Who Run the World? Feminism and Commodification in Beyoncé’s Star Text

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Abstract: Grounded in the field of celebrity studies and analyzed through an intersectional lens, this paper untangles the seemingly incongruent discursive knot that constitutes Beyoncé’s feminist identity. I claim that the divergent discourses circulating through her star text tell us something about the state of feminism today. As such, she does not merely display the tension within her own star text, but, as celebrity feminists perforce do, also the tension within the (post-)feminist debate in American society.

Keywords: Celebrity feminism, commodification, celebrity culture, Beyoncé

“You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation.”
– Beyoncé, “Formation” (2016)

When Beyoncé appeared in front of an enormous screen reading “FEMINIST” during the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, the singer became a focal point for critique on the celebritification of feminism. Criticasters of “Beyoncé feminism” emphasize the inconsistencies and oppositional discourses within her star text. While Beyoncé presents herself as a strong, independent, Black1 woman, she is, for example, also deeply invested in

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1 Black and White are capitalized throughout this article to signify use for analytical purposes. The terms in this context relate to lived experiences, without condoning
sexual (self-)objectification, and (heterosexual) marital life and motherhood. Moreover, Beyoncé’s intentions are questioned because of the commercial aims of her celebrity status. The discussions about Beyoncé are similar to more abstract discussions about feminism. Questions about (hetero)sexuality, motherhood, and consumerism are still hotly debated in both the theory and practice of feminism.

Although an extreme linkage between Beyoncé and feminism is reductionist to both ends and depoliticizes the gender issues at stake, Beyoncé’s claim on the feminist label nevertheless caused people to consider the meaning of gendered identities within dominant power structures in which women are marginalized. A discourse of popular feminism gained momentum, void of rigid boundaries between insiders and outsiders. In my personal understanding of feminism, which mostly relies on the writings of bell hooks, in particular her *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000), feminism is per definition an active moment that fights oppression in all its forms. In this article I analyze what Beyoncé’s star text says about the commodification of feminist and anti-racist narratives. In what ways does her star text escape the neoliberal commodification of these possibly transgressive narratives?

With *star text* I refer to Richard Dyer’s explanation of the concept in his books *Stars* (1979) and *Heavenly Bodies* (1986). A star text consists of all (commodified) artifacts that relate to the public persona of a celebrity. Star texts dwell in various types of media and they are always both extensive and intertextual in their composition (*Dyer, Heavenly Bodies* 3). In other words: the star text is situated in various forms – not just in performances, lyrics, and music videos, but also in interviews, photo shoots, social media posts, and so on. Moreover, the star text is always contradictory and unstable because of its complex relation to the society in which it circulates.

Grounded in the field of celebrity studies and feminist theory, the present article untangles some of Beyoncé’s recent articulations of feminism and anti-racism. The articulations of feminism in Beyoncé’s star text serve as a cipher to grapple with the current context of US, and in general Western, (public) feminist debates. I contend that, following Rosalind Gill’s assessment of the role of neoliberalism in gendered identities in “Culture and Subjectivity in Neoliberal and biological determinist or essentialist understandings of identity. This reading is performed from a positionality of a Western European White perspective.

2 Oppression takes shape at the crossing points of social categories within identity. This means that an intersectional outlook on oppression is indispensable for feminism. Let it be clear that the separate use of the terms feminism and anti-racism in this article is used for the sake of clarity but that since the two are thoroughly intertwined, anti-racism is always implied when the term feminism is used.
Postfeminist Times” (2008), scrutinized hyper-individual women, like the female celebrity, can be considered quintessential neoliberal subjects and therefore require more academic consideration when questions of gender politics resonate in the public realm in which they are so visibly positioned. I claim that for the past fifteen years, Beyoncé’s star text has offered a microcosm in which articulations of womanhood, femininity, and race are continuously reconfigured in a codependent relation to neoliberalism and the (post-)feminist/race debate in US-American society. Beyoncé here serves as a focal point to lay out what Lawrence Grossberg calls a radically contextualist political history of the present (2). In extension, my analysis of Beyoncé’s feminism provides a case study of the paradox of feminism in popular culture: pop culture perpetuates a highly individualized and meritocratic image of feminism, but it simultaneously encourages audiences to question the inequality at the base of this meritocratic world view from a feminist perspective.

**Beyoncé’s feminist manifesto**

During the MTV VMAs 2014, Beyoncé performed a medley of her album *Beyoncé* (2014). In this performance, her song “***Flawless” is introduced with the sample of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s famous Ted Talk on feminism displayed on a huge screen:

We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings  
In the way that boys are  
We teach girls to shrink themselves  
To make themselves smaller  
We say to girls,  
You can have ambition  
But not too much  
You should aim to be successful  
But not too successful  
Otherwise you will threaten the man.  
Feminist: the person who believes in the social,  
Political, and economic equality of the sexes

Beyoncé problematizes a narrow understanding of female sexuality as in contrast to male sexuality. Moreover, she defies the notion that female ambition should be non-threatening. The central pointers of Beyoncé’s feminism as presented here are sexual freedom and ambition for all.
There is nonetheless a difference between liking sex and performing sex, which has formed a crucial axis of the feminist debate since the 1960s and 1970s. Beyoncé’s focus on sexual equality grounds her performance in a sex-positive discourse that might be read as feminist yet it is spread in a media environment that is decidedly post-feminist. Post-feminists see feminism as decisively aged and redundant (McRobbie 255). In this view, gender equality is already achieved and feminism is no longer vital: “Women, according to post-feminists, are able to make their choices out of free will” (McRobbie 259). In this performance, Beyoncé demands recognition for female desire and pleasure within a feminist framework, yet the self-objectifying dance routines of Beyoncé and her dancers do not seem to differ much from post-feminist media outlets in which women are continually shown to be sexual objects – though of their own choice.

Post-feminism and neoliberalism, the context in which Beyoncé’s star text resides, share an insistence on meritocracy. When related to celebrity, post-feminist and neoliberal rhetoric tend to equate the possibility of individual female success with gender equality. The articulation of personal female success as proof for the viability of the meritocratic American Dream continues to exist alongside countless examples of gendered and racialized inequalities. This individual focus is clearly present in the performance of “***Flawless.” The song is in this instance performed after Beyoncé’s song “Partition.” In this part of the performance she and her female dancers perform a pole-dance act and Beyoncé sings: “take all of me, I just want to be the girl you like.” This exemplifies celebrity feminism’s post-feminist sensibility, discussed later in this article, and especially foregrounds feminism’s representation in the fantasy world of the popular music performance in which a sexually savvy femininity at times looks awfully similar to a submissive, objectified woman. While the sample of Adichie is projected on-screen, Beyoncé’s dancers pass by standing on a production line. Their outlines are emphasized through backlight, which makes it impossible to identify them. The lightning turns them into rigid Barbie dolls rather than women – we see thin, interchangeable bodies without a face or identity. They do not even move their own bodies, since the production line moves them across the stage. This creates a disjuncture between the visual and the lyrical: while we hear Adichie’s voice making a feminist utterance which is projected on-screen, we see Beyoncé’s voice-, face-, and nameless dancers pass by as objectified omnigender.

The dancers here serve to highlight Beyoncé’s extraordinary individuality more than they sustain her feminist activism. There is a clear chorus/star dynamic that could be read as a concrete visualization of post-feminism: not everybody can be a star. In a pessimistic reading this is reinforced by the insistence on the
importance of ambition in Beyoncé’s feminist manifesto. The manifesto and star/chorus dynamic both emphasize the ideals of meritocratic neoliberalism in which talent, hard work, and resilience are rewarded by extraordinary personal success. Beyoncé presents herself as the possible outcome of female ambition, and seems to urge young women to follow her lead. This version of post-feminist feminism, so intricately focused on individual female ambition and financial success, has been coined “Neoliberal Feminism.” In the course of this article, I nonetheless hope to convince the reader there is more to Beyoncé’s feminism than this neoliberal reading. Aside from the neoliberal readings of her feminism, the claim on the feminist label by Beyoncé was a daring move, when one considers that many popular music celebrities, for example Bjork, Madonna, and Taylor Swift, publicly distanced themselves from feminism (Zeisler).

The dictionary definition of feminism in the sample of Adichie’s Ted Talk makes feminism into an abstract thought that does not require action, since it makes gender equality sound like an aspect of common sense. It is simultaneously a teleological interpretation of feminism and a post-feminist definition of feminism. Adichie’s decontextualized sample presents a feminism so basic and logical that it can be considered taken into account. This is a starkly different definition of feminism than for example the before mentioned definition by bell hooks, in which feminism is interpreted as an active movement that seeks to end sexism and oppression (Feminism viii). Beyoncé’s borrowed definition of feminism, in other words, can be read as a rearticulation of post-feminist feminism that can be considered a safe cause to support, not just because it is articulated as a depoliticized personal ideal, but moreover because it envisions gender equality as a teleologically unavoidable reality. In an era of post-feminism, the difference between embedding a belief in meritocracy in a star text and explicitly claiming the feminist label is negligible: the content is similar in its focus on individuality, with different accentuations that create the illusion of the existence of a new and upgraded conjuncture of celebrity feminism.

After Adichie’s sample, we see the screen behind Beyoncé light up in bright red. Her face and outline are clearly visible as she stands in front of the word “FEMINIST.” The choreography of what follows is as sexual as it is aggressive. Beyoncé sings:

I know when you were little girls
You dreamt of being in my world
Now don’t forget it, don’t forget it
Respect that, bow down bitches
The myth of meritocracy is reinstated through these lyrics – Beyoncé’s hyper-individual success is presented as something to envy and aspire to. During a discussion about Beyoncé at The New School in New York (“Are You Still a Slave?”), bell hooks called Beyoncé an anti-feminist terrorist in reference to this work. hooks even goes as far as to argue Beyoncé colludes in a construction of herself as slave, in service of imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. She elaborates: “I used to get so tired of people quoting Audre Lorde, the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house, but that was exactly what she meant, that you are not going to destroy this imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy by creating your own version of it. Even if it serves you to make lots and lots of money” (“Are You Still a Slave?”). Beyoncé’s success is continuously presented as the result of hard work and dedication, characteristics that are highly valued in American society. Considerations of systemic inequality are rendered invisible and her success becomes articulated not just as a feminist accomplishment but moreover as something that is just and deserved rather than a complex process of individual agency and social construction.

The revival of feminist and anti-racist activism together with the current prominence of celebrity society (see also Krieken) nonetheless creates a conjuncture of celebrity feminism and anti-racism that makes it possible for a celebrity to usurp an activist label without leaving the meritocratic framework – that is both cause and symptom of the inequality denounced by feminism and anti-racism – in which the celebrity is able to exist. To put it even stronger: the celebrity, by virtue of her success, shows that she is no longer held back by institutional racism or sexism. In a 2009 interview with journalist Jonathan van Meter for Vogue Beyoncé stated: “no one’s paying attention to what race I am. I’ve kind of proven myself. I’m past that” (qtd. in Cashmore 144). Ellis Cashmore argues that Beyoncé did not incorporate her Blackness in her star text but merely displayed a “wish-fulfilment fantasy that portrays the hard-earned success of a black woman in a culture largely purged of its historical iniquities” (146). This perpetuates a view of Beyoncé as a post-racial and post-feminist entity that prospers in the meritocratic system. Celebrity feminists, in this discourse, are marked as feminists by mere virtue of their success. They become the ruler against which the failure or success of all women can be measured. Gender liberation, in this case, becomes synonymous with functioning like White Men.3

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3 I capitalized White Men to emphasize that I’m referring to an institution rather than a group of persons. Sara Ahmed explains: “An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behaviour of a set of individuals
The use of the word "bitches" in "Flawless" illustrates the complex negotiations that are part of reading feminism in pop music. Cussing fits with a tradition of using "derogatory and demeaning language when discussing other women" in hiphop and rap music (Oware 790). Matthew Oware describes the custom of braggadocio, in which a type of arrogance is vocalized to illustrate the abilities of an artist to overcome hardship and achieve material success (792). In one reading, Beyoncé thus does not challenge the meritocratic system but rather prospers in it. In another reading, Beyoncé’s use of braggadocio grounds her in hiphop culture, of which the history is in turn strongly related to Black culture. In this second reading, Beyoncé might not break with a patriarchal framework, but disrupts the Whiteness of mainstream culture. The second reading clears the way for a more nuanced understanding of Beyoncé’s feminism wherein her work shows the possibility of creating "cracks" in a neoliberal capitalist culture heavily indebted to colonial expropriation and the appropriation of Blackness and Black culture. Further elaboration on the complexity of these ruptures is required when Beyoncé’s later work is taken into consideration, as I will do in the following section.

From the margins to the center
While Beyoncé does not trespass the meritocratic neoliberal framework in which her star text is sold in my reading, the mere presence of her Black female celebrityhood and layered artistic output could already be marked as a disruption of the Whiteness of mainstream culture. To put it differently: the fact that her star text is such a success can be viewed as an act of dissent in itself. As Beyoncé was critiqued for her feminism, continuous systemic and institutionalized racial within a given community. So when I am saying that ‘white men’ is an institution I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure ("White Men"). This does not mean White Men are a fixed constant. The institution is constantly rearticulated and reassembled. Ahmed writes: “‘White men’ is between tenses, it is how an inheritance is reproduced” ("White Men").

The continuous articulations of Blackness in Beyoncé’s oeuvre and star text have been pointed out by amongst others Brooks, “All That You Can’t Leave Behind”; Durham “Check On It”; and Weidhase, “Beyoncé Feminism.”

The disruptive possibilities of celebrity cannot be determined without engaging with the consumers of celebrity. Like most research in the field of celebrity studies, this study is limited by the absence of consumer voices. There is an urgent need for celebrity studies scholars to combine textual analysis with fan interviews in order to be able to discuss what it is that celebrity actually does. Integrating fan research with celebrity research would guard research from the dangers of singular interpretations.
injustice gave rise to violent upheavals in American cities like Ferguson and Baltimore after the murders of amongst others Eric Garner, Ezell Ford, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Walter Scott. While the murders of these men can be seen as the immediate cause for these revolts, Louis Hyman reminds us that the riots are above all “an expression of anger at another aspect of a system that has exploited the black community in subtler, more insidious, but similarly tragic ways” than fifty years ago during the riots in the 1960s (“Why The CVS Burned”). After 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was put on trial for his own murder, and the acquittal of his murderer George Zimmerman, the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum and visibility. The special relationship between popular music and social justice was exemplified by the great amount of musical celebrities who soon expressed their support for the movement: musicians like Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, John Legend, and Prince all used their star power to pledge their allegiance to Black Lives Matter in their music as well as during public events.

On February 7, 2016, the Super Bowl halftime show, officially headlined by Coldplay, formed the premiere stage for Beyoncé’s newest song “Formation.” Her outfit during the show paid homage to Michael Jackson’s 1993 Super Bowl performance, her dancers were dressed as Black Panthers, and Beyoncé sang about her Black heritage. The fashion of the performance grounded Beyoncé in Black superstardom and her dancers in a historical narrative of (Black) activism. With this performance, not just her feminist identity but also her identity as a Black woman was riveted in not only American pop culture but perhaps American history at large. By performing a song that centralizes Blackness and Black womanhood, Beyoncé used her stage-time for one of the most political halftime performance ever. Moreover, popular music once again presented itself to be intricately connected to social justice and political protest.

The music video of “Formation,” released a day before the Super Bowl, presents the audience with imagery of Black suffering yet also celebrates and reclaims various elements of Black culture that had previously been appropriated

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6 The murders of these men received widespread media coverage. While this was an incentive for many celebrities to speak out, police violence against Black women and LGBTIAQ people remains largely uncovered and underreported by the mainstream media. This ultimately purports to larger questions of grievability and social justice in relation to celebrity activism that go beyond the scope of this paper.

7 Beyoncé did not only sing about Black Southern and Creole heritage but also musically incorporated a vast amount of different music genres that come from Black cultural backgrounds. Moreover, the choreography can also be analyzed as including different influences and artistic expressions historically tied to Black/African-American communities.
by White artists such as gospel and twerking. The video starts out with Beyoncé on top of a slowly sinking police car in Katrina-struck New Orleans while Messy Mya can be heard asking: "What happened after New Orleans?" “Formation” seems to hint at a more explicit intersectional incorporation of feminism in Beyoncé’s star text in the way it specifically foregrounds Black womanhood. Beyoncé sings about her genealogy: “My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana, you mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bama.” This lineage emphasizes both the specificity of the Southern Blackness of her star text, as well as her ordinariness – her Blackness is so clearly inscribed on her body through the emphasis on lived experience as well as performance of Blackness that it blurs the line between the person Beyoncé and Beyoncé as pop star. In other words: it becomes impossible to delineate Beyoncé as commodity within celebrity culture as separated from Beyoncé as human being outside her stardom. The line, “Earned all this money but they never took the country out me,” signifies a moment before fame, used to again present herself as authentic but also to pledge her allegiance to the Black/African American community. In “Formation,” Beyoncé foregrounds her Southern Black heritage as the core of her star text. The song reminds its audience that however universal her outreach or success might be, she first and foremost remains a Black woman from the South. So while her earlier performance of “***Flawless” lyrically featured Beyoncé as an almost universal symbol for female empowerment, “Formation,” on the hand, explicitly calls attention to the specific lived experience of Black womanhood.

This does, however, not immediately discard the universalist and post-racial aspects of her star text, nor does it debunk the inevitably commodified nature of stardom. “Formation” is as much an example of Black pride and activism as it is another example of the commodification of both Blackness and activism by Beyoncé as a million dollar brand. The crucial aspect here is that neither of these readings excludes the other, but that they rather exist simultaneously. The

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8 Both gospel and twerking form important parts of Black culture that have been publicly appropriated and decontextualized by popular White artists numerous times, which adds to the value of Beyoncé reclaiming them. For more on the decontextualization or whitewashing of Black culture see Gaunt, “YouTube, Twerking & You”; Gilroy, The Black Atlantic; Johnson, Appropriating Blackness; and Pérez, “The Ontology of Twerk.”

9 Messy Mya (Anthony Barre) was a New Orleans rapper, comedian, and YouTube personality who was shot in 2010. The sample of Messy Mya, together with the sample of New Orleans bounce musician Big Freedia (Freddy Ross) – also present in “Formation” – grounds the song in the spatiality of New Orleans as the apex of Black Southern culture.

10 Again, I want to emphasize that her Blackness was never absent in her earlier oeuvre. The difference here is that she capitalized and politicized her Blackness and made it both lyrically as well as visually central to her performance.
neoliberal focus of celebrity activism is not disrupted: “Formation” features lines such as, “You just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making,” “I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making,” and “Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper.” These lines perpetuate a vision of financial power as the ultimate way to reach equality and end oppression. Not only is a neoliberal and meritocratic view of society reinforced, the fact that institutionalized racism makes it far less likely for a Black person to become as rich as Bill Gates, or as wealthy as Beyoncé for that matter, also remains unrecognized.

Nevertheless, with “Formation” as well as with the subsequent visual album Lemonade (2016), Beyoncé uses her art to create a space wherein Black womanhood can be discussed on its own terms. The most explicit reference to the specific experience of Black womanhood on the album is made in her song “Don’t Hurt Yourself.” In it, a well-known Malcolm X speech is sampled, during which he calls the Black woman the most disrespected and unprotected woman in America. Lemonade can be read in line with the writings of famous authors like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, whose narratives have portrayed Black womanhood as broken, unique, and powerful all at once. When the visual album is digested in its chronological sequence, a story arc of a personal journey in search of the meanings of individual subjectivity in relation to larger societal structures surfaces. The focus on Black womanhood in Lemonade urges an intersectional view of feminism in which Whiteness is no longer the invisible norm of mainstream culture.11 In Lemonade, Whiteness is made strange. Aside from a few mentions of “Becky with the good hair” and imagery of happy couples of various descent during the finale of the album, White people are both lyrically and visually absent.

After Lemonade, many wondered whether bell hooks, who had called Beyoncé a feminist terrorist in 2014, would change her opinion on the singer. In her think piece on the visual album, hooks focuses on the ways in which Beyoncé and Lemonade still do not escape commodification. Although she calls the subject matter of Black womanhood “daring,” hooks critiques the meritocratic fantasy world Beyoncé creates. “In the world of fantasy feminism,” hooks writes, “there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown [sic] simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality” (”Moving Beyond Pain”). Moreover, hooks critiques the way in which Beyoncé’s feminism has come to stand as “truth.” She warns us

11 For additional analyses of Black womanhood in Lemonade, see Hobson, “#Lemonade”; Parris, “Eight Black Canadian Women”; Ray-Harris, “Beyoncé’s Lemonade”; and Richards, “The Meaning of Beyoncé’s Lemonade.”
to not let Beyoncé’s feminism become our only feminism: the incorporation of feminism in the realm of entertainment, and the rise of celebrity feminism, should not replace political feminisms. It is problematic that it is so much easier to have conversations about race, class, and gender through popular culture than it is to discuss them through formal politics.

hooks continues by critiquing the idea that *Lemonade* is primarily created for a Black female audience. She states: “Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color” (“Moving Beyond Pain”). *Lemonade* demands attention for Black womanhood, but departs from Beyoncé’s extensive star text that offers many aspects to which fans can relate. Beyoncé’s lucrative star text, and her diverse and large audience, are abettors to the many debates that occur whenever she releases a new product. However, the productivity of the incorporation of an intersectional feminist representation in her star text, specifically as a Southern Black woman, though embedded in a neoliberal meritocratic context, should therefore not be easily dismissed.

“Formation” and *Lemonade* have for example spurred societal debates about oppression with their, in hooks words, daring focus on Black womanhood. The music video of “Formation,” the Super Bowl halftime performance, and *Lemonade* were all discussed extensively on radio and TV, and inspired hundreds of think pieces and academic papers. A memorable reaction to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl halftime show is the sketch Saturday Night Live produced. SNL created a fake movie trailer called “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black,” which mostly shows panicking White people, confused because they do not understand the meaning of, for example, the lyrics “hot sauce in my bag, swag.” A confused White man states, “maybe the song isn’t for us,” after which a hysterical White woman exclaims, “but usually everything is!” Turmoil spreads as White people lose their “damn White minds” because of their incapability to understand Beyoncé’s newest song (“The Day Beyoncé Turned Black”).

The real-life inability of especially right-wing White people to digest *Lemonade* became visible through, for example, former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani’s denouncement of the Super Bowl halftime show for its “unwholesome” and “political” character, and the failed attempt at a nationwide police boycott of Beyoncé’s world tour. The National Sherrif’s Association even blamed Beyoncé for the deaths of four officers, describing her music as “anti-police entertainment” (Hassan et al.). While Beyoncé’s feminism in itself might not be as radical as for instance hooks wants it to be, Beyoncé’s work and its disruption of the Whiteness
of mainstream culture does facilitate as well as accelerate debates about the intersections between gender, race, and sexuality. Beyoncé’s feminism might not serve straightforward political purposes that go beyond long-standing systems of oppression, but it does perform socio-cultural work that creates spaces for more heterogeneous conceptions of gendered and racialized identities. While this gives the public new ways of engaging with these conceptualizations, the question of the effects of Beyoncé’s feminism on consumers lingers.

Conclusion
Feminism, after years of relentless post-feminist media output, became simultaneously hollow enough to be rearticulated in commodifiable ways that do not harm or threaten the profitability of a star text, and forceful enough to figure as an indictment against the current state of gender affairs. The post-feminist emphasis on the contradictory tension and multiplicity within individual female yearnings enables celebrity feminists to pick whatever additive they deem fit from a seemingly unlimited plethora of choices that can be articulated as feminist. In this process, feminism itself becomes rearticulated as a commodity. Consequently, bell hooks argues, debates about gender issues slowly move away from the political field and reemerge in marketing and entertainment (Feminism 5). The celebrity activist, who by definition forms the antithesis of a prerequisite strategic essentialist collectivity needed for feminist and anti-racist activism in order to radically alter the system in their favor, articulates resistance and compliance to the system at once. In the reading by hooks, Beyoncé’s feminism is so dispersed and contradictory that it does not transgress the boundaries of neoliberal post-feminism. This indicates that after years of post-feminist media imagery, feminism itself is rearticulated as a part of a post-feminist conjuncture.

In the current crossroads that is celebrity feminism, Beyoncé is concurrently both object and subject: she represents, yet at the same time shapes, debates concerning feminism and race. This popular discourse of

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12 The widespread attention for Black womanhood after Lemonade motivated writer and educator Candice Marie Benbow to comprise the Lemonade Syllabus through a Twitter hashtag. In the introduction of the free syllabus she writes: “Black women, spanning generations and class dynamics, used social media to suggest books, films, songs and poetry – primarily by Black women – that they believe best accompanied Lemonade and spoke to the essence of Black womanhood in its historical and contemporary manifestations. Compiled is [sic] over 200 resources that specifically speak to Black women from classics in fiction to Black feminist theory ...” (Benbow 1). The syllabus was downloaded over 40,000 times in 5 days.
intersectional celebrity feminism is thoroughly embedded in a neoliberal post-feminist and post-racial framework. This framework enables Beyoncé to claim the feminist label and simultaneously reinforce hyper-individual meritocratic ideals without exploring the tension between the two. Time and again, Beyoncé presents her personal success as a feminist act. This articulation of feminism and anti-racism can be accused of depoliticizing the larger issues of social inequality at stake: it takes them away from the political arena and into the consumerist field of popular culture. On the other hand, it might be more productive to argue that these articulations function as disruptions of the system in which they are sold. These transgressions are more likely to occur in a culture in which media literacy – the critical consumption of media culture – has become widespread outside the ivory tower of academia. When pop feminism is considered a locus of activism, its most activist element might be that it allows contemporary feminism to become part of everyday life. Further research into the effects of this development is needed, especially in the form of audience research. Now that we know what celebrity feminism looks like, it is time to find out what it is that celebrity feminism actually does.

*Lemonade* can be seen as a culmination of tension between Beyoncé as a million dollar brand in celebrity culture and Beyoncé as Black woman outside her stardom, between Beyoncé as commodity and Beyoncé as activist, between the personal and the political. This does not mean that either of these entities should be deemed worthless, but rather shows that the difference between commodification and activism is no longer determinable: they exist simultaneously. This bleeding into each other of entertainment and politics warrants investigation into how commercial success and social or political processes are negotiated. The notion that celebrity and politics co-constitute each other can be a fruitful premise for research into the politics of pop feminism rather than an impasse. In order to shed light on this co-constitutive relationship, more research on the effects of celebrity is needed. This means that the bridges between celebrity studies, fan studies, and media studies need to be strengthened in ways that facilitate multi- and interdisciplinary research projects. Moreover, the study of celebrity needs to safeguard itself from simplified readings of the phenomenon that either make the object of study into an individualized case study or abstract entity. Rather, celebrity should be taken up as a foundation of contemporary discussion, with famous persons intervening in current political debates, and such political debates in turn supporting the success of a famous person.
Intersectional feminism is never complete or finished; it is constantly evolving. Beyoncé helps construct the feminist debate and might affect the overall meaning of feminism in society, as well as the meaning of Blackness and race. However, the presentation of feminism and Blackness as a cool brand is a long way from progressive and radical feminist and black activism that seeks to end oppression in intersectional ways. Beyoncé’s work, and star text overall, could be the start of a conversation rather than functioning as an endpoint.

Even though Beyoncé’s intersectional feminist star text might be read as controversial, she time and again proves to be a rich source of inspiration for the feminist debate. Although Beyoncé’s feminism does not seem to consider the connection between neoliberal capitalism and oppression, and moreover often conflates her personal success with the possibility of Black and female success in general, her affective investment in celebrity feminism does create more space for discussions about the intersectional nature of oppression. Because of their investment in meritocratic and neoliberal hyper-individualism, celebrities are unable to completely leave behind the socially constructed framework and existing discourses to effectively fight oppression. Celebrity activism is therefore inherently limited and perhaps falls short due to the celebrity’s unrelenting aim of maximizing profits. Within these limitations, Beyoncé’s work and star text nevertheless illustrate how commodification and activism coexist in contemporary popular culture.

In conclusion, the study of “Beyoncé feminism” shows how two contradictory strands of contemporary celebrity feminism in popular music might coexist: her feminism on the one hand shows the inescapable nature of both neoliberalism and capitalism, yet on the other hand illustrates how both are still potentially escapable from within. These escapes might be but small cracks, but also point to the possibilities of art to politically resist and transgress societal understandings of identity. While it might be easier to focus on the ways in which Beyoncé’s intersectional feminism can be problematized, further research into the productivity of these cracks is ultimately of larger interest to both academia and society.

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