultures, it can be argued that black camp inhabits a dynamic interstice that accrues from the development of black queer culture as doubly oppressed from racial and heteronormative ideologies alike. To acknowledge a black camp tradition and, therefore, incorporate the race factor in the tracing of camp's cultural practice eventually leads to challenging the seeming white homogeneity of queer culture. Evolving alongside the allegedly elitist white canon of camp fads and fancies, such as Broadway musicals and baroque architecture, to name just a few, the praxis of black camp nests in the subcultural practices of African American culture. An array of performed traditions, including, among others, the black queer vernacular and the voguing scene, makes manifest of black camp's subcultural power, which has developed out of the social liminality of the African-American community, and flauntingly celebrates black queer pride. At the same time, there exist those practices, such as drag or diva worshipping, which are *sine qua non* to any discussion of camp, be it black or white. Being generic to the camp praxis, the performance of glamorous femininity has been variably embraced by both black and white queer cultures: white Classic Hollywood divas, including Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, and Tallulah Bankhead, were later succeeded by black disco divas, such as Donna Summer, Diana Ross, and Gloria Gaynor, in camp's iconic pantheon. In either case, fierceness, pathos, and sensuality were recurrent patterns that fueled the stars' camp appeal to queer audiences.

Taking into consideration that camp has widely infiltrated the field of mainstream popular culture, what should not go unnoticed is how black camp practices have too entered the sphere of commercialisation. Disco in the late 1970s, for instance, which was a scene that largely owed its existence to the African-American and Latino queer communities, provided artists emerging in the 1980s, such as Madonna, Michael Jackson, and Grace Jones, with its audiovisual camp lexicon—e.g. extravagant styling, lyrical double entendres, and blurred gendered lines. At the time being, a notable example of black camp's popularization is drag star RuPaul, whose reality competition series, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-), draws from the cultural pool of black queer culture, as evidenced by its utilization of subcultural slang and other camp discourses,² and currently enjoys cross-over success. While the co-optation of black camp by the popular culture industries demonstrates how the latter has always capitalised on subcultural fashions and sensibilities,³ it should be underlined that it has significantly added in bringing black queer culture to the fore and thus help re-imagine camp as a racially nuanced mode of expression.

A contemporary artist who has accommodated the practices of black camp in a way that is both culturally relevant and significantly commercialised, and will comprise the central argument of this article is African-American performer Beyoncé Knowles. Ever since Beyoncé emerged into the music scene as a member of R&B group Destiny's Child, a distinctive feminist discourse permeated her songtexts and performances. From the group's empowering hits "Independent Woman, Pt. 1" (2001) and "Survivor" (2001) to the solo anthems "Single Ladies (Put A Ring on It)" (2008) and "Run the World (Girls)" (2011), the artist has engaged in a performative dialogue with her female audience by being vocal about the patriarchal challenges today's women face. Her feminist advocacy is inextricably linked with the politics of race, since the artist deploys her audiovisual agenda from the organic position of black female subjectivity, inhabiting an intersectional locus of identity crossed with racial and gendered markers. In particular, the release of her sixth studio album, *Lemonade* (2016), saw the performer making a political and aesthetic statement by placing urban and peripheral black culture at a centre stage. In doing so, the artist materialised this movement with particular emphasis on black womanhood and sexuality juxtaposed with narratives of Southern tradition and storytelling. What is important to underline, however, is that as much as her performances openly

² The series is partly responsible for popularizing slang terms, such as "sashay" (i.e. to strut ostentatiously) or "serving the tea" (i.e. to tell the truth), as well as bringing to a wider audience subcultural camp practices, such as the "put-down" (i.e. a witty exchange of criticism between two queens) and the "reading" (i.e. to brutally expose one's flaws, similar to the "put-down").

³ See David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl's essay on "What is 'Post-subculture Studies' Anyway?" (in *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, ed. Muggleton and Weinzierl) wherein they present a thorough theorization of subcultures and their relation to mainstream industries, as well as explicate the history of Subcultures/cultural scholarship introduced by Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and its affiliated influential figures, such as Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige.

address a (black) female audience, they also appeal greatly to a considerable portion of gay male consumers. What I will argue is that the artist's corpus of feminist discourse and racial politics often co-exist with a camp sensibility that invites queer readings. Undertaking an analysis of this intersection of camp, race, and feminism will further explicate the cultural affiliations of the diva with queer culture by tracing queer traditions behind her body politics through an examination of Beyoncé's output of black camp.

The icon that is Beyoncé abides by the allegedly essentialist premise that sees gay men worshipping showbiz divas. As a fundamental symbol within the gay male culture, the figure of the diva and the worship pattern offer rich grounds for critical investigations with regard to gay men's identification with her icon. It would be erroneous and totalizing to establish that all gay men are attracted to and choose to identify with divas or camp culture in general. There is, however, persistency—hence the word “pattern”—that may initially be regarded as a rigid stereotype, but, after all, it does carry certain acknowledged validity. David Halperin argues that diva worship and other gay cultural practices “have a consistency and a regularity that gay people as a group do not have. Gay people are different from one another, whereas gay culture displays a number of persistent, repeated features” (134). It is those features that have come to connote gayness not so much as sexually, but rather as culturally defined.⁴ Observing the connection of previous generations of gay men with Hollywood divas, Daniel Harris suggests that:

At the very heart of gay diva worship is not the diva herself but the almost universal homosexual experience of ostracism and insecurity, which ultimately led to what might be called the aestheticism of maladjustment, the gay man's exploitation of cinematic visions of Hollywood grandeur to elevate himself above his antagonistic surroundings and simultaneously express membership in a secret society of upper-class aesthetes. (10)

Applying Harris's argument on contemporary gay men and their attraction to music divas, we soon realize that the latter can serve as models of empathy as well as empowering and sexually-assertive femininities. In addition to that, attention should be paid to the narratives of competitive individualism and glamorous fantasy that often surround the ontology of the diva and thus may obscure her supposed politics of empowerment and, by extension, the espousal of her iconic vocabulary by the gay male culture.

This brings me to the complex discourse surrounding the diva politics of Beyoncé. The artist has been vocal about her affiliation with gay culture and has spoken about her relationship with her gay fanbase. In an interview with *PrideSource*, she states: “I've always had a connection. Most of my audience is actually women and my gay fans, and I've seen a lot of the younger boys kind of grow up to my music” (qtd. in Azzopardi 2011). The elements that comprise her affiliation and relationship with the community, though, point to a network of codes and practices that appear to be long-established within the cultural exchange of gay men with pop divas. As a matter of fact, the artist's icon follows a process of meta-camping in its reiteration of familiar tropes and discourses surrounding the star quality of previously established black divas, such as Etta James and Whitney Houston. Beyoncé's life has thoroughly been promoted by the media and herself as a typical celebrity narrative which is glossed with the aura of the spectacle and, simultaneously, with a controlled approach of her private life as an everyday story of a young woman. For instance, her HBO autobiographical film *Life Is But a Dream* (2013) is a narrative of success that presents Beyoncé as the glamorous and independent entertainer who, being a hard-working and assertive individual, has now been able to enjoy her own female American Dream. Interspersed with footage from her professional endeavours are instances where the artist shows her diva/bossy moments and plenty of others where she carefully allows herself to be fragile in front of the camera, especially when talking about issues of depression and motherhood. The film is representative of how the rest of the showbiz media illustrate her icon. Her fans are more often than not bombarded with images of her onstage glamorous persona, whereas their accessibility into her offstage life depends on how she manages her public/private affairs and in what terms she chooses to publicise them. From music to video to performance, all mediums

⁴ In his book *How to be Gay* (2012), Halperin distinguishes homosexuality from gayness by treating homosexuality as pointing to the state of being sexually gay (same-sex object choice), and gayness as being culturally gay (cultural practices and desires) (12, 18, 60, 69). Although Halperin proposes a distinct division between the two, I would opt for a more interactive and flexible correlation.

surrounding the construct that is Beyoncé rely on a mythologization of her that mostly derives from her play on sexuality, femininity, and instantly catchy songtexts. These ultimately comprise the elemental basis that has cemented her diva status.

From the beginning of her career with Destiny's Child, Beyoncé was often promoted to stand out of the group thus creating early enough a self-dependent persona who is in the lead. According to Simone Drake, Beyoncé's father and manager, Matthew Knowles, was responsible for the public image of the group and, by extension, his daughter's distinctive position within it: "Matthew Knowles, arguably decided early on that Destiny's Child would be a crossover group. And just as [disco diva] Diana Ross eventually pulled away from the Supremes to take center stage, Beyoncé was also destined to be a solo pop icon" (84). Years after the group's disbandment, the artist made a savvy marketing of her widely publicised separation from Destiny's Child by undertaking the role of Deena Jones for the film adaptation of 1981 Broadway musical *Dreamgirls* (2006). Greatly influenced by Ross's history with her group, *Dreamgirls* narrates the story of Deena who succeeded in establishing herself in music industry as a solo performer upon her separation from her female group. Beyoncé's leading role in *Dreamgirls*, itself a potent camp text, not only played on the media obsession surrounding her relationship with Destiny's Child's peers in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but strategically managed to equate herself with Diana Ross, thus prefiguring her persona's iconic status. Significantly, after two highly successful solo albums, *Dangerously in Love* (2003) and *B'Day* (2006), the final Destiny's Child studio album in the in-between years, *Destiny Fulfilled* (2004), and various cinematic endeavors, *Dreamgirls* functioned as a milestone in Beyoncé's transition from the young R&B and hip-hop star to the now mature dramatic black diva.

Although it might be argued that the *B'Day* album and its accompanying tour, *The Beyoncé Experience* (2007), set the basis for the artist's emerging diva politics, her 2008 album entitled *I Am... Sasha Fierce* indeed manifested Beyoncé's decisive turn to a camp-fueled performance. The album features two contrastive sides, the softer *I Am...* embellished with fragile ballads, and the more aggressive *Sasha Fierce*, which introduced the artist's sexually and audacious eponymous alter ego under rough R&B and club sounds. The creative concept of the album relies on black-and-white themes, offering sharp antitheses of Beyoncé's persona that can be traced in the history of the female melodrama genre,⁵ as is made evident from the multiple, albeit analogous thematic binaries: Madonna/whore, passive/aggressive, white/black. The alter ego, Sasha Fierce, has been structured upon a deviant sexuality that incorporates stereotypical representations of black female promiscuity and brassiness coupled though with an impeccable sense of style. Importantly, the corpus of Sasha Fierce, as the moniker indicates, is permeated by potent camp/queer undertones. Sporting haute couture leotards, pulled and swept-back hairdo, and dramatic make-up, the persona embodies an ostentatious version of black femininity inextricably linked with an aesthetics of drag and its perception of gender as masquerade. David Hajdu suggests that "[t]he persona that Beyoncé has constructed for Sasha Fierce – a slithery dolled-up parody of a club girl – would certainly make a true drag act if it had a glimmer of self-awareness or irony. It has none" (132). Sasha Fierce may not carry a drag queen's investment in self-parody, her dead seriousness, however, does not prevent her from becoming a source of camp pleasure. As Sontag underlined by using the case of Greta Garbo, "Camp is the glorification of character... What the Camp eye appreciates is the unity, the force of the person... This is clear in the case of the great serious idol of Camp taste, Greta Garbo. Garbo's incompetence (at least, lack of depth) as an actress enhances her beauty. She's always herself" (61, italics in original). In the same vein, the gravity and authority Beyoncé has exerted over her theatricalization of Sasha, veering from the soft girl-next-door profile to the assertive ghetto diva and managing to uphold both roles with equal rigour, demonstrate that Sasha is an enhancement of Beyoncé's icon.

The artist's professionalism with Sasha is further supported by performative gimmicks that have been instantly embraced by her audiences. By instilling in Sasha elements of hypersexual femininity and swaggering wittiness, Beyoncé has made her body politics a language to be learnt. First and foremost,

5 For more information on the conventions and themes of female melodrama consider Peter Brooks's "The Melodramatic Imagination" and Pam Cook's "Melodrama and the Women's Pictures" both found in *imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television* (ed. Marcia Landy), as well as Christine Gledhill's *Home is Where the Heart is: Studies on Melodrama and the Woman's Film*.

the lead single of the 2008 album, “Single Ladies (Put A Ring on It),” officially presented Sasha to the public through its instantly attractive lyrics and choreography. Music critics were quick to highlight the song’s catchy rhythm and compare it with female empowerment anthems the likes of Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (1967) and Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” (1978) (Crawford 2009). Its viral cultural impact, though, including YouTube parodies, celebrity cover versions and perhaps the campiest moment in post-millennial gay culture, namely Liza Minnelli’s rendition of it in *Sex and the City 2* (2010), relied on the seeming simplicity that Beyoncé adopted for its execution. According to choreographers Frank Gatson and JaQuel Knight, Beyoncé was inspired by Shirley MacLaine’s performance in Bob Fosse’s *Sweet Charity* (1966) while elements of J-Setting, a Southern dance style developed by female students in Mississippi and popular among African American gay men, are traceable in the choreography (Herndon 2010). The notorious routine is mostly based on minimal and easily imitable movements with emphasis laid on the twirl of the bare hand and the sassy facial expression that accompanies the songtext’s call to “put a ring on it.” “Single Ladies” is a multi-layered audiovisual text with its vital camp basis found in almost every layer: the bent wrists, the J-Setting poses, the fierce attitude, the iconic outfit, and, on top of these, the tongue-in-cheek language.

The character of Sasha has been fashioned out of Beyoncé’s engagement with hip-hop culture and the showbiz industry, both traditionally male-dominated spheres. As a result, her performative discourse stands rather in juxtaposition with a patriarchal and, more often than not, sexist logic. Her songs are a feminist call to arms, infused with traits of black urban slang and a brass sensibility. Despite the fact that Beyoncé’s celebrity status seems to be quite dissonant with the working-class struggle of inner city ghettoized districts, Sasha’s performance draws from their cultural pool both the aggressive attitude and the street-smart lexicon in order to authenticate her narrative of success, following the pattern of street “realness” that abounds in the works of both male and female hip-hop artists, such as Tupac Shakur, Jay Z, 50 Cent, and Queen Latifah. To be able to incorporate these attributes into her performances and by adopting rhetorics against the rigidly male/masculine motifs expose the latter’s ideological constructedness. Beyoncé/Sasha can inhabit positions where she originally does not have access to. She forges herself with streetwise aesthetics and proclaims her own originality. Her performance of “Diva” (2008) is indicative of such self-proclamation. Throughout the song, she casually declares she is a diva with technologically-altered voice, and in the chorus, she even coins her own definition: “Diva is a female version of a hustler.” She aligns herself with hustlers, the quintessential figures of illegal and shady activity, and she brags about her achievements with the poetic aid of African-American dialect.⁶ In terms of performance, the artist’s choreography again entails expressive hand movements as well as strutting and posing with hands on the waist as derivative from the catwalk culture; head kept upwards to indicate superiority and rigid facial expressions that signify seriousness.

The *I Am...* album and its interaction with the poetics of camp through the persona of Sasha serves as a rich critical ground. Nevertheless, as Beyoncé moved further with other audiovisual enterprises in her career, Sasha Fierce was allegedly “killed,” as the artist claimed, because her “real self” had grown and managed to merge her two opposing sides (Crosley 2010). Sasha was indeed another stunt, a creative project that provided Beyoncé with additional space to exercise role-playing. What her post-Sasha artistic endeavours show is that the artist promoted her icon in ways not very much unlike the 2008 album. Sasha’s absence made no difference since subsequent album hits like 4’s “Run the World (Girls)” (2011), Beyoncé’s “Flawless” (2013) and “Yoncé/Partition” (2013) and *Lemonade*’s “Formation” (2016) and “Sorry” (2016), sound quite appropriate, both in terms of performance and discourse, to what Sasha Fierce would embody. Even without the façade, Beyoncé’s icon retains its camp qualities not only due to its theatricalised environment, namely the terrain of performance but mainly due to the effect this environment exerts upon the subject matters of race and gender; that is, to expose their ideological fabrication. Therefore, to approach the artist’s performance as camp is to read her treatment of gender and race as performable through and

⁶ The song’s lyrics incorporate references from AAVE (African-American Vernacular English), as found in the following lines: “I done got so sick and filthy with Benji’s I can’t spend,” “I’m a diva, best believe her, you see how she gettin’ paid?/ She ain’t calling him to greet her, don’t need him, her bed’s made.”

through. Under this premise, Beyoncé herself can be viewed as an agent of camp. Albeit promising, this fact alone is insufficient and rather reductive to allow us to draw an assumption over Beyoncé's camp appreciation by gay audiences, let alone lead to conclusions as regards her camp's potentiality to serve as an effective cultural critique. Camp, after all, has been a subject of ambiguous character, mainly due to its superficial and sometimes apolitical nature.⁷ Bearing in mind that not all camp performances are subversive in their destabilization of gendered power relations, especially when the factored in are the politics of pop culture and camp's merge with consumerism, camp has to always be contextually treated. In order to delve deeper into Beyoncé's production of camp, one has to look into the joints of it where African-American (female) culture interacts with gay culture.

The constructedness of race and gender in Beyoncé's body of work would seem disengaged had there not been specific referential pools to draw from. Apart from her meta-camping of other black divas, her affiliation with the black culture, a culture with deep queer nuances, provides aegis toward a more critical and historicized approach to the employment of camp. Sasha Fierce aside, the songs "Flawless" and "Formation" are two other cultural texts that I consider representative of Beyoncé's intersection of racial, feminist and queer politics. First and foremost, "Flawless" is an outspoken feminist manifesto that quickly gained popularity via the social media. The song consists of two parts, "Bow Down" and "Flawless," while Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED speech "We Should All Be Feminists" (2013) serves as its interlude. Similar to "Single Ladies" and "Diva," "Flawless" features a memorable and easy-to-copy choreography, whereas its swaggering lyrics point to a readymade self-assertive anthem: Beyoncé invites her audience to shout "I woke up like this" while twirling her hands in front of her face. Music and cultural critics, however, have questioned both the political effectiveness of the song as well as Beyoncé's pop treatment of feminism. *Fembot* magazine writer Michelle Carroll noted that although through "Flawless" the artist has brought mainstream attention to feminism, the song presents an oversimplified version of the movement's message and even fails to fully incorporate Adichie's call to collective action (2015). Furthermore, it can be argued that aside from Adichie's quote, the songtext appears to offer an ambiguous approach to gender issues, especially if one takes into consideration lines, such as "Bow down, bitches" and "Momma taught me good home training," which seem to perpetuate a heterosexist and patriarchal evaluation of female subjectivity. What I would like to argue, though, is that by revisiting "Flawless" through the discourse of camp, the subject matter of feminism finds an alternative and indeed queer route to successfully emerge.

Beyoncé's take on feminism with "Flawless" has invigorated academic dialogue that witnesses a dichotomy concerning the core values of the movement. This dichotomy stems from the artist's contradictory stance to simultaneously occupy spaces of feminist advocacy and perform under the surveillance of the scopophilic gaze. While there are critics arguing against her effective incorporation of feminist discourse in her work—most notably bell hooks's assessment of her as a "terrorist" of gender and "anti-feminist" (qtd. in Trier-Bieniek 2016)—there are those who have acknowledged the artist's ability to present her stereotypical/patriarchal framing of black womanhood as a performative device that wishes to deconstruct the said framing from within. Critics have proposed an intersectional model of feminism that sees multi-vocality and agency in seemingly confining positions and images that are controlled by patriarchal power grids. According to Marla Kohlman, "[i]ntersectionality highlights the ways in which categories of identity and structures of inequality are mutually constituted and defy separation into concrete categories of analysis" (34). The writer underlines that "[b]y noting the ways in which men and women occupy variant positions of power and privilege across race, space, and time, intersectionality has refashioned several of the basic premises that have guided feminist theory as it evolved following the 1950s" (34). Beyoncé performs from various ambiguous positions, such as the prostitute, the aggressive black woman, or the erotic vixen, which, when viewed through the lens of intersectionality, appear to instill agency in the artist's conscious choice to inhabit them. Under this premise, I argue that the camp logic of her icon relies on such conscious deployment of histrionic stylization which, through its historical underpinnings, can function as a flexible

7 Sontag rushed to identify camp as an apolitical art (54). Post-Sontag critics, however, sought to rectify this approach by turning to the discourse of queer theory and, in particular, Judith Butler's exposition of gender performativity through a critical evaluation of drag—indeed, the epitome of camp.

and certainly liberal model of racial and feminist politics.

Whereas dealing with themes of confidence, “Flawless” as an audiovisual text is, by nature, highly stylized, both aesthetically and discursively. In the music video, Beyoncé appears in a black and white urban setting, surrounded by female and male dancers whose street style draws reference from punk and rockabilly aesthetics. The artist herself sports denim shorts with plaid shirt and the hip-hop-accustomed bling, thus positing her persona in a street-smart working-class position and perhaps saluting a lesbian sensibility—via the stereotype of the plaid-shirted dyke—in order to authenticate both her affiliation with street subcultures, and her radical invocation of feminism. As far as the lyrics are concerned, the song is permeated with a display of material accumulation, a motif Beyoncé has time and again explored in her oeuvre.⁸ Speaking from a privileged status wherein her diamonds are flawless and her husband’s record company is flawless too, the artist deliberately embraces the incongruity resulting from the collision of her capitalist-haloed position with the “realness” of the working class. The lesson that “Flawless” offers is concerned with the adoration of sleek surfaces and donning of masks; it is a lesson about embracing pure artifice. Furthermore, Parul Sehgal draws the necessary connection between the word “flawless” and the subculture of drag: “[t]he idea of beauty as performance – and as successful gender performance – is not what’s new... ‘Flawless’ has been part of drag argot for years” (2015). Featured in Sehgal’s article, historian of drag culture Joe E. Jeffreys argues that the word dates back to the underground scene of the 1960s and is probably associated with drag mother Flawless Sabrina, an iconic performer who was in close liaison with William Burroughs and Andy Warhol (qtd. in Sehgal 2015). By evoking a history of camp, “Flawless” is an exclamation that perfectly resonates with a performance of plastic, yet accomplished femininity. Its camp appeal relies on witty responses and self-parodied theatrics against the imposed gendered construct, therefore being an ironic feminist approach crowned with queer poetics.

From a racial perspective, “Flawless” establishes communication with black culture in a way that camp’s dealing with race is culturally grounded. Upon releasing the song as a single in 2014, Beyoncé wrote additional lyrics and had rapper Nicki Minaj as a featured artist. Minaj is a performer whose public persona has been modelled out of a hypersexualized image of the female body, yet her approach tilts more to camp parody. Her frequent experimentations with her icon include a Barbie-doll character inspired from Japanese fashionista girls, and an alter ego, named Roman Zolanski, a frenetic British gay man living inside her (Vena 2012). Minaj’s contribution to “Flawless” simultaneously amplifies the song’s camp quality and verifies its black authenticity, this time relying on the artist’s rap background. The remixed version plays with the singers’ celebrity lifestyle and indulges in explicit sexual references and themes of materialism and regality. In its display of camp, “Flawless” here foregrounds Beyoncé’s image of Queen Bey, a pun originating from the stereotype of Queen Bee, the quintessential figure of female aggressiveness and independence in the post-slavery imagery of African-American culture. L. H. Stalling’s specifies that “(i)n any Queen Bee myth, sexuality becomes power to be wielded for protection, a door to independence and pleasure, and a marker of criminality and outlaw status. The potency of her sexual desire, perceived as abnormal by mainstream society, makes her murderous seductress” (173). Queen Bee’s outcast social status and thereby her developed sense of antagonism in a hostile patriarchal environment are the cross-sectional point of her performance of aggressive sexuality with camp’s theatricalization of gender as a counter-hegemonic strategy. Beyoncé and Minaj’s “Flawless” is simultaneously nurtured by both power positions, therefore providing ironic narratives that, nonetheless, are potential spaces of empowerment for sexually non-normative subjects to occupy.

The intersection of camp poetics, race, and feminism employs identity politics that appeal similarly to a spectrum of racial, sexual, and gendered subjects. Not very much unlike “Flawless,” *Lemonade*’s “Formation” addresses Beyoncé’s fierceness in consonance with her cultural background, the notion of black womanhood, and queer discourses. Textually, the song proves to be repetitive of cliché themes already found in the artist’s songwriting agenda. Once more, materialism and careerism become structural motifs: Beyoncé makes reference to her Givenchy dress, her El Camino car, and her alleged “black Bill

⁸ Consider other songs, such as *B'Day*’s “Ring the Alarm” (2006) and “Upgrade U” (2006), *I Am...Sasha Fierce*’s “Diva,” *4*’s “Countdown” (2011) and *Lemonade*’s “Formation” (2016) and “6 Inch Heels” (2016) to name just a few.

Gates” status. By tracing her origins in the Deep South and highlighting her Creole roots and black heritage, the artist produced “Formation” both as an intergenerational homage to black female power and as an indictment against police brutality over African-American individuals, by using post-Katrina images of the city of New Orleans as her visual backdrop. Importantly, the music video also lays emphasis on the city’s queer culture by incorporating footage from *That B.E.A.T.* (Bagheri 2012), a documentary about the dancing culture of bounce and its affiliation with the city’s queer community; the featured act of bounce queen Big Freedia in the song’s lyrics further consolidates the visibility of the city’s queer culture. In addition, “Formation’s” reiteration of the exclamation “Slay” wishes to place Beyoncé at the heart of contemporary gay culture by using a slang term—closely related to and sometimes interchangeable with “fierce”—that hails a swaggering personality. As Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley and Caitlin O’Neill put it, “[f]emme and fabulous, Beyoncé’s formation celebrates the art of black femininity in every kind of body brave enough to own it” (2016, italics in text). “Formation” met with general critical acclaim because, as an audiovisual project, it manages to render multiple minoritarian subjects visible in a rather celebratory and inviting way.

As is the case with “Flawless,” “Formation” provides spaces of identification with and through black female and queer culture. It stands as a visual amalgam created from all shades of African-American culture—ranging from the revival of the Southern plantation mansion and the practice of voodoo to images from the contemporary ghettoised/policed cityscape, to the *poesis* of black vernacular. Along with the authenticity and communal call that these images seek to bolster, they are, at the same time, highly stylized and inevitably centralised around the icon of Beyoncé. The artist is not presented as an ordinary black woman; instead, she is the black diva who fuses her Givenchy leotards with antebellum fashion; who repeats almost *ad infinitum* that she slays; and, who is a force of nature, an African goddess who symbolically sacrifices her own body to sink a police car, the representation of institutionalised state power. Her making manifest of her superiority is accompanied by a glamorised exhibition of black culture. The visual and discursive characteristics of it are thus promoted as authentic, real and always with a swagger. “Formation” embodies blackness in a solely performative way, by marking it as attractive, imitable and, most of all, marketable. Though blackness per se cannot be fully comprehended and expressed through means of performance—as E. Patrick Johnson suggests, only the “living of blackness” can become “a material way of knowing [it]” (8)⁹—popular culture products like “Formation” offer a significantly glossed-over racial and gendered reality. The song’s moves, lyrics, styles, and attitudes, which are already undergirded with a black queer sensibility, function as fodder for Beyoncé’s camp appeal precisely due to their histrionic nature.

Because of the wide impact of “Formation” and, later on, its parent album, criticism was directed to the conundrum of cultural appropriation. Specifically, critics focused on the appropriation of black female culture by white gay men. Although clearly not something that can be described as an emerging phenomenon, the cultural debate seems to have remained unresolved not only because of the complexity of both cultures but mainly because of the different power networks permeating them. Two years ago an Op-Ed article on *Time*, entitled “Dear White Gays: Stop Stealing Female Culture,” written by black female graduate student Sierra Mannie, triggered a barrage of responses as regards the topic. Mannie opened her article by stating: “You are not a black woman, and you do not get to claim either blackness or womanhood. There is a clear line between appreciation and appropriation” (2014). She also stressed that “[a]t the end of the day, if you are a white male, gay or not, you retain so much privilege... [T]he black women with whom you think you align yourself so well, whose language you use and the stereotypical mannerisms you adopt, cannot hide their blackness and womanhood to protect themselves the way that you can hide your homosexuality” (2014). Following Mannie’s piece, the 2015 National Union of Students Women’s Conference in the UK requested that white gay men stopped appropriating black female culture and underlined white gay males as a privileged group within LGBT+ communities (Apple 2015). Counter-argumentative pieces were also written on various online platforms, including a direct response to Mannie’s article (again featured on

⁹ In his work on *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (2003), Johnson argues that “blackness does not only reside in the theatrical fantasy of the white imaginary that is then projected onto black bodies, nor is it always consciously acted out; rather, it is also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing” (8).

Time), entitled “Dear Black Women: White Gays Are Your Allies, So Don’t Push Us Away,” penned by Steve Friess, a white gay man from Detroit, whose allegedly patronizing tone was met with backlash.¹⁰

Although both sides of the debate made valid points as to white gay men internalising elements of black culture and to the actual extent this is happening, the issue of appropriation per se largely remained unexplored. In order to understand how appropriation works, one has to investigate both the direct interactions between the communities and, importantly, the indirect mechanisms that allow the sharing of culture, namely the commercialisation of it by mainstream industries and social media. In my dealing with the historical and cultural interrelation between gay male culture, pop divas, and the subject matter of camp, there have been instances where indeed cultural appropriation and cultural borrowing, or even appreciation, as Mannie puts it, were hardly indistinguishable—a case in point is Madonna’s infamous engagement with the voguing culture in the early 1990s. As a traditionally queer praxis, camp is a performance of gender, a theatricalisation of its surrounding environments, and, ultimately, a mimetic strategy employed to parody ideological constructs. For instance, white suburban womanhood and glamorous white femininity have frequently been targets of camp parody, whose treatment of them risks being interpreted as sexist and misogynist; yet, at times, their performative discourse has been called upon to reveal fissures on heteronormative social structures. Similarly, black womanhood has time and again been part of camp’s arsenal, used both by (white and black) gay men and (black and white) women as a means of generating irony or in order to evoke narratives of empowerment against patriarchal ideology.¹¹ A tradition of black camp can be traced in the early 20th century black female stand-up comedy of the chitlin’ circuit, a descendant of the vaudeville and burlesque scene, as well as in the period of Harlem Renaissance wherein one finds the origins of black drag ball culture.¹² Black women and gay men have in fact been in stable cultural exchange and communication for over a century now.

To return to Beyoncé, her icon has been fundamental in the projection of black female culture to various groups of the gay male culture. The way, however, this projection comes across points to it being inevitably glamorised as is the case with every pop culture icon and narrative. As a result, elements comprising Beyoncé’s work, such as African-American dialect and/or gay slang as well as the aesthetics of black femininity, are mediated through her persona and, of course, are marketed accordingly. Linguist Maciej Widawski identifies stylization amongst the important features of the slang and its popularisation, an argument that, besides linguistics, also applies to the visualisation of culture and can legitimately be extrapolated on the work of Beyoncé, which combines both discourse and image. According to Midawski, “[p]eople imitate someone else’s way of speaking for various reasons such as to identify with a style or an attitude” (112). By popularising elements of black culture, both female and queer, Beyoncé renders them available for everyone to use. As bell hooks underscored in her review of *Lemonade*, “[v]iewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers” (2016). The idolization of black womanhood through a camp poetics becomes a stylized corpus that Beyoncé requires from her audience to read. Through this practice, namely the sharing of culture as crafted and absorbed via Beyoncé’s mediator-icon, the gay audience partakes in the already marketised black camp experience by imitating mannerisms and language, not by appropriating them.

The artist’s engagement with cultural practices as part of her commercial projects will inevitably be of marketised nature. Her praxis of camp, indeed an artistically aware one, is to a great extent compromised by Beyoncé’s capitalist-crowned status of an affluent and influential individual. As a result, conundrums regarding the nature of her work as well as her promotion of African-American culture must always be filtered through the power grids operating her status. Concerning her exposition of black camp, Beyoncé

¹⁰ *Time* magazine issued a third article featuring Friess and Courtney Jones-Stevens entitled “A White Man and a Black Woman Hug It Out” (2014) which illustrated a dialogue between the two with regard to Mannie’s and Friess’s article.

¹¹ Consider the performance of black womanhood by R&B artist Macy Gray in Shugart and Waggoner’s essay on “Macy Gray: Venus in Drag” (2008).

¹² For further information, see Stallings’s *Mutha’ Is Half a Word*, Mel Watkins *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying: The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture* (1994), and George Chauncey’s *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (1994).

rather knowingly immerses her persona in its subcultural poetics in order to both forge her diva politics with cultural relevance as well as sustain her appeal to queer audiences. However, the resultant perception of black camp through Beyoncé by a wider audience comes largely refined, if mitigated because of her carefully marketised icon. This raises concerns as to how a minoritarian practice that is black camp is mediated through a powerful and agential figure. While a radical critique on the said conundrum would underline how Beyoncé speaks the voice of the margins for the margins, hence significantly affecting external views of them and perhaps perpetuating their subaltern position, the case is that the artist rather projects her icon onto the cultural canvas of black queer praxis in order to authenticate her own performance., , Crafted out of queer practices and infused with black feminist politics, Beyoncé's production of black camp ultimately bears the brand, be it social and economical, of her own icon.

Notwithstanding its consumerist-driven character, what should not be stressed is how this said exposition of black camp can function both as a feminist device for Beyoncé's fandom as well as serve as a visible non-white praxis which is usually white by default. According to Stallings, “[b]oth Black women and gay men have historically been oppressed within the United States, and they have produced cultures from this particular position. Each group forced Western societies to reconsider their axiological categorization of gender,” and their community and identity formation is always juxtaposed to, even haunted by the “rigid fabrication of white masculinity” (119). That being said, the intersection of camp, race, and feminism may serve as a model of empowerment for both groups. To twirl the hands in indication of a flawless femininity or to identify with a history of social fierceness by exclaiming “Slay” can practically and effectively fortify a position against ideological rigidity itself. Furthermore, the visibility and celebration of black camp create racial porousness on the conspicuously white surface of the dominant gay culture. Even camp's canon of typically white cultural production acquires a nuanced perspective and opens a more inclusive performance of queer communal bonding. The work of Beyoncé demonstrates that despite the imposing social reality of gender and race, the tools required for its construction can also be utilised, not to overthrow it, but at least make it more flexible. The artist's black camp is audacious enough to revel in its own plasticity and market economy, yet its audacity is one accruing from the fierceness against its narratives of oppression.

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