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Must Stay Woke: Black Celebrity Voices of Dissent in the Post Post-Racial Era

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MUST STAY WOKE:
BLACK CELEBRITY VOICES OF DISSENT IN THE POST POST-RACIAL ERA

by

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B.A. May 2015, Virginia Wesleyan College

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
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ABSTRACT

In today's racially charged climate there is an expectation that black celebrities cry out #BlackLivesMatter, get on the field to #TakeAKnee and be #UnapologeticallyBlack whenever they are in the spotlight. This climate transcends what was once seen as a post-racial America—a time where the media portrayed race as no longer being an issue—and encourages black celebrities to address racism. Prior research on black celebrities by Sarah J. Jackson, Ellis Cashmore, bell hooks, James Baldwin and others acknowledges the historical burden placed on black celebrities to publicly discuss racism and represent blackness in order to challenge dominant narratives. Today, this expectation manifests differently than it has previously due to the affordances of social media and the need for celebrities to brand themselves as “woke” in order to appease their black fans. This thesis analyzes how the system of black celebrity works to bring issues of race into the mainstream public sphere and situates the current climate as post post-racial because of the emergence of discussions around existing systemic racism. Utilizing theoretical celebrity studies research by Richard Dyer and P. David Marshall, I perform a critical discourse analysis of media coverage and online discourses surrounding Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl halftime performance. What I discover is that Beyoncé integrated activism into her brand and public image as a tactic to highlight the tenants of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement—a movement emerged to bring attention to continued systemic racism. This tactic is indicative of a larger cultural shift in the system of American black celebrity in the post Obama era. This research furthers an understanding of how black celebrity and the public sphere converge.

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This project is dedicated to my mother, who sacrificed everything for me to be able to pursue my education, has encouraged me to follow my passions and to fight for what I believe in. I dedicate this thesis to my two sons who have granted me patience and grace during the countless hours I have worked on this project. To the love of my life, Dominique Archibald who supports me in everything I do. To my family and friends who have always been there to tell me “you got this” every time I doubted myself. And most of all, I dedicate this to all the black and brown people in this country who strive and flourish in a country that has never given them the freedom, love, and opportunities they deserve.

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INTRODUCTION

Research Overview & Objective

In 1968, James Baldwin published an essay on Sidney Poitier that discusses the burden of black celebrity. In it, Baldwin writes “it’s only the black artist in this country who have been called upon to fulfill their responsibilities as artists and at the same time insist on their responsibilities as citizens” (Baldwin, 1968). The responsibilities that Baldwin is alluding to is the responsibility that black celebrities have to represent on behalf of the black community. He goes on to say,

The isolation that menaces all American artists is multiplied a thousand times and becomes absolutely crucial and dangerous for black artists. ‘Know whence you came,’ Sidney once said to me, and Sidney, his detractors to the contrary *does* know whence he came. But it can become very difficult to remain in touch with all that nourishes you when you have arrived at Sidney’s eminence and are in the interesting, delicate, and terrifying position of being part of a system that you know you have to change. (p. 54)

Baldwin is discussing the “terrifying” burden of black celebrities to represent the black community and be agents of change in the racist systems they are part of. When black people become famous and have mainstream success, there is an expectation from some black people that they will accurately represent and discuss the struggles of being black in America. Baldwin comments on this stating, “The reaction of that audience to Sidney and to that play says a great deal about black people in this country, who find nowhere any faint reflection of the lives they actually lead. It is for this reason that every Negro celebrity is regarded with some distrust by black people, who have every reason in the world to feel themselves abandoned” (p. 56). Poitier

found himself in a position where he was loved by white America not only because of his extraordinary talent, but the way he managed to embody the idea of a classy, educated, affluent, well behaved black man. And as much as black Americans in the 60s loved to see a person who looked like them on screen, his roles didn't represent the reality of the struggles black Americans were facing. Struggles like police brutality, segregation, poverty and unemployment—the types of struggles activists in the Black Panther Party were fighting for during the same era. This is where the distrust Baldwin discussed comes in, black celebrities are not only expected to be present on screen, they also need to represent for the black community. When they do not, this leads to a feeling of abandonment by those who come from their same communities and are supposed to understand their struggles.

Fifty years have passed since Baldwin wrote this piece, however the expectation that black celebrities like Poitier faced has remained as celebrity culture has only grown in American society. In the conclusion to his essay, Baldwin comments on why it is difficult for black celebrities to get in a place of changing things: “it takes a long time in this business, if you survive in it at all, to reach the eminence that will give you the power to change things. Sidney has that power now, to the limited extent that anyone in this business has. It will be very interesting to see what he does with it” (p. 58). This thesis will analyze how black celebrities of this era are leveraging their eminence to try and change racist systems. Furthermore, this thesis will address a key piece of Baldwin's statement, “the limited extent.” Though major black celebrities have power to change things, certain limits do exist like access to mainstream audiences, how to become a major star when black and industry codes of conduct. Despite these limits, some celebrities manage to work around the limits to challenge issues facing black communities. I will analyze current celebrity culture, black celebrity limitations and issues facing

the black community in order to understand how black celebrities are using their status as part of social advocacy efforts.

There is a long legacy of black celebrities being tools for black social movements that began even before Poitier and that extend to the present day. In order to understand this legacy of black celebrity's responsibilities, it is necessary to understand the concept of celebrity and how it has emerged in American culture. The concept of celebrity has been studied for decades and research indicates that celebrities do yield the cultural power to influence attitudes. However, there is a difference between celebrities in general and black celebrities; the main difference I wish to address is the expectation black celebrities have to discuss racism. Without black celebrities bringing the issue of systemic racism to the public sphere, the ability to change the systems is at risk. I outline the theoretical and historical frameworks that define celebrity, what is necessary in society for celebrity to exist, how the public sphere enables celebrity and describe the race driven political moment that this era's celebrities function in. Finally, to exemplify how black celebrities are expected to use their platform and work around the limits black celebrities' face, I perform a discourse analysis of Beyoncé's 2016 halftime performance.

Beyoncé's performance was polarizing due to her deploying images of an all-female set of dancers who wore black panther-esque outfits, afros, and black berets as she sang pro-black lyrics. Her display resulted in a considerable amount of media attention, dissent from conservatives, support from left-leaning people, and her celebrity image was then linked to the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) Movement. This moment was a major shift from Beyoncé's brand which had previously focused on content surrounding love, relationships, fun and female empowerment. What made this moment even more historical is took place on arguably the largest pop culture stage in American society— the Super Bowl halftime show. Her performance

injected an important counter narrative about law enforcement into the public discourse. This narrative, generated and distributed collectively by the #BLM Movement, identified critical issues around policing, race, and violence in the US.

I contextualize this performance in what I call the “post” post-racial era because there is growing discourse that the dream of post-racial America was never truly achieved. The post-racial American dream is what the media postulated as America finally moved past racial discrimination positioning all races as having truly equal opportunities. In the time that America was supposed to have reached post-racialism, discussions in the media on the effects of racism slowed down significantly to a point where it appeared racism was no longer an issue. However, in this thesis I will outline how issues related race have rematerializing in cultural and political conversations challenging the idea of post-racial America (Landsberg, 2018, p. 199).

Furthermore, I argue that in this post post-racial moment black celebrities are pressured to publicly discuss issues related to racism and police brutality and work as an ambassador/liason by bringing attention to issues related to racism and #BlackLivesMatter from alternative public spheres into the mainstream public sphere. This moral pressure stems from being viewed as authentic and true to the black community and not forgetting the continued struggles of people of color. The objective of this research is to illustrate how black celebrities in the post post-racial moment are integrating activism into their brand to promote black liberation movements.

Furthermore, this thesis aims to explain how the expectation black celebrities have always faced is manifesting in this moment where race is reemerging as a hot button topic. Finally, this thesis seeks to understand the implications of black celebrities generating political discourse.

METHODOLOGY

I analyze the news media attention that Beyoncé's controversial 2016 Super Bowl halftime performance garnered through discourse analysis. Critical discourse analysis is used to apply a close reading of public expressions that involves multiple resources of evidence for the purpose of dissecting its structures and devising its meanings (Waring, 2017, p. 9). Language, expression, imagery and tone are considered as systems of ideas and practices that frame the possibilities for understanding social, economic, and political relations between dominant and dominated classes (Waring, 2017, p. 197). By drawing evidence from this event's initial staging, professional news sources reporting on this event, social media reacting to both this event, and its framing by professional news sources. By placing them in a discourse with critical media and critical race theory scholarship, I frame Beyoncé as a celebrity. Furthermore, I frame her as a specific discursive agent that can systemically inject issues into the public sphere. Drawing from Carbo et. al's (2016) method of discourse analysis, I seek to answer; what the function of Beyoncé's performance was, what meanings are constructed from the responses, how the responses construct identities, how power is being produced/negotiated, what the responses say about social historic understandings, and identify similar patterns in discourse and the relationships between the discourses. As a method, critical discourse analysis allows me to go beyond identifying and describing the halftime performance to understand how her display, and the response engaged in the process of creating meanings. As Jackson & Welles (2015b) detail, meaning making around tense social moments is particularly important because of the power of language to create, legitimize, and/or undermine certain interpretations of the world (p. 7).

For this analysis my evidence comes from popular professional online news sources such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *The Associated Press*, *CNN*, *Fox News*, *Breitbart*, *Newsmaxx* and *CBS News*. I've chosen this group because they are a convenient sample of center, left-leaning and right-leaning news sources based on Adfontes Media's Media Bias Chart created in August of 2018 (Ad Fontes Media, 2018). Additionally, I pull evidence from *The Root*, *Atlanta Black Star*, *Ebony* and *Essence* because they center the voice and experiences of African Americans according to Cision PR Newswire's "11 News Sites We Love For Trail Blazing Coverage of Black Culture and Communities" list (Howard, 2018). *The Root*, *Atlanta Black Star*, *Ebony* and *Essence* will serve as a representative of black voices and opinions throughout the case study due to the fact that a majority of their writers are people of color and they speak on issues by relying on black culture and history.

I collected 102 news articles from the sources above by going on each website and using the search terms "Beyoncé" "SuperBowl" and/or "halftime." To remain within the particular context of post post-racial, colorblindness and the political climate, this limited the evidence to articles written in the year 2016. The same search terms and criteria were used when pulling tweets from Twitter. I also want to note that several of the news articles analyzed integrated tweets to highlight public opinion and sentiments.

THEORETICAL & LITERATURE REVIEW

The System of Celebrity Explained & Defined

When studying celebrity, the first questions that come to mind are what is a celebrity and how has celebrity culture become a modern-day phenomenon? The field of celebrity studies is relatively new in academia. Richard Dyer broke ground in 1979 when he wrote *Stars* which has worked as foundation for celebrity studies. The academic journal *Celebrity Studies* didn't emerge until 2004. However, the interest in public individuals in society can be linked as far back as the 18th century (Morgan, 2010). Celebrity has been defined by many such as Richard Dyer, P. David Marshall, Francesco Alberoni, etc. For Graeme Turner (2004), "celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand" (p. 10). The most crucial piece of Turner's definition is understanding that celebrity is "a commodity". When one thinks of a celebrity, they may imagine a specific person such as Kim Kardashian, LeBron James, or whoever. What makes a person a celebrity is a system of publicity that attempts to commodify their public image and promotes that image. In essence, celebrity is a product of media industries. Commodifying an individual is challenging because it involves packaging an image as something that is exchangeable. What creates the challenge is that people change and their images are not always commensurate and can never just be one thing.

In the United States, commodification is key to the celebrity process because it closely relates to a particular public, capitalist culture in American society that is hegemonic. Indeed,

processes of celebrity can differ from culture to culture. However, this is a particularly modern process that can only be pervasive in post-agrarian, large-scale societies. Dyer (1979) begins the first chapter of *Stars* by citing two other researchers, Italian sociologist Francesco Alberoni and English media sociologist Barry King, who both suggest certain social structures are necessary in order for the phenomenon of celebrity to develop (p. 7). Alberoni's conditions are:

1. A state of law
2. An efficient bureaucracy
3. A structured social system
4. A large-scale society (stars cannot know everyone, but everyone can know stars)
5. Economic development above subsistence
6. Social mobility (anyone, in principle, can become a star)

Kings conditions, similar to that of Alberoni's are:

1. Production surplus
2. Development of a technology of mass communication
3. Extensive penetration of the cultural sphere by industrialization which leads to a separation between a system of action committed to instrumental goals (utilitarian and predominant) and a system of action committed to expressive goals (moralistic and subordinate)
4. Rigid separation of work and leisure: division of structure between expressive and instrumental roles
5. Decline of local structures and the development of mass level of culture, transformation from specific to universalistic modes of evaluation

6. Organization of the motion picture industry around commodity production and the progressive centralization of control over production
7. A relative increase of social mobility into expressive role positions unconnected with sacred institutions (which in feudal society constituted centers of power)

According to Dyer, “the advantages of King’s terms is that they allow one to see the political or ideological significance of expressive roles as well as of instrumental ones. Alberoni’s terminology on the other hand does remind us that expressive roles, as suggested above, are not believed to be politically significant” (p. 8). For me, both the conditions by King and Alberoni are pillars of mass, modern society so that a public image can become commodified and produced on a mass scale. In the case of liberal capitalist societies this means those processes of consumerism and commodification are part and parcel of creating a public image.

Dyer’s work on stardom is foundational to celebrity studies however, it mainly focuses on film stars of the Hollywood studios. Even with the cinematic focus, though, his work on film stars embodies many of the elements of modern-day celebrity. When discussing the way our understanding of stardom lends itself to defining modern day celebrity, P. David Marshall (1997) states,

By far the most developed work on the concept of celebrity appears in the extensive writings on films, particularly Hollywood. Here the name celebrity is rarely used. Star is the usual identification of some persona that has transcended the films that he or she has performed in and created an aura. There are three levels of study of film stars that can help further our reading of the modern day celebrity: first, the film star has been analyzed as the economic heart of the culture industry; second, the film star, in conjunction with the film experience and generally from within the text, has been studied as a form of

spectatorial pleasure and identification; and third, in a way most connected to the meaning of celebrity, the film star has been studied as a sociological phenomenon that exists the film roles and plays an active symbolic role in the lives of audience. (p. 120)

Research on stardom focused on film stars because cinema and Hollywood studios were a primary mode of investing and creating stars because film was viewed as the economic heart of culture. In the field of celebrity studies, star and celebrity are often used interchangeably, however they are distinctly different. A star is a type of celebrity but a celebrity is not always a star. Stars are a product of Hollywood studios. In *Stars*, Dyer describes a star as images in media texts that are products of Hollywood (p. 10). Film stars were utilized by Hollywood as capital. Star's names were used to sell films and were used as a loss against investment. Dyer even describes the system as monopolistic as the studios "owned" the stars talent (p. 10). By creating and promoting a star's image, the studios were trying to assure they could attract film audiences and guarantee against financial loss (p. 11).

However, today, celebrities are more than just film actors and actresses, also including athletes, musicians, bloggers, Instagram celebrities, YouTube stars, etc. A celebrity can emerge from generally any field or arena and is not exclusive to Hollywood. And in this specific era there are different modes of production that can create a celebrity while a star was a product of Hollywood studios. Celebrities are not limited to being products of Hollywood but are created by different media sources, branding, and image creation by their personal team. Celebrity has some similar rules to stardom— both are about the creation of an image— but they differ in whose responsibility it is to create that image and how that image maintained. When Dyer's work on stars and stardom emerged, stars were agents of the Hollywood studios and much of their image and publicness were handled by the studios. Celebrities do still have representatives who handle

their image, however, it is up to the celebrity to hire their own team and curate their own image using the tools available to them (media, social media platforms, podcast, sponsorships etc.). The modern-day star or celebrity is no longer the sole creation of Hollywood studios bound by long-term contracts. Instead, Hollywood today opts for maximum flexibility, shedding long-term contractual obligations and emphasizing the work of individuals to develop their own brand. Indeed, modern celebrities now use social media tools to promote their individual ventures and brands that sometimes engage the demands of a studios, sometimes not. With that being said, celebrities of the 21st century have their own characteristics and definition. According to Larry Z. Leslie (2011), these definitions are (p. 17):

1. leads a public life; is involved in work or activity in some area of the public sphere
2. has accomplishments of interest and importance to the general public
3. is well known or famous, usually because of those accomplishments
4. seeks to become a celebrity by finding ways to be regularly seen and heard, thus maintaining status as a well-known, famous individual
5. is highly visible on or in media
6. connects with the public on a subconscious level, embodying its dreams and desires.

With these characteristics, Leslie is addressing celebrity not tied to stardom. I want to work with these characteristics in conjunction with Dyer's foundational conditions and definitions of a star. Dyer's work focused attention on the ideological and political function of stardom as a phenomenon, foregrounding how stars articulate highly visible discourses on individuality and personhood within a capitalist society (Holmes & Redmon, 2010, p. 5). Celebrities, like stars, are

highly visible, center around discourses of individuality and thrive because of our capitalistic society. Drawing from Dyer's notions on visibility in general, I will use them as background for what types of celebrity have emerged to understand the way celebrity works in the present day.

Though capitalism and modes of production have changed, what has stayed the same is that celebrities are publicized individuals who are promoted through media. Through their publicity and promotion their personhood and labor are sold as a commodity. According to Dyer (1986), celebrities are "both labor and the thing that labor produces" (Dyer, 1986, p. 5). Dyer asserts that images have to be made and that stars are produced by media industries (p. 4). The present-day celebrity image is made via public appearances and through social media, and a carefully-curated focus on "brand." The reason for the creation of this star's image is to use the celebrity's brand in order to sell products, advertising and sponsorship opportunities. Celebrities labor on the content they create such as the films, shows, albums, etc. and simultaneously portraying their image publicly is part of the labor of being a celebrity. It is essential to the concept of celebrity that their labor occurs publicly.

It is integral to celebrity that this publicity engages the public sphere. Dyer (1986) argues that,

The star phenomenon cannot help being also about the person in public. Stars, after all, are always inescapably people in public. If the magic, with many stars, is that they seem to be their private selves in public, still they can also be about the business of being in public, the way in which the public self is endlessly produced and remade in presentation.

((p. 12)

Celebrities, like stars, are produced and produce their labor publicly. Celebrities' "private" lives are captured by paparazzi, the press, and increasingly by the celebrities themselves who curate

content for social media. Leslie's (2011) first two characteristics about a 20th century celebrity are both related to the need of the publicness; "leads a public life, is involved in work or activity in some area of the public sphere & has accomplishments of interest and importance to the general public" (p. 17). A celebrity image is the public construction of a performer, made up of the diverse representations of that individual (Ellcessor, 2012, p. 48).

The audience's interest in the celebrity is generated by the celebrity's public labor of making themselves a spectacle. People pay money to see the celebrity's form of entertainment whether it be a music concert, a film, and television show or football game. Additionally, people pay celebrities attention, even when they are not formally creating content. The celebrity's labor occurs outside the content they create because audiences pay attention to celebrity's "private" lives as well. This is evident in the popularity and prevalence of gossip magazine and websites like *OK! Magazine*, *Star*, *In Touch*, *Perez Hilton* and *TMZ* that focus on reporting celebrity whereabouts constantly. The attention that celebrities attract can raise their popularity level and net-worth because the more they are discussed in popular culture raises their perceived importance. This goes back to items four and five in Leslie's definition of celebrity- being regularly seen and highly visible in the media. A celebrity's ability to attract attention increases their point-of-sale. This has been exemplified in the way celebrities gain endorsements from major corporations to advertise products. The price to endorse products increases with the popularity of a celebrity. This is because if they are popular, that means they have a large audience that products can be advertised. In the digital age this can be seen in the way celebrities advertise products on their Instagram pages. The more followers a celebrity has, the more they can be paid to share a product with their audience. Attention and being seen are primary components of modern-day celebrity because attention can quantify into revenue. In the digital

age, it is more-so important because of the ease of sharing celebrity photos and whereabouts with audiences round the clock.

The attention celebrities garner makes them attractive to companies and corporations because they can be used to advertise products. Advertising is key to success for film, music, television, and virtually every single type of media. The more buzz and interest that surrounds celebrities, the greater an audience that is created, which generates a bigger audience to whom products may be marketed. This gives off the impression that celebrities are the product but in reality, the audiences that they bring (i.e. you and me) are the real product to corporations. Dyer (1979) speaks about this when he says to think of “Hollywood production as a capitalist’s production like any other, and in this perspective, stars are to be seen in terms of their function in the economy of Hollywood, including, crucially, their role in the manipulation of Hollywood’s market, the audience” (*Stars* p. 10). While Dyer is speaking specifically about Hollywood in the excerpt, this can be applied to the economy and capitalism more broadly. In order to gain more attention and get audiences and fan-bases, celebrities publicize themselves.

By using paparazzi, the press, and social media to publicize themselves, celebrities open themselves up to become public sites where issues are engaged. For example, recently, Caitlyn Jenner (formerly known as Olympian Bruce Jenner) became a site of discussion about what being transgender is and the transitioning process. The public discourse was not just about Caitlyn Jenner specifically and her transition, but things like what bathrooms trans folks be should “allowed” to use and at what age is it appropriate to introduce topics of gender and sexuality to children. Furthermore, Caitlyn was invested in curating an image of herself as a transgender woman transitioning and mediated the process by being featured on the television show *Keeping up with the Kardashians* and participating in public interviews. Caitlyn’s private

life became a publicized topic for all the world to discuss on what society deems as “normal” and “appropriate”.

While celebrities can exist as a site of discourse, their existence is not necessarily a radical challenge. In many cases, celebrity images help maintains dominant ideologies such as the idea of the American Dream and the notion that we are all individuals. According to Turner, Hollywood stars provide a convergence of consumer culture with democratic aspirations through the celebration of their American Dream lifestyles and the media’s elaboration of their success. The American Dream says that if we work hard we can all succeed. Many stars are built around the notion of going from a “normal” American (or sometimes poor American) who through hard work and dedication, have reached a level of success that all of America can look up to. Dyer’s (1986) discusses this as well stating,

Capitalism justifies itself on the basis of the freedom (separateness) of anyone to make money, sell their labor how they will, to be able to express opinions and get them heard (regardless of wealth or social position). The openness of society is assumed by the way that we are addressed as individual— as consumers (each freely choosing to buy, or watch, what we want), as legal subjects (free and responsible from the law), as political subjects (able to make up our mind who is to run society). Thus, even while the notion of the individual is assailed on all sides, it is a necessary fiction for the reproduction of the kind of society we live in. (p.8).

Celebrity often thrives on the concept of a meritorious version of capitalism where a person’s hard work and ability justifies their position in society. By portraying hard work this influences regular members of society to keep working hard for the corporations and institutions they work for in the hopes that one day their hard work will pay off like it did for a celebrity. In this

fictional version of society, all people start at the same place in life, will encounter the same opportunities, and have the ability of social mobility. In this conception issues such as racial discrimination, corruption and systematic marginalization do not hinder one's abilities. Indeed, celebrity often acts as an endorsement for a view of society where examples of hard work, commodification, consumerism and self-expression are celebrated as the keys to success.

Another dominant ideology celebrities appeal to is America's investment in individualism, which is also tied to capitalism and democracy. Individualism is tied to capitalism because being an individual means you are an empowered consumer. According to Turner (2004),

Most accounts of the history of celebrity relate it to, among other things, the pairing of the growth of individualism with the rise of democracy. As a result, it is suggested, celebrity operates 'at the very center of the culture as it resonates with conceptions of individuality that are the ideological ground of Western culture' (Marshall, 1997: x).

Marshall describes celebrity as one of the fundamental mechanisms for constructing and maintaining the discursive linkages between consumer capitalism, democracy and individualism. If Marshall is right, then celebrity has a crucial ideological function.

Turner's interpretation of Marshall suggests that the promotion of the celebrity as an individual supports the ideologies of democracy and capitalism. By their own merit, achievements and labor they can live whatever life they want. By promoting the idea of individualism, celebrities uphold the ideology that we are all empowered voters, consumers and members of society who start at equal playing fields with social mobility, as opposed to the reality that systems actually have more to do with a person's societal position. While celebrities inevitably help construct dominant ideologies, and many reinforce those ideologies, celebrities can also challenge

dominant ideology and thus, gather the power to do more than just sell products by using their influence to shift culture politically.

P. David Marshall (1997) discusses this type of power in *Celebrity & Power*. Building on Dyer's theory on what conditions are needed to create a celebrity, Marshall suggests that instead of looking at celebrity as a thing someone *is*, it should be understood as a system. Marshall states that, "the concept of celebrity is best defined as a system for valorizing meaning and communication. As a system, the condition of celebrity status is convertible to a wide variety of domains within contemporary culture. Thus, the power of celebrity status appears in business, politics, the arts and artistic communities and operates as a way of providing distinctions and definitions of success within those domains" (p. x). To valorize something is to assign value or merit to it. By becoming a celebrity, the communicating and content that they provide has higher monetary and cultural value in society. Because they are more valuable, they are the picture of success within their domain. For example, many people sing and are singers, but Michael Jackson defines a distinction of success within popular music because he is seen as someone who did it the best. They are valorized for their talent and become well known within their respective fields, being well known and valuable is part of reaching the status of celebrity.

Considering that celebrities are valorized, Marshall goes on to suggest that they have a certain discursive power. He states, "The celebrity is a voice above others, a voice that is channeled into media systems as being legitimately significant" (Marshall, p. x). What first makes celebrities meaningful is the fact that celebrities are *above* others. What makes their voices above others is the ability to be more public and the ability to generate more publicity through media than an average person. By being mediated to many people, celebrities have a large audience and influence on that audience. Marshall even compares celebrities to politicians

because they have constituents, followers and people that listen to them. He says that in politics, a leader must somehow embody the sentiments of the party, the people, and the state and likewise in the world of entertainment celebrities must embody the sentiments of the audience (p. 203). Furthermore, with this position as a leader, celebrities create and perpetuate meaning in society. According to Marshall (1997), “entertainment celebrities, like political leaders, work to establish a form of cultural hegemony. The meanings of masculinity and femininity, the meaning of family, and the definition of common cultural identity are the various territorial domains upon which popular cultural celebrities navigate in their formation of public personas” (p. 214). Giving meaning to life and culture, celebrities have the power to influence the masses.

Though they do possess some discursive power, celebrities also face limitations. These limitations come in the form of having to comply with industry norms, not being taken seriously and for some being part of marginalized groups. Depending upon the industries they are in, celebrities sometimes must maintain certain brand images that adhere to the norms of their industry. For example, football players work for the NFL therefore they must follow certain protocol of the NFL and cannot go against their contracts. Another example is child stars who work for networks such as Disney or Nickelodeon. When getting older, they sometimes struggle with establishing maturity and sexuality because their image rests on the childlike innocence of the networks they are employed by. Throughout history, there have been many celebrities who have been fired for going against the image their industry wants for them such as footballer Tim Tebow who was too religious or Nickelodeon star Jamie Lynn Spears who got pregnant as a teenager.

Celebrities who try to use their discursive power to weigh in on political issues are not always taken seriously. According to Dyer (1997), a star cannot become a serious decision-

maker and still remain a star (p. 7). By serious decision maker this means a politician and someone in the political legislative realm. Celebrities are only seen as valuable when it comes to entertaining but are not valued for their opinions because they are viewed as unintelligent when it comes to serious matters. A prime example of this occurred in 2018 when basketball player, LeBron James, did an interview with ESPN in which he criticized President Donald Trump for racist behaviors and comments. A day later *Fox* journalist, Laura Ingraham said “it’s always unwise to seek political advice from someone who gets paid a hundred million dollars a year to bounce a ball...you’re great players but no one voted for you. The people elected Trump to be there coach. So keep the political commentary to yourself. Or as someone once said, shut up and dribble” (Sullivan, 2018). Ingraham’s statement that it is unwise to take political advice from a basketball player corresponds with the general attitude many Americans have of celebrities being political. The way Marshall (1997) put it, “the forms of mass culture and mass entertainment are positioned at the low end of the hierarchy of taste and value. Individuals who emerge from these domains, then, are tainted with the construction that they are unsophisticated individuals whose appeal is to base and underdeveloped tastes” (p. 225). Celebrities are often seen as unsophisticated and lacking the intelligence to meaningfully contribute to political discourses. This limits their power. There have been several celebrities such as Ronald Reagan, Arnold Schwarzenegger and Donald Trump who have successfully crossed over from celebrity to politician. However, even in these cases part of their campaign was an uphill battle to legitimize themselves as a political candidate in order to be taken seriously as a decision-maker. Additionally, most celebrities who have been able to make that transition from popular culture into politics have been white and male. This is symptomatic of white male privilege which affords white men the ability to be taken seriously.

Finally, Ingraham's statements about LeBron James draws attention to a larger issue of race. Much of the interview that took place with James discussed the racism that Donald Trump exhibited during his time in office in addition to the challenges James faces being a black male in America. Her statement that he should "shut up and dribble" is symptomatic of the larger problem of silencing black celebrities when they speak out on race. Celebrities who are minorities are not exempt from being victims of racism and discrimination. However, when they do discuss these topics, they are told they should not. In her rant Ingraham made sure to state that James only graduated high school with a GED, introduced this segment by saying "dumb jock alert," and even said that he used improper grammar. All these statements work as a means to discredit him and his ability to comment politically. Black celebrities are only encouraged to publicly showcase their talents for entertainment not to have public discourse on issues of importance that challenge dominant ideologies. To Marshall (1997), celebrities are in an exalted position of a public personality resulting from their ability to win over audiences, not due to serious skills or intelligence (p. 225).

Another important point Ingraham draws attention to is how confusing celebrity power is. She stated, "Unfortunately a lot of kids and some adults take these ignorant comments seriously" (Sullivan, 2018). On the one hand celebrities are perceived as unintelligent but on the other hand, they have the power to influence the public because there are fans who do take their comments seriously. When you're on the level of LeBron James you have a huge fan base to share your views with. So how can someone be valorized and have high influence when it comes to popular culture but still seen as unsophisticated? This leaves celebrities in a position of having agency and audience but also not taken seriously enough in the public sphere to interrogate matters that affect society in a meaningful way. A celebrity can do an interview discussing how racist a

president is, but they cannot go to congress and file for them to be impeached. Celebrities cannot be both celebrities and serious-decision makers/politicians. So, in order to influence audiences and shift culture, celebrities must use symbolic power.

Throughout *Celebrity & Power* Marshall hints at celebrity's symbolic power but does not go in depth on how this type of power works for celebrity's ability to influence the masses. Pierre Bourdieu developed the theory of symbolic power stating that it is a power to make people see and believe certain visions of the world rather than others, essentially the power to construct reality. Symbolic power is the power to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others, and indeed create events by means of the production and transmission of the symbolic forms (Couldry, 2016, p. 99). By celebrities using symbolism that is constantly broadcast through media, they are using soft power to create construct a reality. According to Bourdieu "symbolic power plays a deep definitional role in social life... 'One thing leads to another, and, ultimately television, which claims to record reality, creates it instead' (Couldry, 2016, p. 101). So, though a celebrity is not taken seriously as a political figure, they can use symbolic power in order to influence their audiences and create meanings. The messages they deploy in their music, interviews, shows, films and social media content not only display reality but work to influence the masses to construct reality. Previous research already agrees that celebrities influence audiences for consumerism. But I want to take it a step further and say they not only influence audiences for consumerism purposes, but they also can shift culture by influencing public discourse for political purposes.

Though celebrities are often thought not to argue about societal issues in the public sphere, and the celebrity system often actively discourages them to do so, I argue that black celebrities engage such discourse anyway because black people have so little representation in

the political sphere. There are limits to black celebrity's use of political power and it must be deployed carefully in order to be effective. This tension of real agency and symbolic power is the foundation of my argument about how black celebrities use their voice. In the next section, I will outline what differentiates black celebrities from white celebrities and why their use of their voice - accepted or not- is necessary. To do so, I will use Marshall's definition of celebrity as the framework in understanding how celebrity works in the public sphere and how it relates to my argument. The key pieces of his argument I use are the "voice above others" and the channeling of this voice into media systems. The sentiment of one single voice being above others is key because a voice being above others enables that voice to speak for those who are below them.

Black Celebrity and the Burden of Representing

Much research dedicated to black individuals in media primarily focuses on lack of representation and quality of representation (hooks, 1992; Cripps, 1983; Gray, 1997; Smith-Shomade, 2007). Whether that representation takes place on screen or behind the scenes. This is because blacks are represented less in the media and when they are, their representations are highly stereotypical (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008; Chavez & Stroo, 2014). As necessary and valuable as research on representation is, there has been little to no research solely dedicated to black celebrity as a system. The system of black celebrity needs attention because black celebrities are under pressure to portray black life, represent for the black community, use symbolic power to construct and deconstruct meanings of blackness, and work with different rules than non-black celebrities. In his essay on Poitier, Baldwin (1968) highlights this by stating, "By use of his own person, he must smuggle a reality that he knows is not in the script. A celebrated black TV actor once told me that he did an entire show for the sake of *one line*. He felt that he could convey

something very important with that *one line*” (p. 56). The entertainment industry is still largely controlled by white America (Hunt; Ryan; Sun) and used to uphold ideologies that maintain white supremacy (hooks, 117). However, the increase of black representation in entertainment is slowly starting to introduce topics that can disrupt hegemonic discourses (Chavez & Stroo, 2015, p. 66). In order to create this disruption, though, blacks must be present, which is what Baldwin is saying when he emphasizes a black celebrity feeling like even being present even for just one line is significant. bell hooks (1992) cites Pratibha Parmar (1978) who stated “images play a crucial role in defining and controlling the political and social power to which individuals and marginalized groups have access. The deeply ideological nature of imagery determines not only how other people think about us but how we think about ourselves” (p. 5). By being in the media black celebrities have access to spaces that blacks historically have not been present in. Additionally, as a black celebrity’s fame grows their access to mainstream spaces increases. When black celebrities cross-over into this level, they now have more agency and opportunity to represent.

In order to maintain the notion that upward mobility is possible, preserve the American Dream, and protect the ideology of democracy where all are equal and the philosophy of capitalism, the system of celebrity must give the illusion that race does not matter in the public sphere. According to Marquita Gammage (2017), “black entertainers are forced to shed their cultural identities in order to achieve and maintain mainstream/pop culture success...[T]his means that Black popular artists... must be race-neutral, that is, non-Black and nonthreatening to the White American culture, if they are to achieve and maintain pop status” (p. 725). Baldwin (1968) also describes this dilemma in his essay:

There is a difficulty, there's a rub and it's precisely the nature of this difficulty that has brought Sidney under attack. The industry is compelled, given the way it is built, to present to the American people a self-perpetuating fantasy of American life. It considers that its job is to entertain American people. Their concept of entertainment is difficult to distinguish from the use of narcotics, and to watch the TV screen for any length of time is to learn some really frightening things about the American sense of reality. *And the black face truthfully reflected, is not only not part of this dream, it is antithetical to it.* And this puts the black performer in a rather grim bind. He knows on the one hand, that if the reality of a black man's life were on screen it would destroy the fantasy totally. And on the other hand, he really has no right *not* to appear, not only because he must work but for those people who need to see him. (p. 56)

Baldwin is discussing another level of complexity that all minority (especially black) celebrities face: needing to play into the fantasy of the American Dream in order to work but also needing to be true to their community. If black celebrities want to reach the highest levels of fame they should not discuss race, their culture, or issues related to race in order to appeal to the dominant white audience. So even though black celebrities have the same privileges as white celebrities—being valorized, a voice above others, high media visibility, etc. — they do not have the privilege of using this power fully. This shedding of cultural identity is problematic because black celebrities and their voices are crucial to the black community.

The system of black celebrity holds plays out differently than that of non-black celebrity because pop-culture and entertainment (including sports as a form of entertainment) are primary avenue through which blacks can enter into the public sphere and be seen as valuable in society (Torres & Charles, 2004, pp. 22-23). Athlete Charles Barkley commented on this in an article in

Ebony Magazine stating, “It’s not that I don’t believe there is a certain personal responsibility that comes with being a professional athlete or entertainer. I understand that. The problem we have as black people is that the only role models we see in the media are entertainers and jocks” (Barkley, 2007, p. 164). This heightens the responsibility of black celebrities because of the lack of representation of blacks in other realms such as politics. Currently, only 9.4% of Congress is black (Manning, 2018, p. 7). Therefore, the power and responsibility of black celebrities is that much greater when it comes to using their influence in order to make political statements on black life.

Certain types of politics such as women’s rights, health, and homelessness are acceptable for celebrities to discuss because they affect all races. Discussing racism, systematic oppression, and white supremacy is unacceptable because these issues primarily oppress people of color and acknowledgement of these issues draws attention to white people’s role in maintaining systems that oppress black people. Naomi Murakawa states that the problem of the twenty-first century is the refusal to acknowledge the causes and consequences of enduring racial stratification (Taylor, 2016, pp. Kindle Locations 1090-1093). Black celebrities must assimilate and put their racial issues to the side in most cases if they want to be accepted as cross-over celebrities. The only times black celebrities are allowed to showcase their race is when they are doing a performance/film/show that is already related to their blackness. For example, in *Black Looks*, bell hooks (1987) discusses the fact that audiences only knew Lena Horne was black when the film was specifically coded as being about blacks (p. 119). In films and television shows, unless it is explicitly about blackness, race is glossed over, made comical or used for a one-off piece about racism that doesn’t actually delve into the systemic issues of racism in the nation. Systemic or institutional racism is defined by Keeanga Yamahatta-Taylor (2016) as “the policies,

programs, and practices of public and private institutions that result in greater rates of poverty, dispossession, criminalization, illness, and ultimately mortality of African Americans” (Kindle Locations 256-258). With no real discussions about systematic racism occurring in the mainstream content black celebrities are featured in, this leaves the labor on black celebrities to open up discussions on these topics.

According to Sarah J. Jackson (2014), “Black celebrities—with their bodies, personas, and expressive forms—have unique potential to challenge dominant definitions of race and nation even as they are limited by them” (p. 3). Black celebrities have the audience and ability to speak out about racialized issues but due to their race, they are still limited and not encouraged to speak about race. This places black celebrities in a conflicting position where they have limited power but are also bound by those in power. Black celebrities have been and continue to be subject to a unique set of political criteria for mainstream acceptance that expects them to always perform according to sanctioned scripts while sidelining their identities as members of a still oppressed group (Jackson S. , 2014, pp. 168-169). What Jackson is alluding to is W.E.B. DuBois’s notion of double consciousness. Double consciousness is a psychological term that describes blacks feeling like they are in conflict of having two identities they are trying to reconcile, the self and the self that white America sees (Du Bois, 1905). The way Kevin Quashie (2012) explains it, “double consciousness describes the experience of having two conflicting identities. In Du Bois formulation, this split identity is the definitive impact that oppression has on the black subject who sees himself through the revelations of the dominant world... a black subject whose being is conscripted not only by race but also by racist discourse. In short, double consciousness conceptualizes black subjectivity as conflict with whiteness” (p. 12). Relating Quashie’s statement back to Baldwin, black celebrities have two conflicting identities, the one

that feeds into the fantasy of American life and the one that speaks to the reality of the black person's life. Though celebrity is centered around the idea of individualism, many black celebrities must water down their blackness. The black body inherently is a representation of years of systemic racism. If black celebrities openly discuss issues faced by blacks, they will shatter the ideologies of democracy, social mobility, and in America being equal.

The black celebrity is in conflict with whiteness because black celebrities are either strengthening white supremacy or working against it. Quashie's (2012) description says the black identity is in a sense of "strife, of being in an unending struggle with racism. In this regard, the options are few— accept the racist characterization and become all the inferiority it imagines you to be or resist it fiercely" (p. 14). This doubling is felt especially by celebrities who must make this decision publicly and are held to a sense of responsibility to choose to resist racism fiercely. Black celebrities are in conflict with the idea of individualism because they must present a white washed version of themselves in order to be accepted in the mainstream. Black celebrities are in a struggle of trying to be authentic, while simultaneously combatting white discourses and performing according to sanctioned scripts that will not allow them to be "too black".

An example of celebrities avoiding addressing race can be seen in celebrities like Oprah and Will Smith who are black but rarely discuss their "blackness" or the racism they have experienced. This is a tactic that Ralina Joseph calls strategic ambiguity (2018). Strategic ambiguity is a practice that some privileged minority person's use by being intentionally ambiguous about race in an effort to maintain cross-over appeal, sooth fears of racial difference and "claim a seat at the table." (p. 3). On the other hand, not all black celebrities prescribe to strategic ambiguity and center their image around their culture. The only problem with this,

though, is that some cases of black celebrities using their upbringing or culture as part of their entertainment value can spectacularize blackness. For example, when hip-hop artists perform what is understood as black culture, these performances can uphold problematic tropes and ideologies such as that blacks can only be entertainers, are uneducated, live in the ghettos, do drugs and are thugs. Furthermore, in each of these cases of blacks either embodying “black culture” or assimilating to white norms, neither is allowed to publicly discuss systemic racism without facing punishment and being discredited.

According to Gammage (2017), “there exists a confined stardom for Black artists, entertainers, athletes, and celebrities. When Blacks in the popular public domain attempt to exercise their human right of freedom of speech, in particular when they embrace and support Black culture, they are ostracized and ridiculed to the point of damnation” (p. 727). For example, in 2013 Oprah, someone who uses strategic ambiguity, actually discussed an instance of her facing discrimination. In a handbag store in Switzerland a sales clerk refused to show her an item and insinuated she could not afford it. Instead of the instance resulting in a larger conversation about the way black people are stereotyped and the treatment people of color face in retail spaces every day, the instance was seemingly framed as a misunderstanding between her and the sales clerk and Oprah ended up having to apologize for the situation being “blown up” (Smith-Park & Matthews, 2013). In contrast, Serena Williams is a celebrity who has not tried to be ambiguous about her blackness throughout her career. She openly speaks about the discrimination she faces in tennis and how it relates to the larger mistreatment of black women. Due to her outspokenness, she is the victim of racial attacks, mockery, told she is too masculine, her athletic abilities are questioned, and she faces mistreatment by referees and opponents. All this is to say,

despite how race is presented on a black celebrity, there is no right way to discuss systemic racism.

This brings us to the question; how can black celebrities bring issues about systemic racism to a larger public sphere without losing their celebrity? Jackson (2014) claims,

because celebrity status is marked by instability and spectacle, the influence of celebrities on public debates is based on the attention of public gaze, not concrete institutional power...this phenomenon is more acute in the case of black celebrities who, by way of their race, are treated as even more spectacular and are further removed from access to institutional power than their white counterparts. (p. 9)

Black celebs have the potential to challenge dominant ideologies in entertainment even though they lack institutional power. However, if black celebrities do so, as Gammage notes, they have the potential to be punished. Black celebrities who speak openly of their experience as raced individuals and the negative effects that this has had on their lives face the threat of public damnation, loss of sponsorship, or loss of fame.

This potential loss is a problematic for many celebrities of color. For example, black celebrities have historically and presently been pressured to speak out against racism and be a voice for the black community. As Baldwin (1968) said of Poitier, “he really has no right *not* to appear, not only because he must work but for those people who need to see him” (p. 56). Black people depend on black celebrities to use their visibility in order to bring light to the issues of racism. They have no right *not* to. According to Dyer (1979), “many writers see the stars, in general and in specific instances, as giving expression to variously conceptualized inner wants on the part of the mass of people” (p. 18). Celebrities can express the want and desire for equality that the black community has. The way Marshall (1997) puts it, “for the subordinate cultures, the

celebrity articulates an avenue for the expression of their own notions of freedom, fantasy and needs” (p. 56). Because there is less representation of blacks in most media industries (Smith, Choueiti, Pieper), when there is a black celebrity image that can be used as a role model, the audience looks to them as a voice for all. Marshall (1997) goes on to say, “In politics, a leader must somehow embody the sentiments of the party, the people, and the state. In the realm of entertainment, a celebrity must somehow embody the sentiments of an audience” (p. 203). Black celebrities must represent for the black audience. Even though celebrities are in a different class than their black audiences, this does not change the fact that they experience power limitation and experience racism. Black folks’ engagement of and fight against racism is collective (Quashie, 2012, p. 73). Black celebrities must use their voice and space in the media to speak out because if they don’t, nobody else will. This was true for Poitier when Baldwin (1968) stated, “The interesting, delicate, and terrifying position of being part of a system that you know you have to change” (p. 54) and it is still true of black celebrities now. That is the burden of being a successful mainstream black celebrity. They must face their double consciousness publicly and bear the brunt of trying to be the voice of change. Not all black celebrities want to discuss racism or use their platform to do so, but there is still an expectation of it. When they do not meet this expectation, they face being viewed as apathetic to the black community, Even artists as major as Kanye West have had their proverbial “black card” revoked for not properly using his platform to combat racism.¹ The power of the black celebrity is so complex because they are still subject to trying to play the game while trying to change the game.

Marshall (1997) makes it clear that celebrities have power (though somewhat limited the power still exists). He argues, “In the public sphere, a cluster of individuals are given greater

¹ I’ll explain this in more detail

presence and a wider scope of activity and agency than those who make up the rest of the population” (p. ix). According to Dyer (1979), certain stars either expose contradictions or embody an alternative or oppositional ideological position to dominant ideology (p. 34). For black celebrities, it is critical that they use their power to speak out about racism, and many do. Some historical examples include Muhammad Ali, Eartha Kitt, Paul Robeson, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, Peter Norman, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Tupac, Dave Chappelle, Nina Simone, the list can go on. The reason that it is critical they use their space in the media to speak out is because mass media are ideological sites. The media creates and maintains forms of knowledge, about race and nation, which have been defined by those in power (Jackson S. , 2014, p. 2). Black celebrities are agential cultural producers who, given their public status have the opportunity to introduce unique public discourses and foster dialogic relationships with the press (Jackson S. , 2014, p. 9).

The key piece to celebrities and the discourses they create, though, is the element of publicness. Celebrities cannot exist without them being public individuals and discourses cannot be had without the public sphere. In the following section I will outline Habermas’s Public Sphere theory and how it does not include minority voices. This leads to the development of counterpublics and mega celebrities who can be members of both counterpublics and the mainstream public sphere.

There Is No Celebrity without the Public Sphere

The previous section establishes the need for publicity in order to be a celebrity, however what is publicity? This is the act of making something more visible in the public sphere. The concept of the “public sphere” is a concept developed by Jürgen Habermas (1991), outlining how

the idea of “publicness” came to be in the 18th century. Habermas argues that the public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (p. 176). The public sphere is key because having the ability to articulate the needs of society with the state is necessary for a democratic society where the people’s needs, desires, and interests are considered. The public sphere and democracy go hand in hand because ideally the public sphere gives everyone a voice. The idea that people have always been able to discuss how they feel about things and have avenues to do so is one that is taken for granted. But, there was a time when people couldn't and didn't come together to discuss matters related to society and interests. When the public sphere emerged, it was a place reserved for the wealthy and powerful feudal lords to come together, chat, and be “public”. The public sphere was an actual place that people physically came together out of their private homes to talk. Nancy Fraser (1990) defines the public sphere as, “a designated theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction” (p. 57). Historically, the public sphere involved a spatialized component that allowed people to come together physically to talk. In his work, Habermas brings up the fact that people came together to saloons, coffee houses, and restaurants to be part of these public conversations. However, the mercantilist phase of capitalism altered the public sphere because print became more accessible and powerful (Habermas, 1991, p. 20). This period complicated the spatial component of the public sphere because “public” debate also became mediated through literature, print news and the like which cannot be spatialized. For example, when a news article is published it is available to the public but it's not a specific place. Fuchs (2014) definition is, perhaps most practical: “the public sphere can be understood as an area in social life where individuals can come together

freely to discuss and identify societal problems through discussion, influence, and political action” (p.40). By using the broad language of “coming together” Fuchs does not necessarily mean physically —though it can. The public sphere can be a forum, a newspaper, or in the digital age it can exist online.

The biggest criticism of the public sphere is that it is highly idealized and utopian. According to Fraser (1990), Habermas not only “idealizes the liberal public sphere” but also “fails to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres” and it is “because he fails to examine these other public spheres that he ends up idealizing the liberal public sphere” (60-61). Habermas acknowledges the fact that the public sphere was “based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of property owners and the role of human beings pure and simple” (p. 56). What is key is that so many members of society DIDN’T own property and therefore could not participate in the public sphere. Women and minorities were not able to own property in the 18th century, therefore they did not meet the criteria to be members of the public sphere. Habermas even states, “Women and dependents were factually and legally excluded from the political public sphere” (Habermas, 1991, p. 56). Though he mentions this fact, his work continues to discuss the public sphere as if it was inclusive. Additionally, due to Habermas’s focus being on 18th century Germany which was mostly white, the lack of access people of color had to the public sphere is not mentioned. Habermas’s public sphere theory idealizes the public sphere as somewhere where “human beings pure and simple” could come together and “articulate the needs of society with the state” and does not critically look at how many groups of people really did not have access to do this or have their voice heard. According to Fraser (1990) “subordinated social groups usually lack equal access to the material means of equal

participation” (p. 64-65). Access to the bourgeois public sphere was contingent upon class, ownership of property, and ability to read and write. This lack of access relates us back to democracy because groups of people have always structurally been denied access to having a voice and therefore have always lacked access to a vote/say in having their issues heard.

Habermas situates the literate property-owning bourgeoisie as “the” public, but this is a disservice because they were not all the people existing in society, so therefore they should not be regarded as “the” public and made to seem like they reflect the wants, needs, or interests of all of society. Minorities were excluded from being able to have discourse about their lives publicly with all of society. According to Fraser (1990)

Habermas's account of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere stresses its claim to be open and accessible to all. Indeed, this idea of open access is one of the central meanings of the norm of publicity. Of course, we know, both from the revisionist history and from Habermas's account, that the bourgeois public's claim to full accessibility was not in fact realized. Women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebeian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds. (p. 63)

By denying minorities the ability to discuss their societal concerns publicly, this lays the groundwork for making minority interests' subordinate and restricting their ability to take place in democratic practices. Fraser (1990) states that “the bourgeois conception of the public sphere, as described by Habermas, is not adequate for the critique of the limits of actually existing democracy in late capitalist societies” (p. 77). I agree with Fraser's sentiments because true legitimate democracy is supposed to be open for all but in most cases— currently and

historically— there exists limits that are put in place by structures that prevent people from having access and inclusion, these structures are articulated through class, race, gender and literacy. This was true for the public sphere and because this is how the concept of public conversation with the state began, this laid down a foundation that puts the needs of minorities as not being part of “the” public. The public sphere was an arena to discuss matters with the society and the state and within this discussion, discussion can lead to democratic action and matters becoming part of the law. The infrastructure of people going from private individuals to citizens in the public sphere marginalized black voices from the start. According to Fuchs (2014), “liberal ideology postulates individual freedoms (of speech, opinion, association, assembly) as universal rights, but the particularistic and stratified character of unequal societies undermines these universal rights and creates inequality and therefore unequal access to the public sphere” (p. 63). Access to a public voice— a vital piece of democracy— is historically unequal and yet another way minorities were not put on equal footing as the rest of society. I believe this foundation is something that society in America has never overcome as minorities are still not truly seen as prioritized members of society but as “other”.

Because not everyone was welcome in “the” public sphere, marginalized groups created their own counter publics. Fraser (1990) defines counterpublic as parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (p. 67). Another workable definition developed by Sarah J. Jackson and Brooke Foucault Welles (2015a) is “the unique sites and methods that members of traditionally marginalized citizens groups use to produce nondominant forms of knowledge” (p. 933). Similarly, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) write about the proletarian public sphere which is the public sphere of

the working class, which can be seen as a counterpublic. Negt and Kluge (1972) state, “restricted access of workers in their existing organizations to channels of communication, soon led us to ask whether there can be any effective forms of a counterpublic sphere against the bourgeois public sphere. This is how we arrived at the concept of the proletarian public sphere, which embodies an experiential interest that is quite distinct” (p. xliii). What these many definitions of counterpublic sphere establish is that groups outside of the bourgeoisie have experiences that are not being communicated and not being discussed fully. This is what has happened historically with the issues of the black community. They are forced to create counterpublics because they are not included in the public sphere. Counterpublics exist because they are formed by members of a group with common interests (Fraser, 1990, p. 71). Furthermore, according to Fraser (1990), counterpublics stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics (p. 70). Jackson (2015) supports this argument by stating that “what is significant about counterpublics, beyond the role they play in legitimizing and sustaining marginalized communities, is that they explicitly and strategically seek to challenge the ‘dominant knowledge’ inherent to the mainstream public sphere” (p. 934). The bourgeois class (upper class) have established what is mainstream and dominant without including the voices of members of communities that lack wealth.

Some might argue that times have changed since the 18th century public sphere Habermas wrote about and that opposing voices have more ability to be included in the mainstream conversations about society. For those who may believe this, I want to pose the argument that even the act of *including* their voices to the mainstream reinforces the fact they are other and that the white dominant conversations are the one that includes others and never the other way around. The fact that minorities have now somewhat been included in public conversation still renders their voices ancillary as the mainstream is still the dominant and the

minority voice is the subordinate trying to be included. To this, Fraser (1990) quotes Mansbridge who states, “the transformation of 'I' into 'we' brought about through political deliberation can easily mask subtle forms of control. Even the language people use as they reason together usually favors one way of seeing things and discourages others. Subordinate groups sometimes cannot find the right voice or words to express their thoughts, and when they do, they discover they are not heard” (p. 64). Furthermore, in order to be included in the public sphere minorities have to take on the norms of the dominant culture, which I brought up in the previous section about black celebrities having to white wash themselves. To this end, Fraser (1990) states that “since there can be no such lens that is genuinely culturally neutral, it would effectively privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others, thereby making discursive assimilation a condition for participation in public debate” (p. 69). It is up to counterpublics to not only meet to discuss their needs, but also to challenge what those in power decide is dominant. However, to challenge dominant ideologies they are forced to assimilate into the norms of those in power.

During the 18th century, counterpublics met and discussed in person how to challenge the dominant public, but in the digital era, counterpublics come together through the use of social media and digital tools. In their work on the use of twitter uprisings in Ferguson following the shooting of Mike Brown, Jackson and Welles (2015b) argue that minority viewpoints often reflect the work of networked counterpublics who, enabled by digital technology, have new opportunities to create and broadcast knowledge and that networked spaces offer citizens marginalized in the public sphere radical new potentials for identity negotiation, visibility, and influence (p. 3). They go on to state that

Young people and people of color (and in America, young people are increasingly people of color) are using new media to draw attention to issues related to inequality and

injustice more than ever before. Wardell contends that online activism, particularly that utilizing Twitter, YouTube, and other social network sites, often starts within small, densely connected networks but spreads because of the amplification of a broader public that includes people of similar identities with similar experiences of marginalization. Such examples of online racial justice activism are connected to the larger phenomena Florini (2014) and Brock (2012) have called 'Black Twitter,' and the popularity of what Sharma (2013) calls 'blacktags.' Sharma's exploration of networked subjects is particularly relevant to networked counterpublics, in that he details the way racialized hashtags come from within, and spread through, particular communities, allowing twitter users, regardless of their own racial identities, to join in the 'assemblages' of antiracist discourse. (Jackson & Welles, 2015b, p. 4)

Counterpublics use new media to challenge dominant ideologies. Furthermore, the discussions happening within minority counterpublics, like black twitter, are what black celebrities are trying to broadcast in the mainstream public sphere because unlike marginalized groups, they have access to the mainstream.

The public sphere and counterpublics enable celebrity because in order for a person to be highly publicized, there has to be a public arena for them to be visible in. As such, celebrities are major points of discussion in the public sphere. Celebrities are public subjects because their lives operate within the public sphere (Marshall, 1997, p. 70). According to Marshall (1997), the celebrity embodies the empowerment of the people to shape the public sphere symbolically (p. 7). Even Habermas (1991) discusses the importance of public individuals in the public sphere; "the nobleman was authority inasmuch as he made it present. He displayed it, embodied it in his cultivated personality; thus, He is a public person; and the more cultivated his movements, the

more sonorous his voice, the staid and measured his” (p. 13). Black celebrities are representatives for a counterpublic, but they have the ability to reach the mainstream public sphere. As part of their celebrity they are expected to use their ability to moonlight in the mainstream public sphere to be of help to the counterpublics who do not have access or means to participate in mainstream discussion of needs.

Traditional media like television news, newspapers and interviews are regulated by gatekeepers, making it difficult for celebrities to discuss racism publicly without interference. However, the affordances of digital media like social media allow black celebrities to have a platform to talk directly to the public without going through a gatekeeper. Social media has given celebrities the ability to have more intimate relationships with their fan bases and a curate messages that are more personal and genuine (Marshall, 2016, p. 459). One major social movement of this era that has managed to get attention in the mainstream public sphere but began in the counterpublic sphere of black twitter is a #BlackLivesMatter movement (here after referred to as #BLM). Black celebrities have played a role in drawing attention to and sustainment of the #BLM movement. In the next section I will parse out the #BLM movement and how black celebrities have been a catalyst in the current fight for black lives.

The Post Post-Racial: Colorblind Politics and #BlackLivesMatter

In his famous “I Have a Dream Speech” Dr. Martin Luther King stated, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” The type of nation Dr. King describes is one where people are assessed on their merit and not discriminated against by race— the type of nation America is *supposed* to be. For a moment, it appeared this type of “post-racial” nation was

reached when President Barack Obama was elected to office in 2008. According to several news media outlets in 2008, Dr. King's dream had finally been fulfilled with the election of Obama (Squires, 2014, p. 44). "On the eve of President Obama's inauguration, 69 percent of Black respondents told CNN pollsters that Martin Luther King's vision had been 'fulfilled' (Taylor, 2016, pp. Kindle Location 2911-2912). Fast forward to the present, a Gallup poll states that 37% of Americans worry about race relations, doubling from 18% in 2008 and 36% of Americans are dissatisfied with the state of race relations as opposed to only 12% who were dissatisfied in 2008. So how did we leap from achieving Dr. King's Dream with our first black President to more Americans now being worried about race relations and dissatisfied with race relations? In this section I will discuss how the media portrayed America reaching ideal colorblind post-racial era followed by an outline of how the #BlackLivesMatter movement dismantled the idea of the post-racial. To do this, I draw heavily from Keeanga Yamahtta-Taylor's work from *#BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* and Catherine Squire's *The Post-Racial Mystique*. I am outlining both the post-racial and the #BlackLivesMatter movement because this ending of post-racial America is a crucial period for black celebrities and the way they used their platform and voice. I lay out the political and social landscape that created the current post post-racial era we are in that now demands black celebrities to speak out.

Post-racial is a term used to describe a moment where America finally transcends its race fueled past of slavery, Jim Crow, segregation, Civil Rights and their results. The term was seldom used in the early 2000s but the use of "post-racial" surged in 2008 with the historical election of President Barack Obama. In her book the *Post-Racial Mystique*, Catherine Squires (2014) performs a contextual analysis of the term "post-racial" and finds that media outlets used the term to signify that the election of President Obama meant that race didn't matter anymore,

and people would finally be judged on the basis of merit (p. 4). Post-racial narratives stem from the ideology of colorblindness (Joseph R. L., 2012, pp. 26-27). Colorblind means not being influenced by racism or racial prejudice (Cashmore, 2012, p. 85).

Though the election of President Obama is seen as the pinnacle of “post-racial” the narrative that America had finally moved past racism was gearing up for a while. Talks that America was color-blind and post racial had begun as early as the Nixon Administration, which had the goal of making America a “free and open society,” one in which racial discrimination would no longer be used as excuse for lack of upward mobility” (Taylor, 2016, pp. Kindle Locations 1352-1354). According to Taylor (2016), “by the end of the 1970s, there was little talk about institutional racism or the systemic roots of Black oppression” (Kindle Locations 1099-1100). Furthermore, as Ellis Cashmore (2012) points out in *Beyond Black: Celebrity and Race in Obama’s America*, colorblind narratives strengthened over the years due to more people of color getting elected into office and more celebrities of color being visible in the media. Black celebrities aided this shift to post-racial America because seeing blacks in high places strengthened the idea that anyone can “make it” and blacks were seen as no longer limited by America’s racist past (p. 2). Taylor (2016) traces the post-racial conditions under Barack Obama and the emergence of the #BLM movement, she argues:

Beyond the presidency of Barack Obama, thousands of Black elected officials, a layer of Black corporate executives, and many highly visible Black Hollywood socialites and multimillionaire professional athletes animate the “postracial” landscape in the United States. The success of a relative few African Americans is upheld as a vindication of the United States’ colorblind ethos and a testament to the transcendence of its racist past. (Taylor Kindle Locations 185-188)

From the mid-90s to early 2000s the media showed an unprecedented number of black people excelling; Oprah Winfrey was unstoppable, Tiger Woods was on a winning streak, Will Smith was in a handful of blockbuster hits, Halle Berry and Denzel Washington won Oscars, Condoleezza Rice and Colin Powell were in the presidential administration, are a few examples.

Seeing black people doing well gave the impression that America had finally moved past racism. Issues related to race, racism and discrimination didn't even need to be talked about because they appeared to no longer exist. Race was no longer positioned as a national problem. Any time issues related to race came up they were positioned as isolated incidences as opposed to systemic. In 2000, *The New York Times* even began a year-long series that tried to address race in response to the lack of public conversation addressing race. According to them, "the wider public discussion of race relations seems muted by a full-employment economy and by a sense, particularly among many whites, that the time of large social remedies is past" (Sack, 2000). Some of the articles in this series include "Shared Prayers. Mixed Blessings: Integration Saved a Church," "Which Man's Army: The Military Says It's Colorblind" and "Why Harlem Drug Cops Don't Discuss Race: Color Can Give Anonymity Undercover. But Looking Like a Suspect Has Its Risks." Post-racial and colorblind narratives effectively don't talk about race in order to make it seem like race is not an issue anymore. Television shows cast multi-racial cast members, discrimination is not talked about, and seeing a few successful people of color is heralded as proof of progress. Then in 2008 the election of Barack Obama solidified the impression that America really had moved past race as an issue. Television Scholar Herman Gray (2013) calls this proliferation of difference into question asking if increased visibility of minority groups necessarily equals social progress (p. 772). Gray (2013) states, "I side with critiques of representation that doubt that merely seeing more members of heretofore aggrieved

and excluded communities in the media will increase access to life chances or disrupt the alliance of difference and power that Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls racism or what Ian Haney-López calls color-blind racism” (p. 772).

Despite the muting of public conversation surrounding race and the appearance of successful black folks in the media, discrimination was still going on systemically and is still going on today. The system is not colorblind. The effects of racial discrimination are still seen in incarceration rates, home ownership, education, unemployment, wages, and poverty rates. In *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva addresses the way inequality is still persistent in society despite the fact that white people maintain that they do not see race (2017, p. 2). According to Bonilla-Silva, the way racism is now practiced in the post-racial era is via “colorblind” racism: “Jim Crow racism explained blacks’ social standing as the result of their biological and moral inferiority, color-blind racism avoids such facile arguments. Instead, whites rationalize minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” (p. 2). Practicing racism this way allows it to operate structurally by excluding people of color from collective upward movement. The way Bonilla-Silva (2017) puts it, “racial discrimination is not just about jobs and housing: discrimination affects almost every aspect of the lives of people of color. It affects them in hospitals, restaurants, trying to buy cars or hail a cab, driving, flying, or doing almost anything in America. Indeed, ‘living while black [or brown]’ is quite hard and affects the health (physical and mental) of people of color tremendously, as they seem to always be in ‘fight or flight’ mode” (p. 205). He argues: “racial inequality today is due to the ‘continuing significance’ of racial discrimination. The scholarly community has documented the persistence of

discrimination in the labor and housing markets and has uncovered the existence of old-fashioned as well as subtle smiling discrimination” (p. 205). But the mainstream media gives a different impression. So why if the facts show blacks still face discrimination in almost every facet of American life, does the media portray an ideal that America is now “post-racial”? Because by saying America is post-racial and ignoring actual facts on discrimination, systems and institutions can continue to discriminate against people of color but still posit America as a place where we are judged by merit not by color.

Post-racial visions rest upon neoliberal ideologies that an individual’s behavior ultimately determine a person’s circumstances. Post-racial discourses ignore institutional racism and blame continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices for themselves or their families (Squires, 2014, p. 6). The investment in neoliberalism brings us back to the system of celebrity because neoliberalism relies on the idea that everyone is in charge of their fate and the ability to move upwards. In order for America to be neoliberal and democratic, racism can’t exist because, ideologically speaking, everyone is equal. Black celebrity helps to support this ideology because being black and visibly successful gives the perception that all blacks have the capability to be successful but ignores the obstacles and systemic racism that has to be overcome to become a success. For example, black athletes and rappers often highlight the fact that they “started from the bottom” but through hard work and perseverance, they managed to “get out the hood.” While this may be true, this dismisses the systemic racial issues like redlining and lack of educational resources that puts a disproportionate amount of blacks in the hood in the first place and forces them to have to work extremely hard to get out. Furthermore touting the few blacks that have gotten lucky or managed to become a success through a particular talent, that doesn’t change the fact that 22% of black people are living in poverty as compared to only 9% of whites, the median

income for black people is \$43K as opposed to \$71k for whites, and the unemployment rate for black people is 6.1% as opposed to white unemployment being almost half of that at 3.4%. Moreover, the above numbers have been stagnant over the last couple decades despite the narrative that blacks have “finally made it.” What neoliberalism and colorblindness do is make these disparities look like an individual problem as opposed to a systemic one. The logic is ‘if P. Diddy can get himself out of poverty, there is no excuse for other black people- they should be able to overcome these issues, or they just aren’t working hard enough.’ Celebrity’s investment in individualism is contradictory because it obscures all the systemic factors that are dependent on a person’s propensity for success.

The fantasy is that anyone can be successful, anyone can be a celebrity, and we are all equal and capable no matter our race. Colorblindness is actively promoted in the media because “political and economic elites have a vested interest in colorblindness and in the perpetuation of the myth that the United States is a meritocracy” (Taylor, 2016, pp. Kindle Locations 209-210). By saying America is past race and racism, the state is able to cut programs like Affirmative Action that aid people of color to overcome discrimination (Taylor, 2016). According to Taylor, “the United States does not passively contend that it is a colorblind society; it actively promotes its supposed colorblindness as an example of its democratic traditions and its authority to police the globe...Promoting the United States as colorblind or postracial is used to justify dismantling the state’s capacity to challenge discrimination” (Taylor, 2016, pp. Kindle Locations 192-197). By ignoring race and perpetuating an ideal that we are all equal removes race from its tie to the economic, social, cultural, and historic fabric of the United States (Joseph R. L., 2012, p. 25). Taylor sums it up by stating, “Colorblindness and ‘post-racial’ politics are vested in false ideas that the United States is a meritocratic society where hard work makes the difference between

those who are successful and those who are not. (Taylor, 2016, pp. Kindle Locations 1522-1523). So, by the use of exceptional examples like Barack Obama—someone who had to tone down his blackness in order to get elected—America is able to continue to have racist systems while perpetuating the notion that race is now a non-issue.

Not surprisingly, the utopian “post-racial” ideal of America came crashing down almost immediately when President Obama actually began his presidency. I make this claim based on Squires argument that, “attacks on Obama were relentless and brutal in the blogosphere and traditional press” (Squires, 2014, p. 57). Her exhaustive analysis of news items collected from Lexis-Nexis found that “writers accused the president of either deliberately stirring up racial tensions or making tactical racial blunders in response to other’s provocations” (Squires, 2014, p. 57). In the years leading up to and following Obama’s election, black celebrities only rarely spoke about racism in the media (Cashmore, 2012, pp. 1-2). Of course, there were instances (such as in 2000 during Hurricane Katrina or during the imprisonment of Michael Vick in 2007) where race became a hot button topic, but discussions of systemic racism were nowhere near as prevalent as they are today. However, in 2012 discourse switched from rarely discussing race to race actually becoming a central theme in news media and political discourse. This shift came as a result of the increased visibility of police brutality against people of color and the emergence of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement which I will outline below.

According to Taylor (2016), “Every movement needs a catalyst, an event that captures people’s experiences and draws them out from their isolation into a collective force with the power to transform social conditions” (Kindle Locations 3147-3148). And Trayvon Martin served as the catalyst for the #BlackLivesMatter Movement (herein referred to as #BLM movement). #BLM is a contemporary social movement that has used ad-hoc networks using

data-rich tools to illuminate the problems of systemic racism and police brutality on social media. Black people have used the power of hashtags and sharing to show that singular instances of police brutality on black people are not isolated but part of a larger problem. The movement has snowballed into being focused on more than just police brutality but also the larger issues facing people of color in this nation. Despite the major focus on police brutality, #BLM did not start with an instance of police brutality, but with an instance of racially motivated police negligence. On February 26, 2012 in Sanford, Florida Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old black boy- was walking home from the store with a bag a skittles and a soft drink wearing a black hoodie when 28-year-old George Zimmerman, a white man, took it upon himself to follow Trayvon and murder him. Zimmerman was a local neighborhood watch person and called the police and told them “This guy looks like he’s up to no good, or he’s on drugs or something.” Despite being told to leave Martin alone and let police come, Zimmerman continued to follow Martin. A fight between the two ensued and Zimmerman shot and killed Martin. Due to Florida’s “Stand Your Ground” Laws, Sanford police did not arrest Zimmerman. Initially, the killing of Trayvon Martin did not get much media attention, just coverage on local news stations. However, Martin’s parents hired an attorney and publicist who framed this as a race-based issue, attracted and used media attention, and started a petition on change.org to call for Zimmerman’s arrest. They proclaimed if Trayvon had been a white boy and Zimmerman a black man, there would have been no hesitation in arresting him, but because Zimmerman was white Trayvon was automatically depicted as the aggressor.

While the petition was receiving attention, the major turning point in Martin’s incident was when the petition got the attention of celebrities such as Al Sharpton, Talib Kweli, Jesse Jackson, Wyclef Jean, and Sean “Puff Daddy” Combs. These celebrities not only signed the

petition but used their social media platforms to bring attention to Martin's murder and urged their fans to sign the petition. This caused a 900 percent spike in social media traffic to the website and protests on behalf of Martin ensued around the nation. Even President Obama who tried to deflect from answering questions about the case for weeks as it was growing eventually made the statement, "If I had a son, he would look like Trayvon...I think every parent in America should be able to understand why it is absolutely imperative that we investigate every aspect of this, and that everybody pulls together—federal, state and local—to figure out exactly how this tragedy happened" (Taylor, 2016, pp. Taylor, Kindle Locations 3062). This was one of the rare occasions he referenced race during his presidency. After forty-five days, Zimmerman was finally arrested and put on trial for murdering Trayvon Martin. Despite his acquittal, the post-racial bubble of America had been popped. Many even referred to Martin as a modern-day Emmett Till (Taylor, 2016, pp. Taylor, Kindle Locations 3038).

In the wake of Zimmerman's acquittal, three community organizers Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors voiced their frustration using social media. Alicia Garza typed a love letter to black people and proclaimed #BlackLivesMatter. With that a movement was born.

It was a powerful rejoinder that spoke directly to the dehumanization and criminalization that made Martin seem suspicious in the first place and allowed the police to make no effort to find out to whom this boy belonged. It was a response to the oppression, inequality, and discrimination that devalue Black life every day. It was everything, in three simple words. (Taylor, 2016, pp. Taylor Kindle Locations 3115-3118)

#BLM was created in the wake of Martin's death in 2012 and further strengthened in 2014 after the killing of Mike Brown, an 18-year-old black boy who was murdered by police and his dead body was left in the street for over four hours in Ferguson, MO. The police officer, Darren

Wilson, was also acquitted which led to protests and riots in the city of Ferguson (Taylor, 2016, pp. Taylor, Kindle Location 3451). In the weeks and months following the murder of Mike Brown many more black men, women and children were murdered at the hands of police— Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, and more. These and other police killings were caught on smart phones and shared over the internet with the world to highlight the fact that the volume at which brutality against blacks was occurring was a systemic issue. Black folks were ensuring that the racism that they faced could not be ignored any longer and the news media was eating it all up. #BLM became the movement attached to the demand that people of color be treated fairly in this nation. The movement at its core is about the fight against police brutality and violence against black bodies but additionally the movement wants to address issues of systemic racism, “they start from the basic recognition that the oppression of African Americans is multidimensional and must be fought on different fronts” (Taylor, 2016, pp. Taylor, Kindle Locations 3442-3443). This movement became a door to opening conversations about not only police brutality but systemic racism and discrimination.

The growth of the #BLM movement and black folks sharing documentation of instances of racial violence online has dispelled the idea of a post-racial America and usher in what Memory Studies scholar Alison Landsberg calls post post-racial America. It is post post-racial because the subject of race has rematerialized into the political and social spheres (2018, p. 203). Prior to #BLM, conversations about race diminished and race was framed as a non-issue. However, in the post post-racial, systemic racism, police brutality, and the continued discrimination against people of color are issues that activists are forcing on to the public agenda and drawing attention to something that blacks had known for years: racism still exists. It may not exist the way it did during Jim Crow, but #BLM has reinvigorated the idea that systemic

ways of discriminating against people of color still occur. The movement has not just brought awareness to these issues, but it has, “radically transformed how racism is conceived and contested” (Wang, 2018, p. 13).

Black celebrities have invigorated conversations about race through public support #BLM. Some examples include LeBron James and some of his teammates wearing “I Can’t Breathe” (Eric Garner’s famous last words before being choked to death by police) t-shirts in 2014 to warm-up before a basketball game; singer The Weeknd donating \$250,000 to the #BLM movement and tweeting “enough is enough. It’s time to stand up for this. We can either sit and watch, or do something about it. The time is now. #BlackLivesMatter *black fist emoji”; rapper J. Cole actually attending protests in Ferguson, MO and included snippet statements from protestors in his song “Be Free”; singer/actress Janelle Monae ending her 2015 *Today* show performance by stating “God bless America. God bless all who’ve lost lives to police brutality. We want white America to know that we stand tall today. We want black America to know that we stand tall today. We will not be silenced.” The #BLM Movement has ushered in a new era of black celebrity outspokenness or as some call “wokeness.”

To be “woke”/ “stay woke” is a slang term that became popular on the internet that means “being aware of community issues and social justice especially related to racism and white supremacy” (Garofalo, 2016). The idea of being aware of societal issues has long existed and has been called being “awake” or, at one time, “conscious”. In his work on Sidney Poitier, Baldwin (1968) even writes, “white Americans appear to be under the compulsion to dream, whereas black Americans are under the compulsion to awaken” (p. 55). In the same connotation, being woke means to not be asleep to all the discrimination going on and be cognizant of racism. The awareness and talks of racism had died down in the years leading up to the “post-racial”

state of America, but the tide was turning. An article by Lawrence Ware (2016) on *The Root* states,

After the civil rights movement, black folks in America enjoyed previously unknown levels of upward socioeconomic mobility...During this time of unprecedented opportunity, complacency set in for many. Indeed, there were always those like Louis Farrakhan, Jeremiah Wright and Cornel West who continued to shine a spotlight on racial inequality, but many—dare I say most—fell asleep and dreamed of individualized prosperity at the expense of communal empowerment. (Ware)

Now due to the #BLM it was time to wake up and wake up the rest of America—it was time to be woke. According to reporter, Alex Garofalo (2016), “it was not until the 2012 shooting of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old African-American teen, by neighborhood watchman George Martin in Florida and the subsequent birth of the Black Lives Matter movement that ‘woke’ caught fire.” Celebrity culture changed from not wanting to talk about race to avoid stirring the pot to now seeing it as a badge of honor to be “woke.”

The term woke became somewhat watered down to the point of mass circulation. Articles on news and celebrity gossip sites churned out lists like “15 Hot Celebs Who Are Also Woke AF,” “12 Young and Woke Celebrity Women,” “12 Times Celebrities Were Woke AF on Social Media,” “Fight the Power: 15 surprisingly ‘Woke’ Celebrities”. Being aware of racial injustice was now cool. Any celeb—black, white or other—who seem even somewhat interested in social justice can now be “woke.” Despite the fact that it was on trend in popular culture to be racially aware, let me be perfectly clear: all of America was not fans of the #BLM. In fact the movement received backlash and was even referred to as a terrorist group by some conservative news outlets (Levin, 2017). Though being “woke” is now a trend in popular culture, being too invested

in discussing racism too much—especially for cross-over celebrities—can be seen as radical and too political to more conservative and colorblind audiences.

In 2016, the need to be woke and racial conditions became increasingly heightened in the media due to the presidential race involving now-President Donald J. Trump whose campaign reignited overtly-racist behavior with his seemingly fascist rhetoric (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). His campaign and election play a huge role in the sociopolitical landscape and how black celebrities are expected to publicly discuss racism and politics because Trump is perceived to be outright racist and alienated minorities. Trump's campaign slogan promised to "Make America Great Again," a dog whistle for white working-class Americans and economic elites. During his campaign, he was adamant about building a wall to keep Mexican immigrants out; at one of his rallies he kicked a black man out and called him a thug; he covertly supported police brutality by telling officers "Please don't be too nice" when handling suspects; and he even got support from the Ku Klux Klan's Grand Wizard, David Duke. Even though America is supposed to now be a non-racist country Trump's views managed to gain him a wave of support, so much so that he was elected President. This caused confusion because of the tensions between the #BLM movement that was trying to bring awareness to systemic racism but simultaneously the leading political candidate (and now President) is a racist who was using discriminatory discourse to gain support.

Due to his racist discourse and Trump's campaign reigniting racism it became common practice to speak out against racism and President Donald Trump. For black celebrities, it was a must to be against Donald Trump and what he stood for: racism. Any black celebrity who even seemingly supported him was had their "black card" revoked and deemed an "Uncle Tom." An article on *Essence* titled "17 Black Celebrities and Influencers Who Still Support Donald Trump"

chastised black celebrity Trump supporters by saying “Not even after Donald Trump defended white supremacists on a national stage will these supporters and surrogates denounce the president” (Coleman, 2016). The expectation placed on black celebrities was growing as America was electing into office a man who made it clear that the needs of the black community are not a concern but instead catered to the needs of white Americans.

By 2016, fans expected black celebrities to be woke, against Trump and against racism. This is evident in the way black Trump supporters like Stacey Dash, Kanye West, and Omarosa were “cancelled” publicly by black twitter. Furthermore, *Ebony* published an article titled “Will More Black Celebrities Speak up about Racism Now?” demanding that more black celebrities speak out: “If we want freedom now, collectively and individually, we have to step up. Applauding from the sideline is easy, carefully crafted public statements are common, and allowing others to be your social justice mule is simply out of the question” (Hubbard, 2016). Former basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabar did a guest piece for *The Hollywood Reporter* expressing the need to stand against Trump, “it’s especially important over the next four years that black celebrities step up and take stances to give voice to those in the black community who will not be heard by the incoming administration. Given that the country is in the throes of a civil rights backlash that threatens to undo the progress we’ve fought so hard to attain, we have to be fearless and relentless in speaking up at every opportunity” (Abdul-Jabbar, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar: Black Celebrities Must "Be Fearless and Relentless in Speaking Up" Against Trump (Guest Column), 2017). These examples illustrate the ways expectations on black celebrities began to manifest as America was transitioning from post-racial to post post-racial.

What occurred in 2016 and beyond is many black celebrities did in fact start speaking out on racism, police brutality, and politics. However, this was risky because dominant ideology was

and is still postulating the idea that racism is no longer a major problem in America. This caused friction for black celebrities because on the one hand, the black community needed them to speak out, on the other hand, they risked diminishing their popularity with white demographics who didn't believe racism was an issue. What occurred is black celebrities navigating issues of race within their public image, brand, and online presence. In the next section, I will illustrate how this navigation occurred by using Beyoncé Knowles Carter as an example. She went from being an apolitical figure to integrating activism, being woke, and the #BLM Movement into her personal brand.

BEYONCE: THAT B***** CAUSIN ALL THIS CONVERSATION

Case Study Overview

With twenty three Grammy Awards, six number one albums on the Billboard Top 100 Chart, approximately 158 million albums sold over the span of her twenty-year long career, a handful of acting nominations, and several successful retail ventures Beyoncé Knowles-Carter is one of the biggest celebrities of this generation (Thorpe, 2018). According to *The New York Times* she “has an astronomical lock on the world's attention. We orbit her” (Morris, 2016). She has been awarded several pop-cultural accolades over the years such as *Forbes* 2014 “Most Powerful Celebrity” and *BBC*'s 2018 “Most Influential Woman.”

What makes her such a major star isn't just her talent, but her ability to crossover, which Richard Dyer (1986) describes as “one who, though rooted in a particular tradition in music with a particular audience, somehow manages to appeal, and sell beyond the confines of that audience” (p. 64). Beyoncé is an R&B artist but she is the embodiment of a crossover star because her appeal is much broader than just R&B fans and black audiences. Her level of celebrity and ability to cross-over has even been compared to that of pop icon, Michael Jackson. Culture critic/journalist Touré (2018) elaborates,

Like MJ, she's a global pop icon who's popular with children and grandparents and the generation in the middle that takes care of them. Like MJ, she's taken Black music and made it cross over... one else can give us all that Beyoncé gives regularly. She's the Queen of Pop and from the looks of it, her reign will continue for years to come. (Toure, 2018)

Because of her significant celebrity status, Beyoncé was selected to perform at the Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show on February 7, 2016 alongside Coldplay and Bruno Mars. She had previously headlined the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2013, but her because of her appeal to a wide demographic of people, she was invited to the halftime stage just three years later. Members of her massive fan base who call themselves “the Beyhive” even called the event the “Beyoncé Bowl”. *USA Today* reported that she was chosen to perform because she’s one of the last artists “with a national following left” and to give the show “a much needed boost with her energy” (Scott, 2016). Nobody expected her performance to be divisive or bring attention to racial disparities in America. However, Beyoncé’s Super Bowl 50 performance marked the beginning of her debut as a cultural activist. In a performance that lasted less than two minutes, Beyoncé managed to divide the public and bring in to question what is appropriate for a Super Bowl halftime performance. Beyoncé and her back-up dancers, clad in afros, Black Panther Party-esque outfits, black berets with their fists raised to signify as a symbol for black power, marched on to the Super Bowl 50 field in Santa Clara, California to perform her new release, “Formation”, which included the following lyrics:

Ok ladies now let's get in formations, ok ladies now let's get in formation. Prove to me you've got some coordination. You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making. My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana you mix that Negro with that creole make a Texas Bama. I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros. I like my Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils. Earned all this money but they'll never take the country out me, I got hot sauce in my bag swag. I see it I want it, I stunt yellow bone it. I dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it. I twirl on my haters, albino alligators, El Camino with the seats low sippin

Cuervo with no chasers. Sometimes I go off. I go hard. Take what's mine, I'm a star cuz I slay. Ok ladies now let's get in formation.

As her backup dancers left the field, one held a sign stating “Justice 4 Mario Woods”, a black man from San Francisco, California who had been murdered in an act of police brutality little more than two months prior and fifty miles from the halftime stage.

Beyoncé's performance marked a significant departure from the type of content usually expected from her. Race, blackness and socially justice had not been topics she has touched on in her past repertoire, whether it be solo or with her former vocal group, Destiny's Child.

Researcher Kevin Ball (2016) notes in *Film Criticism* that “Beyoncé's videos espouse feminine resilience and empowerment much more loudly than race, from the inversion of the breakup genre on ‘Irreplaceable’ to emblazoning the word FEMINIST as the backdrop to a MTV awards performance” (Ball K. , 2016). *The New York Times* discussed her graduation into new territory by highlighting her previous work, “‘Flawless,’ a triumphant anthem that flaunted her Independence” and “‘Partition,’ where she sings about trying to be hot for her husband” (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016). In fact, her biggest hit prior to 2016 was the four-time platinum record, “Single Ladies, “that she performed at the 2013 Super Bowl, which chastises men unwilling to commit by singing “if you liked it then you should have put a ring on it” and tells all the single ladies to come together and “put their hands up.” “Formation” and the Super Bowl 50 halftime performance were simply unlike any performance, video, or records she produced. As pop-culture and feminist theory professor Treva Lindsey succinctly put it, “this is the most explicit she's gotten on race,” (Gass, 2016).

With such a distinct shift in her lyrical topics and costuming, this Super Bowl halftime performance garnered major attention online and subsequently in the news media. According to

the social media monitoring firm, Spredfast, Beyoncé averaged 147,000 tweets per minute during the halftime show. In comparison, Coldplay only received 83,000 and Bruno Mars 28,000 despite the fact that Coldplay's performance lasted a full five and a half minutes and Bruno Mars approximately two minutes as well (Heine, 2016). Not surprisingly, the large number of responses were mixed as Beyoncé's radical shift in style could not be ignored. Twitter users opposing the performance often noted the racial undertones in the costumes and lyrics of the song. For example, @uwish1127 said, "Wow @NFL how do you let @Beyoncé perform in what is a known racist uniform (black panthers). #awful #SuperBowl #shruinedthehalftimeshow." Conservative writer Michele Malkin tweeted, "Cuz nothing brings us all together better than angry @Beyoncé shaking her ass & shouting 'Negro' repeatedly. #sb50". Many even pegged the performance as an attack on police officers; @talkmaster tweeted, "Didn't realize Beyoncé's song last night was basically anti-cop. Screw her."

In contrast, supporters of the performance applauded her display for the powerful allusions to America's racial history and current political conditions. For example, DeRay Mckesson, a prominent leader in the #BlackLivesMatter movement, tweeted, "The #Formation shout-outs to Malcolm X & MJ were excellent," referencing the fact that the song "Formation" was released just as the Black Panther Party was celebrating its 50-year Formation Anniversary. Other Twitter users applauded how much Beyoncé's emphasized her race and her using the halftime show as a stage for such a bold display. For example, @cosmorgpolitan tweeted that, "Beyoncé just had beautiful black women dressed as black panthers performing halftime at the Super Bowl. Y'all don't understand" and @nyshaV tweeted that, "I love that Beyoncé used her platform for a political statement. It's always needed, because it's too often Black voices go unheard." Furthermore, many supporting tweets came as response to the negative backlash. For

instance, @DjMullo tweeted, “#beyonce killed that halftime performance #sb50. The backlash just shows how our society's true color.” Some users even went as far as tagging news sources, such as @1Shyla who tweeted, “I thoroughly loved the halftime show of #SB50! @Beyoncé: Right voice, right time @CNN” responding to a CNN article that said Beyoncé’s protest “missed the point.” Beyond the 147K tweets per minute during the halftime show, this moment went on to permeate the news cycle for days and weeks following.

Given the intensity of the public response, it was no surprise that politicians also weighed in on the performance and what it meant. Outspoken conservative politicians were against the performance because the nod towards the Black Panther Party was perceived as anti-cop. However, democratic and liberal politicians hardly weighed in at all. For example, in an interview with *Fox News* the day after the Super Bowl, former New York Mayor, Rudy Giuliani (R) stated, “This is football, not Hollywood, and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us, and keep us alive” (Zaru, 2017). New York State Representative Peter King followed suit by tweeting “Beyoncé Formation video & #SB50 act was anti-police, shameful. Repeats big lie of Michael Brown innocence. Cops deserve support not criminals.” He even went on to release a lengthy statement expounding on the ways the “Formation” music video was “irresponsible” and arguing that “no one should really care” what Beyoncé thinks “about any serious issue confronting our nation” (Campbell C. , 2016). There was a present absence in reports, tweets or statements from prominent liberal politicians, possibly due to the harm it would cause to align their views with the Black Panther Party.

The backlash came to a head when some police groups began calling for a boycott of Beyoncé urged police officers not to volunteer to staff concerts for her “Formation World Tour”,

which took place in the spring following the Super Bowl. Javier Ortiz, president of the Miami Fraternal Order of Police, told local newspapers that he felt that she was trying to "divide Americans by promoting the Black Panthers and her anti police message" (Chokshi, 2016a) Additionally, Ed Mullins, president of the Sergeants Benevolent Association in New York City said, "To taint police officers globally in the Super Bowl is really wrong" and "She made a statement and now law enforcement is making a statement. What's clear is that no one in the country is trying to resolve the issues between communities of color and the distrust of law enforcement" (Hassan, Krieg, & McAfee, 2016). Furthermore, Milwaukee County Sheriff, David Clarke, went on *Fox Business*' "Risk and Reward" and compared the Black Panthers to the KKK stating "Beyoncé in those Black Panther-type uniforms, would that be acceptable if a band, a white band, came out in hoods and white sheets in the same sort of fashion? We would be appalled and outraged. The Black Panthers are a subversive hate group in America" (Otiko, 2016).

The variety of responses to this performance evoke questions about what is expected at the Super Bowl and of Beyoncé and other black icons. Black celebrities have a history of challenging ideologies and bringing to question what is appropriate, acceptable and necessary. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Richard Dyer (1986) analyses one of the first major black stars who challenged racial ideologies while remaining popular among white audiences, Paul Robeson. His examination of Robeson drew some parallels to the symbolic power of Beyoncé in this moment and what her halftime performance represents in popular culture. Both Robeson and Beyoncé worked as crossover stars who were a site of symbolic struggle. Speaking of the 1920s-1940s and Robeson, Dyer asked, "how did this period permit black stardom? What was the fit between the parameters of what black images the society could tolerate and the particular qualities

Robeson could be taken to embody? Where was the give in the ideological system?” (Dyer, 1986, p. 65). These same questions can be asked of Beyoncé’s celebrity and stardom. How does the current post post-racial climate permit black, female stardom? What is acceptable or warrants public outrage of this magnitude? Furthermore, what could be tolerated in the public sphere of a Super Bowl halftime performance? These are significant questions for Black American celebrities.

Black Americans have had significantly limited access to the ability to form public policies through forums of legislation. Therefore, they have had to embrace tactics and develop strategies that are often outside the parameters to legitimate policy formation to access and influence public decision making. The most celebrated form of this are the public protests, speeches and marches of early 1960s that constitutes a significant portion of the US’s collective memory of black folk’s struggle for Federal civil rights legislation. However, even after this victory, black people have had to rely on the reach of celebrity to often make their needs known to a general public that is both majority white and lawmakers who systemically underrepresent the needs of minorities. Beyoncé’s performance is one example. It is a performance that stylistically evokes a memory of Black Pride while, at the same time, connecting this memory to of-the-moment policy debates that remind the viewers that these criticisms of police legitimacy are both longstanding and remain unaddressed. I establish this connection by arguing that Beyoncé’s influence is both symbolic and significant because her celebrity and the stage represented a “public sphere opportunity” to influence both policy debates and discourse.

The remainder of this paper gathers evidence of this claim from arenas of public discourse such as online news articles, tweets, and academic critiques that covered the performance. Indeed, this paper illustrates that a global super star of Beyoncé’s magnitude is not

offered *carte blanche*: Beyoncé, no matter her status, is not allowed to simply “get away” with a pro-black display without some push back and attempts at symbolic counterformation. This pushback occurred due in large part to the historical and ideological infrastructures the Super Bowl rests upon. However, because of the post post-racial moment that it occurred in, Beyoncé was able to embrace the backlash she received and continue to influence her existing fan base. Finally, this paper makes a normative claim that black celebrities must take the risk of speaking out because entertainment is a substantial access point for black people to enter into public sphere debates, debates that are often only allowed for those deemed as worthy to debate law and policy, i.e. members of legislators and news media. These points are evident in the way public discourse framed her performance in the post post-racial moment and the symbolic reformatory techniques of white supremacy.

Upon analysis of approximately 120 news articles, news videos, and tweets, what I discover is consistency among the reporting and discussion of the performance. Despite which way the sources leaned politically (left, center, right, African American) the same factors were prominent in discussion. The following eleven discursive trends dominated the reporting and discussion of this moment:

1. Audience size of the Super Bowl
2. Debate on what type of performance is deemed appropriate at a halftime show
3. Beyoncé’s level of celebrity
4. The imagery in the “Formation” music video
5. Perceptions of her performance as “political,” “radical,” “provocative,” “bold,” “outrageous,” and similar terms
6. Beyoncé’s declaration of black pride and unapologetic blackness

7. Historicizing the moment by relating it to Tommie Smith and John Carlos' 1968 Olympics protest
8. Framing of the Black Panther Party
9. The current political landscape
10. The #BLM movement and expounding on what that movement stands for (or what the news source perceived they stand for)
11. Reference to Beyoncé's social responsibility

I find these trends to be significant because they demonstrate the system of black celebrity, the shift that black celebrities have taken in the post-post racial era, how black celebrities have integrated activism into their brands, what is deemed as acceptable in the mainstream public sphere, and the struggle black celebrities face between the social expectation to speak out on issues concerning race versus the punishment that follows if a black celebrity does speak out. According to P. David Marshall, (1997) "at any given moment, there may be a governing consensus about what the celebrity represents, but this representation may be from a variety of positions and perspectives. The process of consensus exemplifies Gramsci's concept of working hegemony within the construction of cultural signs" (pp. 57-58). These trends exemplify the working hegemony of the power structures of the Super Bowl, the public sphere, and expectations of black stardom to reinforce or challenge existing structure.

Items 1 and 2 illustrate how the Super Bowl is an extension of the public sphere as it is a site of significant ideological debate and discourse where many people come together and what is considered "appropriate" is patrolled by political and cultural "stakeholders." Items 3, 4, 5, and 6 illustrate what level of celebrity is necessary to have entry into the public sphere and how Beyoncé pivoted her brand in a way that allowed for her to create a narrative on #BLM. Items 7,

8 and 9 illustrate how her performance harkened upon public memory and history to deliver her message. Furthermore, the use of civil rights imagery highlights the similarities between the 1960s movements and the present. Item 10 illustrates the power her performance had to actually create discourse. Finally, item 11 illustrates the social responsibility that black celebrities face and how Beyoncé and other black celebrities are navigating it. In the following section, I will expound on each of these groups of trends, how they relate to the post post-racial moment, how the public sphere operates in contemporary culture, and what is expected of black celebrities.

The Super Bowl: A Site of Struggle

1. Audience size of the Super Bowl
2. Debate on what type of performance is deemed appropriate at a halftime show

According to P. David Marshall (1997), “the greater the number of people who watch a television program, buy a record, or view a film, the more the artifact is an example of popular culture” (p. 44). If this is the case, then the Super Bowl is the premiere example of American popular culture existing today. As an annual televisual ritual, the fifty-plus year competition has become a significant site of debate, a space of public display concerning American values and culture that brings an audience averaging 100 million viewers each year. For example, *Super Bowl 50* was viewed by approximately 111.9 million viewers of all ages, genders and ethnicities, making it the third largest watched Super Bowl in history (Pallotta & Stelter, 2016). Indeed, one of the factors that made Beyoncé’s performance so controversial was the reach she had due to the size of the audience. *The New York Times* summed up the Super Bowl as “a moment where the entire country will be watching and forced to sit up and pay attention. We can't overlook the audacity of that -- and I think that's why she is able to command our attention the way she does”

(Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016). What is being noted is the significance of using the Super Bowl stage to make a “political statement.” *The Associated Press* has similar sentiments stating that Beyoncé’s performance “made for a stunning display of unapologetic blackness and political activism during one of the most-watched events of the year” (Holland, 2016). Likewise, *CBS News* called the Super Bowl a “global halftime stage” where she showcased a political message about police brutality (CBS News, 2016). And *CNN* agreed, stating “Beyoncé dared to use the nation's most-viewed event as a platform to shout #BlackLivesMatter” (Jones, 2016). Use of descriptors such as “daring,” “stunning” and “political” underscore just how much Beyoncé’s performance was received as a shock. In short, this is because the Super Bowl’s national and global reach makes the event a significant site of performance where what is considered “appropriately American” is often unquestioned.

The issue of reach has always been significant to media companies. The concept of mass communication relies on the ability to process, design, and deliver cultural messages and stories to large audiences through media channels. However, in the current marketplace, media is more fragmented than ever before because entertainment can be streamed asynchronously and our newsfeeds and video recommendations personalized. Prior to the digital age, people watched many of the same programs and evening news making mass communication easy to achieve (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos, 2014, p. 3). According to Campbell et al (2014), prime-time network TV has lost half its viewers in the last decade to the Internet and alternative platforms, and thus “the notion of mass media may no longer exist” (p.3).

The Super Bowl is one of the last examples of mass communication that the continued ability to attract mass viewership. Both corporate America and dominant political forces view the Super Bowl as a major mass media event where products, American values and ideologies can be

disseminated and formed. Cultural theorist Michael Real (1977) suggests that the Super Bowl, “structurally reveals specific cultural values proper to American institutions and ideologies” (Real, 1977, pp. 92-93). It does this by resting on particular traditions that reinforce what it means to be American and what values are important to Americans. The pomp and circumstance surrounding every Super Bowl have become secular forms of ritual.

The Super Bowl is staged on a Sunday night in February each year. A majority of Americans are not working on Sundays, thereby ensuring it has a chance to access a significant audience. With no major events going on during that time of year, Michael Malone (2016) states in *Broadcast & Cable*, the Super Bowl has become “an excuse to celebrate” (p. 10). Other television channels understand that they cannot win as significant an audience as the Super Bowl and often find that their only chance at gaining an audience is to broadcast programming to audiences, they suspect will have no interest in football or the sports events in general. For months leading up to the Super Bowl, the event is talked about constantly in the news and in advertisements.

The communal aspect involved in viewing the Super Bowl makes it an important American ritual. According to Michael Real (1977), “the majority of viewers saw the game in a group setting, used it as a social occasion, talked and moved at prescribed times during the telecast, and discussed the Super Bowl with acquaintances before and after the day of the game” (p. 99). Many viewers throw or attend Super Bowl watch parties. Sports bars/restaurants prepare for the event as one of their busiest days of year. Furthermore, the day after Super Bowl Sunday is often discussed as a possible holiday as a significant amount of the workforce often takes the day off to recover from their festivities.

The biggest nod towards American values appears through the event's constant association with the US military before and during the game. According to Melissa Schimmel, "From the ritualized pregame presentation of military hardware known as 'the flyover,' to the presentation of the US flag by military Color Guard, the marching of military bands, the singing of military choirs, and "live look ins" to US military bases at home and abroad, the NFL and the US military have shared more than 40 years of history" (Schimmel, 2017, p. 82). By continuously celebrating US military forces, the Super Bowl has molded itself into an expression of American nationalism.

The halftime show is a major part of the Super Bowl ritual that was added in as part of the spectacle during the early 1990s. According to Malone (2016), prior to adding pop-acts in the 90s it was viewed as "an opportunity to leave the room or change the channel" (p. 10). The halftime show used to feature marching bands, or even magic shows—nothing that really kept the audience's attention. Neal Pilson, former CBS President, states they were losing 4.5 rating points during the Super Bowl until they integrated popular music into the show in 1993 when Michael Jackson took the stage (p. 10). Since then the performer is considered an attraction and their announcement is part of the ritual.

Perhaps the greatest indicator of the significance of the Super Bowl is illustrated in the price of a commercial. For 2016, the base price for a 30 second ad was \$5 million (the highest it's ever been) because products will be seen by approximately 110 million viewers (Grodin, 2016). The commercials that air during the Super Bowl are part of the ritual that viewers expect. With the massive audience, advertisers air some of their most attractive and entertaining commercials. Tomovick et. al (2001) notes that viewers watch Super Bowl commercials more attentively than commercials broadcast during normal prime time television programs and that a

recent study reported that 7% of Super Bowl viewers turn on the Super Bowl contest exclusively to watch the advertisements (p. 91). This component clearly highlights the importance of capitalism in America to the point that consumerism has been merged with entertainment.

Rituals not only reoccur at set times but come with expectations that must be acknowledged. In many ways Beyoncé's performance at *Super Bowl 50* fulfilled some of the above expectations: she was a premiere pop performer and her performance was dedicated to a specific representation of American militarism. However, Beyoncé's invocation of militarism was not the state-sanctioned variety: by providing an attractive version of Black Panther style, Beyoncé challenged many viewers' expectations of what is considered "American." Indeed, what is considered to be "appropriately American" has largely been decided by white America. Michael Butterworth (2008) asserts that to be an "American" is to invoke the legacy of the Declaration of Independence and to trumpet the virtues of freedom and democracy (p. 322). Beyoncé's highlighting of significant racial tensions challenges that the values of freedom and democracy are not, in fact, operating. In short, Beyoncé's performance reminded viewers that all Americans do not share the same freedoms and equality before the law.

Beyoncé's injection of unapologetically, pro-black politics and American memory into the biggest television show of the year provided a stark reminder of racial differences— an issue white America tries to avoid due to the uncomfortableness of the topic. As Rudy Giuliani said in his statement, "You're talking to Middle America when you have the Super Bowl, so if you're gonna have entertainment, let's have decent, wholesome entertainment" (Breitbart News, 2016). The term "Middle America" in itself is a euphemism for "white America." Many see the Super Bowl as a time to not discuss race. In an NPR interview on the politics of the Super Bowl, Amy Trask, the former CEO of the Oakland Raiders states;

one of the things I observed and I enjoyed over the course of my career is looking through our stadium during a game and seeing fans from every location, every age, every ethnicity, race, religion, men, women, old, young— enjoying those moments together and looking around and seeing every single person embraced in collective ecstasy. That's something tremendous that sport offers us. And I always hoped that people would remember that moment of commonality when disagreeing on other topics. (Garcia-Navarro, 2017)

Emphasizing “commonality” reinforces the idea that the Super Bowl is not a place to bring up friction, discourse or unfavorable views; it is a time of idealized togetherness. In a *Fox & Friends* interview discussing Beyoncé’s performance, Stuart Varney stated “is there anything in America which can exclude race? I mean why is race brought into the halftime show at a Super Bowl game? Why?” (Wilstein, 2016). Indeed, had she done this performance at one of her concerts, evidence suggests she would not have been tagged by so many as controversial. By doing it at the Super Bowl, Beyoncé’s choreography, costume and song guaranteed that her message would be sent out to the widest national audience in an effort to reframe discourse in the public sphere.

Racism is often not discussed at mass events like the Super Bowl because the topic is viewed as divisive. For example, creator of the Boycott Beyoncé website Patrick Hampton, said “it is a day where we are supposed to put all of the political stuff aside and just focus on the Super Bowl” (Ball C. , 2016). However, statements like this are problematic because they promote a sense of “we” that structurally does not exist (Schimmel, 2017, p. 82). Moreover, by putting “all the political stuff to the side” what this really means is only embracing state sanctioned American politics like the military fly overs, the Star-Spangled Banner and

dominantly white culture. Sports events like the Super Bowl are invested in homogenizing audiences to promote a sense of togetherness. But in this homogenization, different experiences are not acknowledged. According to Schimmel (2017), “the production of civic rituals should not presuppose consensus in culture: sub communal, segmental differences cannot be easily concealed” (p. 82). The culture that is presupposed is one that rests upon white supremacy and ideologies. This is evident in the reactions to Beyoncé’s injection of black culture to this civic ritual. Though black Americans are in fact American, black culture is not viewed as appropriately American. Schimmel (2017) goes on to say “ritual that attempts to mask contradictions in civil society can also reproduce contradictions and conflicts” (p. 82). The notion that black culture or the politics of racism don’t belong in sporting events is a glaring contradiction because both are just as American as the military, law enforcement and any other aspect of American culture that is celebrated at the Super Bowl. The Super Bowl field is a hegemonic display of nationalism and a site of struggle of what is appropriate to be presented to the American public. To say America’s issues of racism should not be discussed at the Super Bowl is problematic because it is an attempt to use hegemony to silence talk of racism in general. Athlete and activist Kareem Abdul-Jabbar talks about this, noting “for people of color, professional sports have always been a mirror of America’s attitude toward race... whatever happens in sports regarding race, plays out on the national stage. Right now, sports may be the best hope for change regarding racial disparity because it has the best chance of informing white Americans of that disparity and motivating them to act” (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018). Abdul-Jabbar’s statement highlights the fact that the sporting field is a major way to bring attention to these issues because it is when black entertainers have America’s attention. Because it is so widely viewed, the Super Bowl attempts to make Americans feel like they are all the same enjoying the

same sport at the same time, but the truth of the matter is all Americans are not the same, we do not all have the same great experience in America and everyone's voice is not actually valued. The "participatory" aspect is not true participation of all because the Super Bowl does not want inclusion of all experiences.

Fraser (1990) speaks of the silencing of inequalities stating, "The bracketing of social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they don't exist when they do, this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates" (p. 64). By using nationalism and patriotism, sports create the dynamic of "we" in civic rituals like the Super Bowl. This is advantageous to creating ideologies that favor dominant groups, but silences marginalized communities. Kareem Abdul Jabar continues, "The problem is that this is not the message that those who profit from disparity want the public to hear. They attempt to silence voices of dissent in sports today just as they have throughout my lifetime and before. And that attempt is always disguised as an appeal to patriotism. They use the flag the way a magician uses a cape: to misdirect the audience from the manipulation. Poof! No racism here, folks" (Abdul-Jabbar, 2018). The adverse reactions to Beyoncé's display, discourages other black celebrities from bringing attention to racial issues. Creating the narrative that if one isn't patriotic to the American flag and law enforcement reinforces the hegemonic power of the rituals of sports.

When Beyoncé was chosen to perform it was likely because she has always been a safe artist that all audiences can relate to and enjoy. *The Root* highlights this fact:

The Super Bowl is considered an apolitical, family-friendly event, despite all the violence that happens on the field in the name of good sport. The performers chosen are typically considered "safe," noncontroversial and appealing to a general audience. Beyoncé

showing up on the field, channeling the Black Panthers—an organization largely beloved by black people and despised by white people because they equate black pride with hating white people—was never going to go over well in that arena. (D'Oyley, 2016)

Beyoncé departed from her normal brand of women's empowerment, love, and fun and chose the biggest stage in America to make a shift to the political. The Super Bowl was her way of accessing the public sphere to make a message about race.

The Beyoncé Rebrand

3. Beyoncé's level of celebrity
4. The imagery in the "Formation" music video
5. Perceptions of her performance as "political," "radical," "provocative," "bold," "outrageous," and similar terms
6. Beyoncé's declaration of black pride and unapologetic blackness

Discussing the performance, *The Root* posed the question "The entire time all of this was happening, my only question was this: When the fuck did Beyoncé become so unapologetically black?" (Jackson P. , 2016). This question epitomizes the stark shift in Beyoncé's brand and content. As noted in the previous sections, Beyoncé's brand previously revolved around love and women's empowerment. However, after her performance at *Super Bowl 50*, Beyoncé began to be described as unapologetically black, political, radical, bold, and provocative. *The Atlantic* even went as far as calling her "revolutionary." So, when did she become "black"? This shift occurred exactly one day before *Super Bowl 50* when she dropped the single with the music video,

“Formation.” This video was a key point of contention in the frenzy of Beyoncé’s performance.

The video announces Beyoncé’s transformation as an artist. According to *CBS*,

Some say the song marks a transformation for Beyoncé, from more than just an artist who makes hits to an activist who make statements. As a guest performer, Beyoncé used the global halftime stage to showcase her political message about racism and police brutality ...That message was unmistakable, especially in the song's music video (CBS News, 2016).

By dropping the video exactly one day before the halftime performance, audiences were encouraged to connect the message from the video to the performance.

The “Formation” music video focused solely on black womanhood, black culture and presented elements of activism. As described by *The New York Times*, “Formation” was “the most widely seen act of political art in recent memory” featuring the singer standing atop a half-submerged New Orleans police cruiser, police sirens, a jacket that says “POLICE” on it, graffiti that reads “stop shooting us.” At one point in the video, a hooded boy dances in front of a line of riot gear-clad officers who later join him in raising their hands — an allusion to Michael Brown. At the end of the video, the police cruiser submerges entirely under water, taking Beyoncé with it. *The Atlanta Black Star* described the piece as “a symbol of beauty, resistance and spirituality while condemning police brutality and the government’s failure to prevent Black Death and trauma following Hurricane Katrina” (Bediako, 2016). *The Root* similarly described the video as,

An unapologetically black- and Southern-ass song and video. The words to the song (as has been covered here) invoke the nostrils of the Jackson 5, baby hair and Afros, Red Lobster, and hot sauce in a purse, which I think we can all agree is about as black a list of things to mention in one song as possible. The video includes braids, slave imagery, New

Orleans underwater after Katrina, Beyoncé sinking a police car and graffiti that says “Stop Shooting Us” as police throw their arms up. It’s impossible to triple down on this blackness, right? (Jackson P. , 2016).

Because this music video is so centered on blackness, it came as a shock to Beyoncé fans. *The Root* proclaimed that “black America collectively lost its mind” (Helm, 2016). This moment became a major part of the discourse surrounding the halftime show because it signified Beyoncé heading towards activism.

As groundbreaking as this video was it was more than a “pro-black video.” The video served as the initial catalyst in the re-branding of Beyoncé. Branding or self-branding can be described as a series of marketing strategies applied to the individual, a set of practices and mindset, and a way of thinking about the self as a salable commodity (Marwick, 2013, p. 3). Prior to the release of the “Formation” video, Beyoncé’s brand was racially ambiguous to reach as wide an audience as possible. Beyoncé had never embraced her black culture or spoke about race. *The Root* described her as “black-ish”,

No shade, but between the blond wigs, Creole propers and that L’Oreal ad where she self-identified as part French, Native American and black, well, one could comfortably assume that Queen Bey was just a shade black. Black-ish, even. But all that changed the day before the Super Bowl when Yoncé dropped “Formation,” a brazen and unapologetic ode to Southern, African-American blackness and the militant love of such. The next day when she performed at the Super Bowl with her nod to the Black Panther Party and dropped the mic, black America collectively lost its mind. (Helm, 2016)

This type of discourse is significant: it comes from a source centered on black voices and describes the way Beyoncé was viewed when it came to embracing her race before the video.

Beyoncé's previous hesitance to identify as black and *The Root* calling her "black-ish," figures into a larger discourse on racial identification, colorism and hairism. These are discourses that Beyoncé's image has been discussed in due to her attempt to present herself as racially ambiguous. Even *CNN* reported "she is one of those stars of color who -- until now -- has been beyond race for the mainstream audience" (France, 2016). Communications scholar Ralina Joseph acknowledges Beyoncé's racial ambiguousness in *Postracial Resistance* (2018), "because she sold her 'African American, Native American, French' heritage as purchasable through L'Oréal makeup True Match color called 'soft sable,' Queen Bey —superstar singer Beyoncé Knowles— garnered crossover fans" (p. 4). However, Joseph frames Beyoncé's ambiguity as part of a larger strategy, "her earlier strategic ambiguity laid the groundwork for her to transform to a Black feminist heroine of wokeness whose 'Negro/Creole' background became unapologetic articulation of radical Southern Blackness" (p. 4). Essentially, Beyoncé used ambiguity as a tool to prop her up as a large celebrity so she could transform into "a Black feminist heroine" without fear of the consequences. Her shift from being "beyond race" to now center in blackness was major enough that *Saturday Night Live* broadcast a sketch titled "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black." This was a three-minute trailer for a fictional horror movie mocking the absurdity of some white people's reactions to Beyoncé's latest track "Formation." Some poignant parts of the fake trailer include the narrator stating, "it was the day white people lost *their* Beyoncé" and two white people saying, "maybe this song isn't for us...but usually everything is!" (*Saturday Night Live*, 2016). The movie of the *Saturday Night Live* sketch was rated NC-17 for white people and G for black people. This loss of a "black artist" who was once perceived as universal or mainstream and digestible for white audiences was the joke.

Several sources noted the risks involved in going from catering to a white audience to shifting to black audiences. *The Atlantic* states that,

Forgoing the universal also involves risk, as Beyoncé surely knew...as a pop star, she surely wants to have as broad a reach as possible. But as an artist, she has a specific message, born of a specific experience, meaningful to specific people. Rather than pretend otherwise, she's going to make art about the tension implied by this dynamic. She's going to show up to Super Bowl with a phalanx of women dressed as Black Panthers (Kornhaber, 2016a).

By forgoing being universal, Beyoncé is risking being seen as a cross-over artist and is comfortable being labeled as simply a black artist. As *The Washington Post* put it, "Beyoncé is 'no longer legible to America' she is stepping away from a more universally appealing trope of feminine blackness in favor of an experimental and boisterous black womanhood that has room to make critique of social-economic issues" (Bradley, 2016). It is risky when a black artist steps away from being universal to focus in on black issues because the potential to lose white audiences, and as we saw in the many responses to the Super Bowl performance, aligning oneself with blackness is automatically perceived as anti-white. *The Root* discusses this saying, "when an A-list black celebrity—I'm talking upper-echelon A-list—does or says something pertaining to race specifically advocating for the black social-justice movement, it dominates news headlines, because there's the idea that once you've 'transcended race'—that is, crossed over—and are wholeheartedly embraced and accepted by the mainstream, it is in your best interest not to remind folk that you're black" (Eromosele, 5 Videos Pre-'Formation' That Big Up the Black Social-Justice Movement, 2016). Indeed, Beyoncé took a risk in changing her music content. However, judging from the arrogant lyrics in *Formation* such as "I twirl on my hater,"

“You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation,” and “I go hard, get what’s mine, I’m a star,” her subsequent actions following the performance, it appears that Beyoncé is sending the message that the rules do not apply to someone of her stature. In the midst of all the backlash, when asked how she felt about her performance Beyoncé stated “It makes me proud” (Seemayer, 2016). Additionally, when Beyoncé’s publicist was asked for a statement about the Black Panther Party symbolism, her camp declined to comment stating “the imagery speaks for itself” (Holland, 2016). Because this message about black socio-economic issues, police brutality and race in general were so relevant at the time Beyoncé was able to take a risk and because she had built such a strong audience and fan-base she was able to make the shift without fear. This risk of stepping away from being a cross-over star could have been more detrimental in prior eras because of her dependence on record labels and conglomerates like MTV and BET to distribute and promote her content. However, in the digital age Beyoncé has the security of multiple social media platforms she can market her music, the multiple channels her fans can use to access her content like her husband’s TIDAL streaming service, and an HBO deal already in place.

It is clear the “Formation” video and Super Bowl performance were more than just a one-off declaration of blackness, but a full re-brand because every detail was planned. Prior to the release of “Formation,” Beyoncé had not dropped any new content for fourteen months. Her last project was her self-titled album “Beyoncé”, which was released December 13, 2014. Nothing in that album suggested her content would be taking a turn in the future. Then on February 6, 2016, the day before the Super Bowl, Beyoncé surprised fans with the new single “Formation”, which featured an entry into her new direction. Then after the halftime show, she went on to saturate her Instagram feed with twenty-eight photographs from the performance. The day after the Super Bowl, in the midst of all the media frenzy, Beyoncé announced that she would be going on tour

in the spring—the Formation World Tour. Fast forward to April 6, 2016, in an interview with *Elle Magazine* she was asked about her halftime performance. She said,

Anyone who perceives my message as anti-police is completely mistaken. I have so much admiration and respect for officers and the families of officers who sacrifice themselves to keep us safe. But let's be clear: I am against police brutality and injustice, those are two separate things. If celebrating my roots and culture during Black History Month made anyone uncomfortable, those feelings were there long before a video and long before me. (Park, 2016a)

After the heat from the halftime show began to die down, on April 16, 2016 she teased her upcoming HBO visual album release, *Lemonade*, on her Instagram and she was subsequently released it on April 23, 2016. While the album focused on infidelity in marriage, the visuals of all twelve music videos for each song centered on black women and black culture. *Slate* called it a mix of traditionalism and radicalism: “on *Lemonade*, the more radical provocative Beyoncé comes out as well—radical, at least, for a mainstream pop star of her stature. As many others have noted, she marshals an array of powerful signifiers of blackness: the voice of Kendrick Lamar, the mothers of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, costuming that seems to evoke Yoruba culture, the poetry of Somali-British poet, Warsan Shire, and cameos from other recognizable black women who have been outspoken about their blackness (Serena Williams, Zendaya, Amandla Stenberg)” (Harris, 2016). She continued to harness her newfound embrace of her black cultural roots. Furthermore, at the Formation World Tour, which police groups wanted to boycott, Beyoncé sold “Boycott Beyoncé” t-shirts. This move conveyed a message that she was embracing the backlash. *The Atlantic* states, “she is also directly acknowledging the people she’s alienated and telling them she doesn’t want them to come back:

What she stands for is what she stands for” (Kornhaber, 2016b). By selling “Boycott Beyoncé” shirts, she was indicating that she did not care how any haters felt about her new-found alignment with black culture (Hudson, 2016a).

Beyoncé’s rejection of her crossover ambitions combined with her embrace of black culture included activism. In July 2016 after the killings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile by police officers, Beyoncé’s Instagram page posted the following message, “We All have the power to channel our anger and frustration into action,” with a caption urging followers to head to her website. The website posted a call to action named after one of the songs on the Lemonade Album, “Freedom.” it stated:

WE ARE SICK AND TIRED OF THE KILLINGS OF YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN
IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

IT IS UP TO US TO TAKE A STAND AND DEMAND THEY ‘STOP KILLING US.’

WE DON’T NEED SYMPATHY. WE NEED EVERYONE TO RESPECT OUR LIVES.

WE’RE GOING TO STAND UP AS A COMMUNITY AND FIGHT AGAINST
ANYONE WHO BELIEVES THAT MURDER OR ANY VIOLENT ACTION BY
THOSE WHO ARE SWORN TO PROTECT US SHOULD CONSISTENTLY GO
UNPUNISHED.

THESE ROBBERIES OF LIVES MAKES US FEEL HELPLESS AND HOPELESS
BUT WE HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT WE ARE FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHTS OF

THE NEXT GENERATION, FOR THE NEXT YOUNG MEN AND WOMEN WHO BELIEVE IN GOOD.

THIS IS A HUMAN FIGHT. NO MATTER YOUR RACE, GENDER OR SEXUAL ORIENTATION. THIS IS A FIGHT FOR ANYONE WHO FEELS MARGINALIZED, WHO IS STRUGGLING FOR FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS.

THIS IS NOT A PLEA TO ALL POLICE OFFICERS BUT TOWARDS ANY HUMAN WHO IS STRUGGLING FOR FREEDOM AND HUMAN RIGHTS.

THIS IS NOT A PLEA TO ALL POLICE OFFICERS BUT TOWARDS ANY HUMAN BEING WHO FAILS TO VALUE LIFE, THE WAR ON PEOPLE OF COLOR AND ALL MINORITIES NEEDS TO BE OVER.

FEAR IS NOT AN EXCUSE. HATE WILL NOT WIN.

WE ALL HAVE TO POWER TO CHANNEL OUR ANGER AND FRUSTRATION INTO ACTION. WE MUST USE OUR VOICES TO CONTACT THE POLITICIANS AND LEGISLATORS IN OUR DISTRICTS AND DEMAND SOCIAL AND JUDICIAL CHANGES.

WHILE WE PRAY FOR THE FAMILIES OF ALTON STERLING AND PHILANDO CASTILE, WE WILL ALSO PRAY FOR AN END TO THIS PLAGUE OF INJUSTICE IN OUR COMMUNITIES.

CLICK IN TO CONTACT THE POLITICIANS AND LEGISLATORS IN YOUR AREA, YOUR VOICE WILL BE HEARD.

-BEYONCE (Beyonce, 2016)

The Instagram post included links to help readers find and contact their appropriate congressman. The *Washington Post* noted that at the time Beyoncé's Instagram had 77 million followers. To be sure, these posts and releases were more than just hints: these posts and songs addressed systemic racism and provided calls to action for her significant audience, an audience that is both developed by and connected to her level of celebrity. It takes a major star to have the type of effect that permeates news sources and creates mainstream discourse around a topic. As the *Washington Post* says, "When Beyoncé speaks, people listen...now, as perhaps the most iconic musical performer of her generation, Queen Bey is about to push boundaries artistically by addressing issues of racial inequality in a way that might put the career of a less established artist at risk" (Peterson, 2016). This passage not only highlights the power Beyoncé has to garner attention, but also her level of celebrity and how she is leveraging it to attack systemic racism.

Additionally, the use of the words "our," "us," and "we" signified Beyoncé aligning herself with the black communities that are under attack from law enforcement. Then, Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z put their money where their mouths are and reportedly donated \$1.5 million dollars to the #BLM Movement and paid to bail out protesters in Ferguson and Baltimore

(Caramanica, 2016). And in her final entry of counter narratives into the public sphere, in August of 2016 Beyoncé brought the mothers of slain black men to the MTV Awards: *CBS* noticed: “Superstar singer Beyoncé didn’t just bring daughter Blue Ivy to the 2016 MTV VMAs; she also brought the mothers of police shooting victims Mike Brown, Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner and Oscar Grant to the red carpet. Brown, Martin, Garner and Grant are some of the most important names to catalyze the Black Lives Matters movement. Beyoncé recruited the mothers of Brown, Martin and Garner to partake in her visual album, *Lemonade*, as well. They held photos of their late sons in the video” (Park, 2016b). All these instances show the way Beyoncé changed her brand from pop-star to pro-black pop star.

Beyoncé shifting her brand from a universal crossover to an activist for black culture made headlines because of the way she converged commodification with activism. *The Atlantic* highlights this stating, “What’s been fascinating about her 2016 PR campaign is the way it has encouraged and capitalized on the notion of her as someone whom everyone can’t agree on. It’s a maneuver that recognizes the drawbacks of her previous model of uber-popularity, fits in with pop culture’s love of conflict, and frees her to be a more politically pointed artist” (Kornhaber, 2016b). Beyoncé has always had a certain aura about her due to her lack of directness and the fact that she does not do interviews often. Beyoncé leveraged her celebrity and distance in 2016 to integrate activism into her brand. Furthermore, what is significant about Beyoncé’s rebrand is the way she embraced black culture and activism while growing her celebrity status and therefore profits. In the digital age and era of neoliberalism, a celebrity’s brand is synonymous with their success. In *Status Update*, Alice Marwick’s (2013) book focuses on publicity, branding, and micro-celebrity, Marwick stresses the way self-branding promotes authenticity and business targeted self-presentation. Earlier in this project I brought up Richard Dyer’s quote

“Images have to be made. Stars are produced by media industries” (p. 4). While during the era of Hollywood Studio stars were made by the film studios, in this era of digital media celebrities must make their image through highly-curated brand initiatives that include the use of media industries, “self” branding, and social media. Finally, we should always remember that while it may appear the work going into a star is done entirely by themselves there is much work by an entire team that goes into something like the brand of Beyoncé. Beyoncé’s rebrand from someone who was a crossover artist to an artist detailing issues of blackness was managed through online news and social media in an attempt to remain authentic.

The timing of Beyoncé’s rebrand brought her authenticity into question by *The Root* in two separate articles. The articles stated “But if she runs this race toward intentional and actionable blackness, anybody who has ever disparaged her will have to take back some of those things they’ve said about her being an empty vessel,” and “I don’t agree with the accusation that Beyoncé is ‘exploiting black resistance,’ but I do understand the conspiracy theory behind it. It’s kinda cool to be ‘woke’ right now, and Beyoncé has pulled a 180 at just the right time. Is she conscious or is her messaging convenient, just a constructed way to reinvent and engage black Consumers?” (Jackson P. 2016; D’Oyley, 2016). These two statements coming from black journalists are significant because they address some of the feelings the black community had about Beyoncé’s earlier lack of action towards black issues making her “an empty vessel.” This brings to attention the expectation that black celebrities have to speak out. The Root writers question if the timing of her rebrand was simply for convenience because of the shift in celebrities becoming “woke” or if it was for the right reason. However, I argue that in the post-racial moment, it made sense for her to rebrand because of the visibility of police brutality. Whether the shift was for economic success or genuine advocacy, it was necessary because it

brought racism into larger discussion. Her shift was met with embrace by many because the need of major stars of her stature to use their platform to introduce these important topics.

Celebrity status matters because they have symbolic power which can translate to political power in the form of influencing conversations. According to P. David Marshall (1997), “a collective formation of will can be better comprehended and positioned when it is housed in particular public individuals” (p. 196). In the song, video and performance of “Formation” Beyoncé was disseminating a message about the state of black people in America in addition to using Black Panther Party imagery as symbolism to motivate activism. The way the media and politicians positioned her as radical or a threat that needed to be contained, only further reveal the power of a major celebrity. When articles mention the breadth of her social media audience, this conveys the broad reach of her black liberation message. Marshall continues, “The popular music celebrity, then, is often the public representation of change. The large crowds that are associated with the performance of popular music celebrities (here we can think of the massive crowd at Woodstock and its many reincarnations since 1970) serve to substantiate the organization of power behind these representatives of change” (p. 196). With her new brand and messaging, Beyoncé shifted from being a safe artist to one that publicly represented change. She made this clear by publicizing her message through performance and her own social media. The broad reach effectively created discourse around police brutality on social media and in major news.

History Repeating Itself: The Black Panther Party to #BlackLivesMatter

7. Historicizing the moment by relating it to Tommie Smith and John Carlos’ 1968 Olympics moment
8. Framing of the Black Panther Party

9. The current political landscape

As noted previously, the timing of Beyoncé's performance came during a moment where racial issues in America were a hot topic due to the high visibility of police brutality against people of color. Beyoncé's performance and music video ignited further conversation of this problem. *CBS* notes that Beyoncé's performance, "comes during heightened racial tensions across the country, particularly in regard to allegations of police brutality" (AP, 2016). And *Fox* makes a similar statement, "Beyoncé's performance put a spotlight on the heightened racial tensions in the U.S" (Falzone, 2016). *CNN* even went on to quote the Stop Mass Incarceration Network, which linked the racial tensions and responses to the Civil Rights era: "people have been rising up against the genocidal tide of police terror and mass incarceration in ways we haven't seen since the 60's" (Hassan, Krieg, & McAfee, 2016). The statement by the Stop Mass Incarceration Network highlight the way movements in the mid-2010s are reminiscent of Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. Beyoncé's halftime performance recalled the post-Civil Rights movements through the use of Black Panther Party imagery.

Had Beyoncé' never uttered a word, her halftime performance would have been controversial simply because the imagery she used evokes a sense of black power. As *The New York Times* reported, "Beyoncé's message was unspoken, though still perceived as a threat" (Rogers K. , 2016). What came off as threatening was how she drew from a post-Civil Rights history of symbols, particularly those associated with the Black Panther Party. As noted earlier, much of the reporting on Beyoncé's performance, both critical and affirmative, focused on her nod to the Black Panther Party. Though the Black Panther Party of Self Defense (BPP) officially disbanded in 1982, their legacy has managed to permeate popular culture, activist culture, and media. Since the 60s, the BPP has been framed in the mainstream media as militant, radical, and

dangerous. This framing reignited following Beyoncé's performance because she "was channeling black radical movements" (Kornhaber, 2016a). As William Bigelow of *Breitbart* put it, "Beyoncé's Super Bowl act celebrated Malcom X and made an oblique reference to the violent, anti-police Black Panthers" (Bigelow, 2016). *FOX News* host Lou Dobbs went as far as describing the performance as "nostalgic glorification of Malcolm X and Black Panther militant thuggery" and "propaganda" (Otiko, 2016). In her performance, Beyoncé and her backup dancers wore all black leather outfits, berets, afros, bandoliers, displayed the fist up black panther salute, and at one point even formed an X on the field— all iconography and symbolism associated with and popularized by the BPP. Her not so covert nod to the BPP is what led to the Boycott Beyoncé movement by law enforcement. *Newsmaxx* reported that "a Miami police union called for a nationwide boycott of Beyoncé's concert tour this spring because the singer promoted the Black Panthers during her Super Bowl halftime act, a performance widely seen as anti-police" (Garcia, 2016). Though Beyoncé's performance did not directly mention the police, law enforcement, or even the BPP, by utilizing imagery reminiscent of the BPP the performance invokes historical attitudes of the 1960s. *The Atlantic* noticed the historical references, calling them "displays of cultural power coming from specific places, with specific meanings. They were rooted in history, but obviously spoke to the present" (Phippen, 2016).

What is significant about the costumery of her performance is the use of style and gesture to create a call back of the post-Civil Rights Era. The militant, all black dress style the Black Panther Party employed carries meaning because their fashion and symbolism was distinct and intentional in order to send a political message. Fashion is a symbolic practice used by activist groups because style creates cultural meaning. Style produced by activists communicates a

message to the public sphere by challenging the symbolic codes that constitute legitimate costumes and the Habitus of public expression (Doerr, 2016). For the Black Panther Party,

Style was a true expression of liberation in dress. The quintessential piece of Panther wardrobe, the leather jacket, was reminiscent of the color and smoothness of black skin and was meant to be seen as such. The beauty of wearing one's hair naturally in an Afro free from chemicals and straightening combs, illustrated the modern beauty of young black people, accepting the natural state and physical beauty of being black. The Black Panthers' style of dress was expressed in famous slogans such as 'Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.' (Mills, 2007, p. 3)

The BPP used their style of dress to challenge Eurocentric beauty standards and white-centric political policies. Furthermore, the berets they wore juxtapose the military's green berets symbolizing their position as soldiers on the frontline (Contributer, 2016). Additionally, the all black represents solidarity, "a unified block that could not be shaken or intimidated" (Contributer, 2016). Beyoncé brought these elements and symbols to the Super Bowl through use of style: her dancers wore afros, their outfits represented solidarity, and the performance evoked the strong militant feeling that was present during the 1960s. Finally, the BPP made activism cool by being fashionable: "they were cool by all standard definitions; an intellectual center of the new left, and uncompromising in their resistance to the oppression of the established order" (Contributer, 2016). Beyoncé's reputation as a fashion forward pop-icon used the cool element in a fashion statement to reinforce that standing up for social justice is still cool. Beyoncé and her dancers added a level of sexiness to the BPP uniforms, taking them up a notch by opting for leather shorts with fishnets and gold accents as part of their aura. Making black social justice cool and sexy added to the threat and influence of Beyoncé's messages because her fans will

want to follow. As bell hooks puts it, “In white supremacy, loving blackness is rarely a political stance that is reflected in everyday life. When present it is deemed suspect, dangerous and threatening” (hooks, 1992). Indeed, Beyoncé’s style conveyed a message that she was pro-black and, unfortunately, it was seen as a threat by some conservative groups because of the 1960s post-Civil Rights Era it echoed.

What stands out to me are the similarities between the era that the BPP emerged and the post post-racial moment in which the #BLM movement emerged. Both movements come after expectations of progress on the federal level. When the BPP formed in 1966, it was two years after the landmark Civil Rights law passed that was to outlaw discrimination and finally create change for black Americans. Similarly, when the #BLM Movement formed in 2012, it was four years after the first black president was elected into office— this was to signify change. However, despite the perceived federal and legislative progress, both eras were still riddled with racial tension and police brutality. Change was supposed to have happened but for people of color, it felt like they still were not truly equal. The parallels in the two eras are why Beyoncé’s use of post-Civil Rights imagery is significant. Social and political commentator Julianne Malveaux comments on the parallels stating, “the young man who was killed in 1966 was named Matthew Johnson, but he could have been named Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, or let's just call the roll. The officer who shot him was, of course, acquitted. The killing and the acquittal both galvanized people around the Black Panther Party 50 years ago, just as the killing of Michael Brown galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement” (Malveux, 2017). Due to heightened visibility of police brutality in both the late 60s and the mid-2010s, each era witnessed the formation of black activist groups.

The similarities between the BPP and the #BLM are noted frequently throughout the sample set. For example, Jerome Hudson of the right-wing web site, *Breitbart*, found BPP and #BLM comparable when he wrote that, “The part-socialist, part-black nationalist Black Panther Party is headline news again, thanks to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl 50 halftime show performance of her song ‘Formation,’— ‘a big wet kiss to Black Lives Matter’ that pays tribute to the 1960s militant group” (Hudson, 2016c). Comparably, *The Root* connects Beyoncé’s symbolic homage to the BPP by calling it an ode to the #BLM movement: “Beyoncé had her dancers in berets, Afros and all-black Black Panther-esque costumes—certainly an ode to the Black Lives Matter movement” (Eromosele, 5 Videos Pre-‘Formation’ That Big Up the Black Social-Justice Movement, 2016). What I glean is that both movements invoke similar attitudes and questions around race. The #BLM movement is seen as a remix of the BPP.

With that in mind, the behaviors of celebrities during the era of the BPP are being seen in celebrity behaviors now. Some sources mention the similarities between Beyoncé’s performance and the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City where John Carlos and Tommie Smith did a black fist salute. *CBS & The Associated Press* reported “Beyoncé and her dancers raised a fist to the sky, reminiscent of the black power salutes of the 1960-70s, made popular internationally by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who raised their fists to the sky after winning gold and bronze at the 1968 Summer Olympics” (Holland, 2016). *The Atlanta Black Star* takes it a step further by calling it an act of black liberation: “Beyoncé shows us the power of the musician to use art for Black liberation. Indeed, the Super Bowl performance was similar to the actions of John Carlos and Tommie Smith, who raised their fists in a Black power salute at the 1968 Olympics” (Bediako, 2016). This comparison is critical because of the similarities in the political/social conditions and the similarities of the consequent reactions of both displays.

At the time of Tommie Smith and John Carlos's gesture in October of 1968, America was seeing a rise in police brutality and Martin Luther King Jr. had recently been assassinated heightening the racial tension. This was similar to the ways in 2016 many black men had been documented as victims of police brutality and the ongoing political campaigns were spiking the racial tensions. Tommie Smith and John Carlos showed black pride at the Olympics— another sporting event that is supposed to be about the love of one's country— but their pro-blackness got them kicked off their teams and hated in white America for bringing attention to the racial issues in America. In reference to the expectation and need of black celebrities to represent, Tommie Smith said the reason they did the black power salute was that they “saw a need to bring attention to the inequality in our country,” and according to Carlos, “We knew that what we were going to do was far greater than any athletic feat” (Cosgrove, 2014). The need for black celebrities to bring attention to these matters has long existed, and sporting events work as the perfect venue because they are merging of the public sphere with such large audiences. Like the actions of celebrities in the 60s, Beyoncé's performance did create conversations surrounding the topics of police brutality and race.

Creating Conversations about Black Communities

10. The #BLM movement and expounding on what that movement stands for (or what the news source perceived they stand for)

“Beyoncé shows us the power of the musician to use art for Black liberation”

- Jacqueline Bediako, *the Atlanta Black Star*

In an exclusive interview with *Elle Magazine* titled “Beyoncé Wants to Change the Conversation,” Beyoncé was asked about the message she put forward with “Formation.” To that Beyoncé responded, “I’m proud to be a part of a conversation that is pushing things forward in a positive way” (Gottesman, 2016). It is evident that Beyoncé’s goal was to use her art as a means to create discourse around police brutality and the #BLM movement to push things “forward.” In fact, she ends “Formation” by saying “you know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation.” Beyoncé intentionally used her content to create important conversations. According to Marshall (1997), “occasionally, the social power that has congealed in popular music has facilitated the organization of social movements opposed to the general organization of the social structure” (p. 164). Beyoncé’s production and performance of “Formation” helped facilitate a social movement by the fact that it was immediately aligned with the movement and even seen as a catalyst for the movement. Beyoncé successfully injected conversations around what #BLM is and the needs of the black community.

From its inception, the #BLM movement was labeled radical, anti-police, militant, or even a hate group by highly visible conservative pundits such as Bill O’Reilly, Rush Limbaugh, and others (Arrowood, 2015). However, by using #BLM imagery, Beyoncé opened up conversation about the true mission and goals of the movement. For example, *The Washington Post* reported “the primary theme of Beyoncé’s song and music video is that of black empowerment. But some police see it as an amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement, whose members believe blacks have been unfairly treated and sometimes unnecessarily targeted and killed by the police” (Chokshi, 2016a). While the statement implies that #BLM equals anti-police, the statement also brings up the fact that black communities feel targeted by law enforcement. In response to Beyoncé’s performance, *CNN*’s Sally Kohn expounded in great

depth what the #BLM Movement stands for, its parallels with the Black Panther Party and the systemic issues the black community is facing,

Black Americans were sick and tired of being struck by police. And through the Black Panthers, they struck back. The connection to the Black Lives Matter movement today is clear -- and disturbing if you consider how little police treatment of people of color has improved in the intervening fifty years. And the critique from the right is also the same. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie has accused the Black Lives Matter movement of "calling for the murder of police officers" and Republican presidential candidate Senator Ted Cruz alleges Black Lives Matter protests "have embraced rabid rhetoric, rabid anti-police language, literally suggesting and embracing and celebrating the murder of police officers." Bill O'Reilly has compared Black Lives Matter to racist Nazi hate groups. Wrong. As Black Lives Matter declared last fall, quite clearly, as such accusations were swelling: "We're targeting the brutal system of policing, not individual police. The Black Lives Matter Network seeks to end the system of policing that allows for unchecked violence against black people. Right-wing portrayals of this as targeting of individual police are deliberate distortions to derail growing public debate about white supremacy, the ongoing epidemic of violence against black people, and the need to end institutionalized racism in the policing and criminal justice systems." Then, as now, the right wing has tried to insist that anyone protesting violent, abusive policing is anti-police. (Kohn, 2016)

Detailed explanations about black liberation movements in mainstream sources like *CNN* are important because of the lack of understanding between America and communities of color.

When topics like police brutality are not fully delved into or discussed in the mainstream public

sphere, this creates misunderstandings like the belief that the #BLM is an anti-police anti-white hate group. The fact that Beyoncé's performance helped spark this in-depth explanation is significant. In addition to drawing attention to the problems surrounding policing and black people, Beyoncé's performance and video also opened up a conversation about the larger systemic problems facing black communities. According to *The New York Times*, "'Formation' isn't just about police brutality -- it's about the entirety of the black experience in America in 2016, which includes standards of beauty, (dis)empowerment, culture and the shared parts of our history" (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016). Black Americans face issues surrounding standards of beauty because American society prioritizes lighter skin, straight hair and Eurocentric features as most desirable. Beyoncé challenges this in her halftime performance when she says "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros. I like my Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils" asserting that she likes nappy hair and wide framed noses that are seen more often on people of color. In one scene of the 'Formation' video black women are seen in a beauty store buying hair extensions— an allusion to the preference of straight hair in American society. Putting images of such experiences into the public sphere draws attention to the experiences black Americans face to assimilate in a country that is supposed to be their home. Beyoncé's performance of "Formation" does not just stop at creating discourse around police brutality, but casts a wide net by including the larger, systematic marginalization of black faces.

Expounding on the financial disenfranchisement "Formation" brings up *The Atlanta Black Star* reported, "Black power is shaped by a thoughtful decision-making process, which aims to promulgate economic justice ('the best revenge is your paper') and build wealth for generations to come. And we see Beyoncé's wealth passed on to Blue Ivy, who makes a welcomed appearance in her mother's music video" (Bediako, 2016). Much of the racism black

Americans face is deeply rooted in financial inequalities. Black people in the United States face poverty at a rate of 20% which is more than doubled to that of white Americans with an 8% poverty rate. Beyoncé addresses this when she says, “you might be the next black Bill Gates in the making” and “the best revenge is your paper,” thereby connecting race to the economic disparity that a majority of black Americans face. In her statement, Sally Kohn (2016) of CNN challenges police to “proactively acknowledge the systemic problems against which the black community is protesting and fix them” (Kohn, 2016). The acknowledgement of race-based disparities in mainstream media is sparked by Beyoncé in that particular moment and context. And because they are coming from a popular culture icon they reach a wide audience opening up greater discussion.

This matter was thrust further into public mainstream conversation during a Presidential Town Hall Meeting three weeks after the Super Bowl performance when the New York Governor, Andrew Cuomo, asked the then-presidential candidate Hillary Clinton her opinions on the performance:

Let’s talk about Beyoncé for a second because why not? Specifically what happened at the Super Bowl halftime performance? It upset a lot of men and women in law enforcement community, they felt that they were targeted and they feel this is one of many anti police messages and now there’s this resulting call: don’t buy her CDs, don’t support her because she doesn’t support the police. Do you understand where they are coming from? Do you agree? And how do you see in terms of reconciling these points of view? (Felter, 2016)

Her response did not center Beyoncé’s performance, but instead focused on the problems black Americans face with criminal justice: “We have problems in our criminal justice system in a lot

of places that we can't ignore. Put aside any particular celebrity, or any particular song or performance. The fact is that we have too many instances here in South Carolina” (Felter, 2016). While criminal justice and policing may come up in presidential talks regardless, it’s important to note that Beyoncé’s performance was the entry way into this conversation. Furthermore, because Beyoncé is an entertainer she is able to unapologetically approach these topics in ways that a politician cannot. According to *The New York Times*, “Beyoncé renders her politics both literally and colloquially. Her radicalism is both overt and implicit -- she knows that creatively drawn statements of black identity and pride are as powerful as any direct social-political statement” (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016).

Politicians do not have the same freedom to directly address race, invoke the Black Panther Party, or become attached to the #BLM Movement. In article discussing the inability of President Barack Obama to respond to racial inequality Theodore Johnson (2016) of *The Atlantic* writes,

It wasn’t favoritism African Americans sought; they simply wanted an acknowledgement that structural racism is real and some executive resolve to address it from the first president to have experienced it firsthand. But things haven’t gone quite as they had hoped. And frustration has given rise to a new generation of black voters and activists, a generation who uses more overt and dynamic techniques to influence the political agenda... Black Americans understood that Obama’s maneuverability and political capital were limited, and they knew all too well that his race was a factor in the constraints he faced, but that was all of little consolation when their policy concerns went unaddressed. When it came to racial inequalities, Obama’s pragmatism equaled the status quo—not a good look. (Johnson, 2016)

Because even a black President cannot attack race in an aggressive way, black celebrities play a huge role in creating discourses that have the potential to incite change. Beyoncé's performance provided an entry way for conversations on race to be in the mainstream public sphere. Johnson (2016) goes on to say, "Beyoncé put on the most powerful display of black femininity the Super Bowl has ever seen, and black lives dominated the news cycle yet again. These devices have been successful in getting specific issues of concern into the national conversation and onto the federal agenda with more urgency than their forebears" (Johnson, 2016). President Barack Obama is a celebrity in his own right, but when it came to race he more often was responding to race related issues than actively creating discourse around these matters. It is significant that an entertainer is more capable of influencing the political agenda to discuss concerns of black communities.

Through use of style, visual imagery recalling Civil Rights Era and aligning herself with the #BLM Movement, Beyoncé created needed discourse around issues of racial inequality. Too often issues like police brutality go ignored or minimized to being singular events as opposed to part of a larger systemic problem that oppresses black Americans. She used the Super Bowl as a moment to use one of the last mass communication stages available to send out a message and create friction that then created conversation and in some instances provided clarity on problems black communities are facing. Had Beyoncé just done her performance at one of her concerts, racial inequality may not have found its way to being a hot topic on the news agenda. Well aware of her status as a major pop icon, Queen Bey, as she's referred to, leveraged the post post-racial political moment of 2016 to shift her brand to champion for the #BLM Movement both creatively and financially.

CONCLUSION: BLACK CELEBRITIES STAYING WOKE

11. Reference to Beyoncé's social responsibility

The final trend that appeared throughout the sample on Beyoncé's performance were references to the social responsibility to speak out on racial inequality and the ways she is expected to use it. In this particular case, the social responsibility manifested as comments on gratitude that she brought attention to #BLM, the encouragement that celebrities are expected to continue to speaking out, and responses on what black celebrities are expected to do. This expectation to speak out extends past Beyoncé, though, and is placed on black celebrities as a whole. For example, *Breitbart* reported, "Melina Abdullah, a Black Lives Matter activist and leader in California, said it's wonderful that artists like Beyoncé 'are willing to raise social consciousness and use their artistry to advance social justice'" (Breitbart News, 2016). Additionally, the pro-Beyoncé protesters put in an online petition, "We have asked our biggest stars to get political and Bey went there" (Eromosele, 2016b). Statements like these two illustrate that there is a desire that black celebrities use their platform to get political to advance black liberation movements. Though neither explicitly say "black" celebrities, *The Root* uses the term "our" implying the celebrities that belong to the black community and #BLM activist says celebrities "like" Beyoncé, meaning not just her but artists who are her race and her level. These statements are reminiscent of Baldwin's expectation of Sidney Poitier to change the system (Baldwin, 1968, p. 54). Beyoncé's case of going from being a racially ambiguous crossover star to an activist using her platform to advance black social rights demonstrates the shift in the political landscape from post-racial to post post-racial. Additionally, her shift demonstrates the pressure black celebrities are facing to speak out while still risking punishment from the

mainstream media. Finally, Beyoncé's case illustrates the way black celebrities of this era are using social media and branding to create discourses.

Prior to the #BLM Movement, because America was in a moment that was portrayed as “post-racial,” there was a lack of black celebrities speaking out in mainstream media. According to *the New York Times* (2016)

In 2012, the singer, actor and civil rights leader Harry Belafonte indicted, among others, Jay Z and Beyoncé as being part of a generation of black artists who have “turned their back on social responsibility.” It was a rare public upbraiding for a couple who had so effectively shifted American pop culture, but whose work for social change was primarily rooted in what they accomplished on record, not off. Four years later, the social landscape has shifted: Politics have moved from the implicit to the explicit, and culture is following in tow, helped in no small part by Jay Z and Beyoncé, who are increasingly using their outsize platform as a tool of social agitation. In the wake of the police killings of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling this week— but before news broke of the shooting deaths of five police officers in Dallas— both released bold statements, weaving together their activism and their art. (Caramanica, 2016)

What Belafonte addresses by indicting black artists who “turned their back on social responsibility” is the fact that prior to the election of Barack Obama there weren't many black artists discussing race, police brutality, or systemic racism. However, this moment shifted due to the high visibility of police brutality and the inception of the #BLM Movement. Black artists like Beyoncé, her husband Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar, Jesse Williams, Issa Rae, and others are now using their power and platform. *CNN* quoted Bakari Kitwana, author of the "Hip-Hop activism in the Obama Era," who said “while mainstream stars like Beyoncé and her husband Jay-Z have not

necessarily portrayed themselves as activists, they are evolving and they have access to mainstream platforms” (Zaru, 2017).

This evolution is evident in the fact that Beyoncé’s brand shifted and Jay-Z became more open to discussing racial issues in public and donating money to movement like #BLM. Another example of a black celebrity using their platform Kendrick Lamar who opened up conversations about mass incarceration at the 2016 Grammy’s, just one week after Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance. Lamar performed dressed as a prisoner and had his band caged behind bars. As *CNN* put it, “For the second time in a week, an African-American performer has lit up a nationally televised event with a politically charged performance, conveying unapologetic black pride... Rapper Kendrick Lamar arguably went deeper Monday night, staging a theatrical Grammys performance that evoked the chains of slavery and incarceration along with pride of heritage and a fiery condemnation of American injustice” (McAfee, 2016). Additionally, in the same moment that Beyoncé’s performance occurred, black celebrities were boycotting the Oscars because of an online movement called #Oscarssowhite, which was drawing attention to the lack of black Oscar nominees for that year. Both *Breitbart* and *CBS* shared the *Associated Press*’s statement on the climate in which Beyoncé’s performance occurred stating,

All of this comes during heightened racial tensions across the country, particularly in regards to allegations of police brutality. Hollywood is grappling with issues of race as well, with Spike Lee, Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith planning to skip the Academy Awards after no actors of color received Oscar nominations for a second year in a row. Lakeyta Bonnette, a Georgia State University political science professor, said more and more celebrities like Beyoncé are moving toward public activism. In 2014, basketball superstar LeBron James and other NBA players wore “I can’t breathe” T-shirts to their

basketball games: “I can’t breathe” were the last words of Eric Garner, a black man who died after a physical altercation with police in New York City. (Breitbart News, 2016;AP, 2016)

From Belafonte’s proclamation in 2012 that black celebrities had turned their back on social responsibility to a fast forward four years, black celebrities are speaking out and showing out in the form of performance, boycott and social media. The political climate has shifted and black celebrity advocacy is shifting with it, so much so that *The Atlantic* proclaimed, “After Beyoncé’s performance at the Super Bowl a week ago, we can officially say a Black Power moment in mainstream pop has arrived” (Kornhaber, 2016c). Indeed, conversations about police brutality, systemic racism, and racial discrimination were becoming mainstream with the help of black celebrities as catalysts for discourses.

The reason the types of displays Beyoncé, Kendrick, or LeBron James did in the post-racial moment were effective in creating discourse is because of the level of celebrity and the symbolic power which they wield. Symbolic power is the power to intervene in the course of events, to influence that actions of others, and to create events by means of the production and transmission of the symbolic forms (Couldry, 2016, p. 99). By using imagery like Black Panther costumes, prison uniforms, calls to action on social media, “I can’t breathe” shirts and publicly refusing to attend the Oscars, black celebrities are intervening in the expected course of events and transmitting particular messages that ignite conversation.

It must be noted that examples like the ones listed above all take place on major popular culture stages like the Super Bowl, the Oscars, and sports arenas that already have mass attention and attendance. But what is key is the ability to enter and dominate these stages. According to James Baldwin, “it takes a long time in this business, if you survive in it at all, to reach the

eminence that will give you the power to change things. Sidney has that power now, to the limited extent” (Baldwin, 1968, p. 58). The Beyoncé, Jay-Z and LeBron James’s of the world have access and power to influence the mainstream public sphere. The public sphere is where discourse about what is, can and should be brought up to the State occurs. These instances of bringing attention to racism to a larger audience effectively transcend the entertainment world and make way into political conversations. Police brutality has been a major conversation occurring with legislators so much so that the Department of Justice began talks to expand the use of body cameras in 2015 following the death of Mike Brown in Ferguson, MO (Ehrenfreund, 2014) . Conversations that spark from black entertainers promoting movements have real life political and societal effects. Boycotts about lack of black presence at the Oscars are not just about the Oscars but the bigger issue of lack of black representation in important social institutions of discourse formation that could possibly value black life and their stories in one of the most significant arenas of modern life: the movies (McNamara, 2016). The way black celebrities use their access to bring these topics to the public sphere are relevant to the entire black community and experience. But as Baldwin notes, the access does come with limits. This is evident in the backlash black celebrities may receive from speaking out.

The backlash that Beyoncé faced illustrates the precarious position celebrities are in. On the one hand, there is pressure from black communities that they speak out. This is evident from statements like Belafonte’s who said she “turned her back on the black community.” On the other hand when they do advocate for black social justice they face being criticized by those with political power for not using their platform “appropriately.” For example, The New York Sergeants Benevolent Association told *CBS News*, “As a celebrity figure Beyoncé should take greater responsibility in her divisive actions that further complicate relationships between

communities of color and the members of law enforcement” (Shapiro, 2016; Duncan, 2016). Additionally, Rudy Giuliani said Beyoncé should use her celebrity status to encourage people "to respect the uniform, not to make it appear as if they are the Enemy” (Hassan, Krieg, & McAfee, 2016). Statements like these reveal that law enforcement, politicians, and those in power are aware of the power that black celebrities have but do not want them to use that power to fuel social justice movements. They prefer black celebrities to uphold dominant ideologies and the status quo.

When black celebrities choose not to uphold dominant ideologies, they are discredited. In a statement on his Facebook page, New York Rep. Pete King said “Beyoncé may be a gifted entertainer, but no one should really care what she thinks about any serious issue confronting our nation” (The Associated Press, 2016). This statement is in addition to the tons of statements from others that Beyoncé shouldn’t be taken seriously because of her status as a pop-star, her middle class upbringing, her husband’s former occupation as a drug dealer, or even *Washington Post* journalist who belittled her due to her style of dress stating, “a note to Beyoncé: If you want to make a serious political statement, perhaps you should consider wearing more clothes while doing so” (Rogers E. , 2016). These types of statements insinuate that because Beyoncé is an entertainer she has no bearing on “serious” matters—despite the fact that in a democratic nation like the United States everyone’s voice is *supposed* to be equal. Black celebrities have long been castigated for speaking out or told that they are not qualified to do so, but some black celebrities speak out anyway because there's no denying their power to create meaningful discourse. *CNN* reported about this saying,

We tend to criticize celebrities for talking about politics, for taking a stand on serious issues. We resent it when stars such as Cam Newton confront race head-on as he did

before the big game, saying that many fans dislike him because he's a brash, black quarterback. But in our pop culture-crazed, message-driven world, there's no denying celebrity voices can influence the lives of many. Celebrities such as Beyoncé, Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars are part of a refreshing generation of famous voices who are showing that fame can and should be used to push for social justice. (Jones, 2016)

Beyoncé and others in her cohort of celebrity show that despite the backlash, insults and repercussions of possible boycott, black celebrities must take the risk in order to draw attention to problems in society.

My findings support P. David Marshall (1997) who claimed that celebrities are “the proxies of change. Celebrities, then, often define the construction of change and transformation in contemporary culture... They are active agents that in the public spectacle stand in for the people. The assuming of this secondary agency role has led many stars to become spokesperson for political causes and issues” (p. 244). I have shown how Marshall’s argument is adapted to the post post-racial black celebrities who are expected to be spokespeople for systemic racism in the public sphere or be “woke.” Marshall’s argument that celebrities are proxies is about celebrities in general. However, when it comes to issues about racism only black celebrities bear the burden to discuss it because they are the only ones who have lived it and can understand the black experience. In the words of Sidney Poitier, black celebrities are expected to “know whence they came” (Baldwin, 1968, p. 54). White celebrities can and do speak out on racism however, often times it can come off misplaced, awkward, or not from a place of understanding. For example, actress Mischa Barton received adverse reactions for an Instagram post that featured a photo of her in a bikini on a yacht, cocktail in hand, with a caption that read, in part, “thank god the pigs

get caught on camera now” (Andrews-Dyer, 2016). Furthermore, white celebrities are not *expected* to speak out and receive no indictment when they choose not to be political.

Black celebrities, especially with major platforms, often are viewed with some disdain by the black community for not speaking up about issues facing the black community or speaking out in a way that supports white supremacy. This is illustrated in the way black celebrities who are perceived as misusing their platform are criticized by black centered news sources. An example of a black celebrity who has been shunned by the black community is Stacey Dash who appeared on *The Root*'s “16 of the Sleepiest (Read Not Woke) Black People We Know.” Dash came under major fire in 2016 for her conservative views, saying there's no need for Black History Month, criticizing black social activist like Jesse Williams, saying there is no need for BET, and many more offenses that are viewed as anti-black (Young, 2016; Cummings, 2017). Others on the list included Raven-Symone, Chrissett Michelle and Kanye West. Additionally, black celebrities who don't speak out at all also face being viewed negatively in the black community. In 2018, rapper Drake came under fire for his lack of speaking out for the black community by rapper Pusha-T who was in a rap beef with him at the time. Pusha-T said, “You are silent on all black issues, Drake. You don't stand for nothing, you don't say nothing about nothing. You have all the platform in the world” (Blistein, 2018). Furthermore, Robert Michel of *Black Enterprise* went on to report about Drake's lack of advocacy for the black community stating,

Why have we never seen Drake at any rallies for issues affecting African Americans?

Why has he never spoken on police brutality, racism, prison reform, etc.? Drake is arguably the biggest rapper that we have in the genre, which means he has one of the biggest platforms, and you mean to tell me he can't even retweet topics concerning

blacks? In a nutshell, Drake wants to be accepted by black culture and be able to say the n-word in his lyrics, but when it is time to speak for us he is silent. He is not above reproach just because he's one of the biggest-selling artists of all time; we must hold him accountable for his actions or lack thereof. Rappers like J. Cole, T.I., Jay-Z, and Nipsey Hussle, just to name a few, have all at one point been advocates for black social issues. They don't think that just because they are millionaires they no longer have a responsibility to their culture and community. Why has Drake never used his voice in the past? (Michel, 2018)

Black celebrities, especially on the popular culture level that Beyonce and Drake have reached, face this type of rhetoric from the black community. As Michel says, "we *must* hold him accountable." Moreover, his statement says that reaching wealth does not mean a black celebrity no longer has a responsibility to the black community. This echoes the sentiments of Baldwin who said, "Know whence you came." Black celebrities are expected to never forget the black community especially when they have a major platform to discuss racism. When they choose not to, the black community notices. While this may not necessarily cause them to lose their fans or celebrity status, they are viewed with an asterisk. Other celebrities who have been looked at with disdain for their silence include Kevin Hart and Michael Jordan. As *Ebony* puts it, "From violence against Black bodies to manipulating the way stories involving people of color are portrayed, the need for social activism is huge, but the silence by some celebrities is deafening" (Hubbard, 2016). Pieces that chastise black celebrities who don't align themselves with black social justice illuminate the fact that there is a desire by black communities that black celebrity draw attention to black issues, concerns and movements.

Black communities still lack power, representation, and resources to create changes without support from the government and state. Due to the lack of power and visibility of systemic racism in the public sphere, black communities pressure black celebrities to use their platform to empower the black communities. In the case of Beyoncé she did not become the spokesperson for the #BLM Movement, however she did change her brand to become one of the many recognizable faces of a movement that needed more mainstream attention. She leveraged her celebrity to create a conversation that could build understanding of what black communities are asking for. Her shift and the variety of responses support my argument that in this political moment where racism is being reevaluated, black celebrities must continue to bring issues related to racism, police brutality, and the black experiences from the alternative publics into the mainstream public sphere because being in the mainstream is the only way to actually create effective changes. In this contemporary era, black celebrities like Beyoncé are using tools like social media messages, public appearance, boycott and protest to challenge the dominant ideological claim that racism no longer exists.

Looking Forward

Since Beyoncé's 2016 display of unapologetic blackness to draw attention to police brutality, many celebrities have used similar tactics of symbolic display, rebranding and financial support to draw attention to the #BLM Movement. One major example is former football player Colin Kaepernick who began kneeling during the National Anthem in August of 2016 citing that he would not "stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color." He went on to say that his protest is rooted in police brutality "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in

the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (Wyche, 2016). Due to his protest, Kaepernick was allegedly blackballed from the NFL. Colin Kaepernick sued the NFL for allegedly blackballing him and reached a settlement in 2019. His case brought a significant amount of attention to the issues of freedom of speech, right to protest, and the fight for black lives. He used similar tactics as Beyoncé in that his protest occurred at highly watched NFL games throughout the 2016-2017 season; he used imagery of growing his hair into an afro which can be seen as a symbol for black pride/black power, he has launched and donated millions of dollars to several social justice organizations, and has he transformed his social media presence and brand from a football player to that of an activist. Other celebrities who have used their platform in this moment include basketball player LeBron James, actor Jesse Williams, rapper Cardi B, tennis player Serena Williams, director Ava Duvernay, actress Issa Rae, and many others. The fight to bring attention to systemic racism in America is ongoing and does not appear to be slowing down anytime soon.

Some possible directions for future research include looking at the ways black celebrities are monetizing being woke and if the black community feels the work black celebrities are doing is truly representative of their needs. At the end of the day, celebrity is about commodification and branding is part of an economic strategy to increase visibility and wealth. As there is a resurgence in social justice, it is trendy to be woke. In the case of Beyoncé and others, there have been questions about the intentions and authenticity of the timing of black celebrities who are choosing to join social justice movements. This is a research area worth looking into.

Furthermore, these celebrities have created discourse but the effectiveness of the discourse and tangible progress in eliminating systemic racism as a direct result of their actions can be drawn to question. Activists, lobbyists, and average Americans are on the ground doing behind the scenes

work to change policy. How does this work go hand in hand with the discourse black celebrities are generating? As the lines blur between activism, entertainment, and politics there are many directions researchers can take to continue to investigate what role celebrities play in social justice movements.

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RESEARCH INTERESTS

Black Media Studies, Television, Film, New Media, Cultural Studies, Critical Race Studies, Celebrity Studies, Popular Culture

EDUCATION

M.A. Humanities, Old Dominion University May 2019

- Concentration areas: Media Studies, Cultural Studies
- Thesis: Must Stay Woke: Celebrity Voices of Dissent in the Post Post-Racial America, Supervisor: Dr. Tim Anderson
- Graduate Certificate, Social Justice & Entrepreneurship

B.A. Communications, Virginia Wesleyan College (now University) May 2015

- Magna Cum Laude

A.A. Liberal Arts, Tidewater Community College May 2013

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

- "Black Celebrity Voices of Dissent in a Post-Racial America." International Communications Association Conference. Washington, DC. May 2019
- "Scandal in the White House: Olivia Pope's Role as an Outsider-Within." International Communications Association Conference. Washington, DC. May 2019
- "Must Stay Woke: Black Celebrity Voices of Dissent in Post Post-Racial America." Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Conference. Washington, DC. April 2019
- "You Know You That Bitch When You Cause All This Conversation: A Critical Analysis of Beyoncé's 2016 Halftime Performance." Union for Democratic Communications Conference. Loyola University, Chicago, Illinois. May 2018
- "Black Celebrity Voices of Dissent in a Post-Racial America." Virginia Association of Communication Arts and Sciences Conference: The Power of Communication. George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. April 2018
- "Scandal in the White House: Olivia Pope's Role as an Outsider-Within." Humanities Unbound Conference: Works in Progress. Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia. April 2018
- "Institutional Racism in Hampton Roads: Virginia Beach's 'Diversifying Municipal Contracting Disparity Study.'" Graduate Research Achievement Day 2018. Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia. March 2018
- "You Know You That Bitch When You Cause all This Conversation: A Critical Analysis of the Negative Discourse Surrounding Beyoncé's Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show" Global Status of Women & Girls. Christopher Newport University, Newport News, Virginia. March 2018
- "Lack of Black: A Look at how Black Business Professionals are Represented in Hampton Roads' Business Journal" Virginia Humanities Conference. Shenandoah University, Winchester, Virginia. April 2017

- "A Grave New World: An Examination of Twitter Uses and Gratifications in Instances of Grief?" Virginia Wesleyan College Undergraduate Research Symposium. Virginia Wesleyan College, Norfolk, Virginia. April 2015

INVITED TALKS

- "Sports, Media, Race." April 2019. Old Dominion University. Communications 260. Lecture
- "Must Stay Woke: Black Celerity Voices of Dissent in Post Post-Racial America." January 2019. Old Dominion University Graduate School 3 Minute Thesis Competition. Finalist. Presentation
- "Must Stay Woke: Black Celerity Voices of Dissent in Post Post-Racial America." March 2019. Old Dominion University Office of Research "Science Pubs". Presentation

PUBLICATIONS

Online

- Kunda, L. "ODU's Special Collections and University Archives Is Going Digital." ODU.edu. July 2018.
https://www.odu.edu/news/2018/7/special_collections_#.W3bwR_IKiUk
- Kunda, L. "For Us by Us." *MediaCommons*. May 1, 2018.
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- Kunda, L. "I Ain't Afraid of no Girl." *Marlin Chronicle*. February 12, 2015.
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Print

- Kunda, L. "Police not Fans of the Waze Craze." *Marlin Chronicle*. February 15, 2015. Page 7
- Kunda, L. "Empire Wednesdays." *Marlin Chronicle*. March 12, 2015. Page 10

RESEARCH

Graduate Research Assistant

May 2017-May 2018

Old Dominion University. Supervisor: Dr. Avi Santo

- Research for several grants & publications. Topics: post-civil rights social life, post-civil rights nostalgia of black neighborhoods, neighborhood segregation in schools, religious life post-civil rights, minority entrepreneurship, brand licensing, Licensing Industry Merchandiser's Association, social justice
- Grant proposal research: National Endowment for the Humanities' Digital Projects for the Public grant- *awarded*
- book (*in progress*): "License to License: Shifting Social Identity on the Contemporary Character & Entertainment Licensing Industry" by Dr. Avi Santo

HONORS & AWARDS

Louis I. Jaffe Memorial Scholarship (Art & Humanities) Recipient

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PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Virginia Association of Communications Arts
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REFERENCES

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