Emancipation's Daughters

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Emancipation's Daughters: Reimagining Black Femininity and the National Body.

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Conclusion

Beyoncé’s South and the Birth of a “Formation” Nation

From Beyoncé’s emergence in her native Houston, Texas, in the late 1990s as the lead singer of the award-winning group Destiny’s Child, and rise to fame alongside Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams, her trajectory to international fame, superstardom, and a successful career as a solo singer, actress, clothing designer, and entrepreneur holds important implications for critical discourses on the U.S. South. It provides a poignant illustration in popular culture of the region’s recurring impact on the nationalization and globalization of black femininity in popular and political contexts. Richard Iton reminds us of the intimate connection between popular culture and politics in the African American context in the post–civil rights era. Themes related to Beyoncé’s intersectional identity as a model of black and southern womanhood have recurred in her song lyrics, performances, and visual representations.

Beyoncé’s performance at the 2009 inauguration of Barack Obama as the nation’s forty-fourth president provided a platform for her to reflect on this aspect of her background with even more focus, by relating the conditions that made it possible to the experiences of her parents, Mathew Knowles and Tina Knowles, in the segregated South and black civil rights struggles. Beyoncé’s performance at Obama’s first inauguration ceremony expanded the foundations for the more salient and pronounced scripts of black southern identity, along with narratives related to her parentage, that have inflected her newer
works beginning with her release of the song and video versions of “Formation” and continuing with the *Lemonade* album. As various critics have pointed out, these new works have been more overtly political and, seemingly, designed primarily for a black and female audience. These observations suggest that these latest works eschew the narratives of postracialism and postblackness that grounded Beyoncé’s inauguration performance; instead, they focus on her southern background, shaping a discourse on race and national femininity that decenters whiteness and that, in the words of Jamil Smith, “drip[s] with unapologetic black pride and power,” making them visible for America.

It is a strategy that suggests the importance of examining her discourse on the U.S. South, which is only now more central and pronounced given the thematic and visual contours of *Lemonade*, in a more nuanced, complex, and panoramic way. This perspective will also help us recognize and appreciate the current intensity of her southern themes all the more.

In a June 27, 2011, interview with Piers Morgan on *CNN’s Piers Morgan Tonight*, on location in London, Beyoncé described her performance of Etta James’s classic song “At Last” at President Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration ball as the moment in her career of which her mother, Tina Knowles, has been proudest. Beyoncé made this classic song her own when she starred in the 2008 biopic based on the life of James, *Cadillac Records*, in which she portrays the legend. As Beyoncé performed the soulful song at the Neighborhood Inaugural Ball, Barack and Michelle Obama did a slow dance in a setting made to appear celestial, with bright sparkling lights that mirrored a starry sky. The singer capped off her performance by blowing a kiss to the new first couple.

The visual image of the new president Obama at the inaugural ball, like his oath of office during the day, was revolutionary to the extent that it dismantled the long-standing white and masculine visual imperatives of the presidency. The spotlight on the first black first couple dancing at the inaugural ball, along with the host, Denzel Washington, and a range of other black performing artists, such as Stevie Wonder, Jennifer Hudson, and Alicia Keys, who also featured prominently on the program, accorded black people an unprecedented salience in inaugural festivities and reinforced the democratizing impulse behind the Obama administration’s introduction of the Neighborhood Ball. Beyoncé’s nationally televised performance at the ball, complete with numerous close-up shots, reflected and extended the emphasis on the iconic images of Barack and Michelle Obama at the inauguration, which countered the typical marginality and invisibility of black bodies at such ceremonies, along with any sense of a mere “token” status of blackness in U.S. civic events.
In the interview with Morgan, Beyoncé frames her performance at this historic event as a reflection of a “new day” in the nation and as a triumph over her parents’ experience of segregation in the South. In describing this segregated southern background, she mentions how her father, Mathew Knowles, needed an escort daily as one of the first African Americans who attended his high school in Gadsden, Alabama, and the experience of her mother, Tina Knowles, a Galveston, Texas, native, of not being allowed to sit at the front of the bus. Beyoncé draws on their past struggles to emphasize the significance of this monumental moment for her parents as blacks who grew up in the segregated South, underscoring that “it’s a new day, and my parents saw me as being a part of that history.” As her biographer Daryl Easlea points out, “Beyoncé’s upbringing is a tale of a new American South, a South very different from the one experienced by her parents just 30 years earlier. Beyoncé has only had to work hard to further her career, whereas her parents, father Mathew especially, had to work hard against Southern racism, segregation and colour bars.” By positioning her role at the inaugural ball as a culmination of this long struggle for her family, Beyoncé reads her journey to it as a triumph in American democracy. She describes her feeling prior to her performance that night by commenting to Morgan, “I can’t believe I was there, and I can’t believe that it was my voice for that moment, and [I was] so honored and [have] so many memories, so many stories from my father and my grandparents and my mother just all going through my mind, and it was really fantastic.” In the vein of the perspective with which many African Americans throughout the nation read the unprecedented election of the nation’s first black president, by seeing it through the eyes of their elders, she observed, “It’s great that my parents could live to see that, and it makes me very proud.” For many, the romantic tone of her performance and the at last refrain conveyed the magnitude of the breakthrough in electing Obama as the nation’s first black president and having Michelle Obama, who grew up on Chicago’s South Side in a family shaped by the Great Migration, as the nation’s first black First Lady. The ballad’s themes of triumph, breakthroughs, overcoming, and fulfillment resonated at a deeply personal level for Beyoncé, speaking to a triumph over past struggles as much as it suggested a new beginning, portended new possibilities for the nation, and introduced the new and youthful first couple.

Yet discourses related to postblackness and the postracial that gained popularity in the wake of Obama’s election were equally evident in the interview. For example, Beyoncé acknowledged that her small nephew, the son of her sister Solange, did not understand why people were identifying President
Obama as black because her nephew did not view the president in terms of color at all. These discourses were even more salient in Beyoncé’s response to Morgan’s question about whether she has ever experienced racism. She acknowledged that she has experienced it “a bit,” but then quickly moved on to underscore the colorblindness with which her fans view her: “I feel like now . . . at least with my career, I’ve kind of broken barriers and I don’t think people think about my race. I think they look at me as an entertainer and a musician, and I’m very happy that that’s changing because I think that’s how I look at people and that’s how I look at my friends. It’s not about color and race, and I’m just happy that that’s changing.”13 This reflective moment, steeped in notions of colorblindness and postracialism, is telling. Her currency had also been advanced through advertising campaigns in cosmetics, emphasizing her “mixed” and “Creole” heritage and downplaying blackness. Indeed, her status as an “America’s sweetheart” was among the factors that made her an ideal figure to perform at President Obama’s inauguration in 2009. The tone of the song “At Last” reinforced this image all the more. I have argued myself that such backgrounds, like Beyoncé’s earlier overlooked linkages to southern discourses, spanning back to her mirrorings of fellow Texan Farrah Fawcett in Destiny’s Child’s video for “Independent Women, Part I” (2000), along with their performance at a concert during the inauguration of George W. Bush in 2001, are crucial as points of reference to weigh against the epistemology of blackness that she scripts through song lyrics and visuals in more recent works, such as “Formation” and Homecoming.14

The occasion for Beyoncé’s visit to London and the backdrop for her interview with Morgan was her performance at the Glastonbury Music Festival before an audience of more than 175,000 people, which made history in light of her status as the first black woman ever invited to the legendary annual musical event. Beyoncé’s performance of “At Last” at the annual festival unfolded against a video montage featuring images from the inauguration and civil rights history.15 Here, the linking of Obama’s inauguration to civil rights history further reflected Mathew Knowles’s and Tina Knowles’s framing of the election as a triumph over a history of racism and oppression in the South. (That Beyoncé married hip-hop mogul Jay-Z [Shawn Carter] on April 4, 2008, the fortieth anniversary of the tragic assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., also underscores her investments in weaving civil rights narratives into her personal history.) At this level, Beyoncé’s articulation of her identity through the lens of civil rights discourses accords with strategies for
fashioning identity that have been recurrently associated with black women in the public sphere of politics. Standing before one of the largest audiences in Glastonbury’s history, Beyoncé described the performance as the fulfillment of a dream because she “always wanted to be a rock star!” This historic performance, as Morgan suggested, reinforced Beyoncé’s status as “the most famous entertainer in the world.” The performance attested to her global fame and iconicity.

Beyoncé was prominently associated with the nation’s first couple in the media throughout Obama’s presidency. It is significant that she and her husband, Jay-Z, are friends of the Obamas and were also sitting on the platform as the president took the oath of office in 2009. Beyoncé’s participation in the inauguration ceremony for President Obama’s second term on January 21, 2013, in which she sang a powerful rendition of the “Star-Spangled Banner” before a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people, further reinforced her linkages to the Obama administration, although the moment was shadowed by a public backlash when some of her critics alleged that she was lip syncing during the performance. In Madison Moore’s compelling short e-book, How to Be Beyoncé, he argues that the controversy about whether Beyoncé lip synced during her performance at the inauguration overshadowed the event itself.

Moore has been at the vanguard among scholars working in queer and trans studies who are advancing the field’s epistemologies on Beyoncé, while shaping emerging areas such as Beyoncé studies. Black trans women have been foundational in promoting and mediating the iconicity of black femininity in popular culture and have played a central role in reinforcing and extending Beyoncé’s, even as she has been primarily related to her narratives as a heterosexual wife and mother in the national arena in more recent years. A host of black queer and trans women, including impersonators and activists such as Riley Knoxx and Miss Shalae (who is also known as Michelle Michaels), have played a salient role in helping popularize Beyoncé. Miss Shalae starred in a 2016 video remake of Lemonade by a collective of trans women known as the Glass Wing Group, entitled Lemonade Served Bitter Sweet. This project also resonates with the groundbreaking performance work of E. Patrick Johnson in Sweet Tea, which focuses on gay black men in the South. Beyoncé has done outreach and collaborations with black queer and trans women, as illustrated in her work with Laverne Cox, the award-winning Alabama actress and activist who became popular through her role on the Netflix series Orange Is the New Black, and who serves as the face of Ivy Park, the active clothing
brand cofounded by Beyoncé. Janet Mock has been foremost among black queer and trans women who have helped to expand and nuance analysis on Beyoncé within black feminist discourses.20

Beyoncé’s performances at major political events both draw on and reinforce her iconicity as a pop singer. That a popular figure such as Beyoncé has been highlighted as a performer at presidential inaugurations is a reflection of how black women have gained visibility in the national public sphere and influenced notions of national femininity in popular and political contexts, ideals that have conventionally been associated with white womanhood, just as the notion of the national body has been correlated with white subjectivity. Her visibility at this level illustrates how black women as a category have increasingly challenged and expanded narrow notions of American selfhood, along with national narratives from which blacks have been conventionally excluded. Beyoncé’s fashioning as a public figure with international fame and status as an icon of beauty in the first years of the new millennium registers the effect of popular culture in helping to envision a broader, more inclusive and racially and ethnically diverse notion of American democracy.

While embracing the unprecedented space that the Obama presidency opened for her as an entertainer, Beyoncé also saliently acknowledges new narratives of American womanhood and national femininity embodied in Michelle Obama’s status as the nation’s first black First Lady. Significantly, she has framed First Lady Michelle Obama as a model of quintessential American womanhood. On April 11, 2012, Beyoncé posted on Tumblr a handwritten open letter—billed by the press as a “love letter”—to Michelle Obama. The letter expresses gratitude to the First Lady for her example as a black woman and pride in having such a role model for Blue Ivy, Beyoncé’s infant daughter:

Michelle, is the ultimate example of a truly strong African American woman. She is a caring mother, she’s a loving wife, while at the same time, she is the FIRST LADY!!!! No matter the pressure, and the stress of being under the microscope—she’s humble, loving and sincere. She builds and nurtures her family while also looking out for so many millions in so many ways. Michelle, thank you so much for every single thing that U do for us. I am proud to have my daughter grow up in a world where she has people like you to look up to.

Love, Beyoncé21

While Beyoncé’s comments here have the potential to reinforce the myth of the “strong black woman” at a rhetorical level, it is notable that Beyoncé
underscores Michelle Obama’s blackness in positing her as a representative and model woman. Here, in addition to emphasizing race and gender as primary factors in describing the First Lady, Beyoncé also frames her as a model wife and mother whose commitment to the first family mirrors her commitment to all American people. Beyoncé draws on the personal in framing the First Lady as a beacon by acknowledging her as an inspiration and role model for her daughter. In her thanks to the First Lady “for every single thing that U do for us,” it is significant that Beyoncé positions herself as a representative and an intermediary to address Michelle Obama on behalf of the national body. While Beyoncé circulated this letter digitally on an internet platform, the fact that it was a scan of her handwritten letter makes it more personal and heartfelt. Beyoncé’s reference to the First Lady as Michelle also underscores the personal nature of their relationship and suggests the closeness of their friendship. The mutuality in their sentiments was evident in the First Lady’s equally public response on the social network Twitter two days later, in a tweet that read, “@Beyonce Thank you for the beautiful letter and for being a role model who kids everywhere can look up to.—mo.”

Significantly, this exchange builds on the collaboration that Michelle Obama established with Beyoncé in tandem with the Let’s Move! campaign. The development of the song and video for “Move Your Body” (2011) revamps her song “Get Me Bodied” from her 2006 B’Day album and aims to motivate and energize American youth, just as remixes of its contemporaneous “Run the World (Girls)” from her 2011 album 4 have aimed to empower girls globally. Beyoncé’s emphasis on children in her song and video work with Michelle Obama mirrors the political agendas and platforms centering children that have been disseminated by black women leaders into the twenty-first century. In 2019, on her website, Beyoncé similarly shouted out Janet Mock on a page highlighting the latter’s activist history as part of the Black History Month series We Good.

The First Lady has been recurrently described as a South Side girl, reflecting her upbringing on Chicago’s South Side, and her family roots in plantation slavery have been closely researched and were publicly acknowledged by her husband during his presidential campaign. Michelle Obama and Beyoncé both embody a model of national femininity that decenters whiteness and in which representative national subjects emerge as black and feminine, constituting black national femininities. Simultaneously, through their linkages to the Africana South, they embody new notions of southern subjectivity that were inconceivable and illegible in the past. Moreover, Beyoncé’s hometown
in Houston, Texas, makes it necessary to explore her through the critical lens and comparative methodologies of the Africana South(west). Beyoncé’s iconicity and global appeal in the pop arena show black women’s capacity to interrupt and unsettle the prevailing white-centered narratives of American identity.

In “Formation,” Beyoncé builds on thoughtful reflections on black southern identity that she offered in the wake of the 2009 presidential inauguration in the interview with Piers Morgan, and that have been manifest in her artistry since her days in Destiny’s Child. She positions this identity as core to herself as a raced and gendered subject, drawing on it to challenge narrow and exclusionary notions of American selfhood. In the process, she makes legible new models of black southern womanhood that are sometimes imaginative and unmoored to geography, constituting new southern diasporas and identities.

These critical contexts are important and valuable, because much contemporary analysis that invokes Beyoncé in relation to the region often examines them in a vacuum, without tracing the relevant backgrounds. The typical methods in popular culture analysis are almost always urban centered, ungrounded, and uninformed by the important contemporary critical thinking in the field of southern studies, sometimes reinforcing notions of southern romance, along with other essentialisms. Critical analyses of the Global and hemispheric South are the basis on which the U.S. South comes into geographic relief, as one of multiple Souths in the Western Hemisphere as a region inescapably shaped by colonialism, imperialism, and plantation slavery dialectically within the vast complex of plantation architectures iterated across its geographies, a critical perspective grounded in American studies that promotes interdisciplinary and comparative study of the region. My work on the U.S. South is rooted in such understandings, which accord with the new southern studies, critical methodologies that eschew the conventional geographic and temporal logics related to the region.

In “Formation,” profuse invocations of black southern identity assert a narrative of Beyoncé’s background that centers blackness, which complicates and, to some extent, contradicts the colorblind narratives of her history that had been circulated in the media. It shapes a subversive and inclusive notion of blackness that she boldly showcased in the video and during her performance before a national audience at the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show.

The release of the “Formation” video on the eve prior to her performance as part of the Super Bowl 50 halftime show heralded a radical turn in Beyoncé’s repertoire and a more direct and assertive engagement with the U.S.
South. Its lyrics most saliently invoke the region by framing Beyoncé's identity in relation to her “Creole” mother’s roots in Louisiana and her “Negro” father’s in Alabama, autobiographically positioning Beyoncé as a byproduct of this geographic and genetic fusion, which she terms Texas 'Bama. As Jenna Wortham notes in her dialogue on “Formation” in the New York Times, this neologism is all the more significant because it unsettles the uses of the term 'Bama as a “lethal insult.” Most typically, this term has been used in black urban contexts as an epithet to make fun of people regarded as tacky and “country,” as illustrated in several scenes in Spike Lee’s 1988 film School Daze.

The setting of the video “Formation” in post–Hurricane Katrina New Orleans, and featuring of the singer standing atop a police car that sinks as the video ends, critique the benign neglect of the city in the wake of the levee break-age in 2005 and the horrific losses of life in the aftermath. The tragedy there is foregrounded in a line sampled in the song from the late gender-nonconforming bounce rapper and local commentator Messy Mya questioning what happened there. The assertive voice that follows, of black queer hip-hop and bounce musician Big Freedia, also a New Orleans native, who does not appear in the video, establishes the tone of empowerment in the song, paradoxically by underscoring Beyoncé’s fierceness among “bitches” and arrival to “slay.” Such terms further link the song’s message to black queerness linguistically; voice-over invocations of foods such as “cornbread” and “collard greens” root it in the South as a region through foregrounded sound dimensions that also signal Beyoncé’s embrace of black queer and trans communities. It simultaneously indicts the pervasive killings of African Americans at the hands of law enforcement, which have typically gone unpunished. The camera pans through the areas of the city that were left most devastated by the storm and that have yet to recover, underscoring Katrina’s continuing impact on the landscape. This visual dimension of the video helps to render Louisiana as a place that is visceral for viewers in the new millennium and signals it as a site of lingering trauma. Its history is further brought to life in Beyoncé’s multilayered portraits of black women and girls dressed in white, recalling antebellum styles and traditions associated with black Creole women, invoking embodiments of black womanhood compellingly visualized by Julie Dash’s film Daughters of the Dust (1991). Similarly, plantation-style architectures highlighted as settings invoke this history. As Jon Caramanica suggests in the aforementioned New York Times dialogue, “Beyoncé is both old South and new South.”

The singer’s assertion that she has remained “country” despite her money, and references to soul food such as cornbread and collard greens, also play
up southern themes. Beyoncé’s acknowledgment of the “hot sauce in my bag” and images of a black marching band and black churches further emphasize southern heritage in the video. The culmination of the video with images of the sinking of the police car with Beyoncé atop it, a youth to whom officers raise their hands in surrender, and a wall that shows the words “Stop Killing Us” written in graffiti bring the video’s themes regarding the abuses by law enforcement full circle. These bold themes fueled a backlash against the singer that resulted in the cancellation of several of her performances because police refused to provide needed security in protest.

The provocative contours of the video were the backdrop for Beyoncé’s performance at Super Bowl 50, which, in a game featuring the Carolina Panthers and the Denver Broncos playing at Levi’s Stadium in the San Francisco Bay Area, further emphasized the game’s panther motifs by paying tribute to the Black Panther Party in the fiftieth anniversary year of its founding in Oakland, California. Beyoncé is featured alongside Coldplay and Bruno Mars, whose performances set the stage for her segment, which begins when she entreats her fellow women dancers, who are dressed in black leather bodysuits, afros, and berets, to “get in formation.” This styling provides a direct paean to the Black Panthers, whose leather jackets and berets became iconic in photography and television media during the late 1960s. The dancers’ afros also reference this period, when the black power movement helped popularize natural afro hairstyles and emphasized black beauty, while also visually building on Beyoncé’s assertion of adoration for her daughter’s afro hair in the song’s lyrics. Notably, Beyoncé and her dancers configure their bodies to form an X, which pays tribute to the black Muslim leader Malcolm X, who played a key role in inspiring the organization’s founding by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966. Their “formation” both enacts Beyoncé’s opening entreaty and, with the song’s lyric, echoes the militaristic formations in which the organization’s members gathered as part of the drills that trained them for armed self-defense. The culmination of the halftime show against the backdrop of a video that includes black singers among several former Super Bowl halftime performers, such as James Brown, Stevie Wonder, Whitney Houston, Prince, and Michael Jackson, saliently invokes black history themes that aligned with the event’s occurrence during Black History Month.

The juxtaposition of the visual economy of the video “Formation” and the song’s performance at the Super Bowl as a paean to the Black Panthers underlined the long history of antiblack violence in policing. It connected the Black Panthers’ founding to address abusive policing in black communities and its
long-standing critique of police brutality with the work of political groups, such as Black Lives Matter and #SayHerName, in protesting contemporary police abuses. (Indeed, the latter hashtag echoes the popular song by Destiny’s Child, “Say My Name,” one of its anthems for women’s empowerment.) Beyoncé’s use of Black Panther Party iconography in her performance lies in a continuum with its citations within black popular culture, from Tupac Shakur’s video “California Love” to musical performances and scenes in the television drama Empire. The roots of this organization in Alabama’s Black Belt and the influence of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization on its emergence link it organically to the South and, in this sense, also reinforce the southern epistemology invoked in Beyoncé’s “Formation.”

This moment arguably rests in the continuum with John Carlos and Tommie Smith’s famous salute to black power during the national anthem at the 1968 Olympics and anticipated the incendiary critiques of police violence staged later, in 2016, by Jesse Williams and Colin Kaepernick, the NFL player who launched #TakeAKnee by kneeling during the national anthem in protest of this issue and persisting racism. It suggested that it is important for American citizens to think more critically about law enforcement by recognizing abuses that they sometimes carry out, even when also invested in respecting their role as public servants who protect and serve communities, and to understand that such critiques should not be conflated with antipolice attitudes. It is also important to frame “Formation” in light of Mark Anthony Neal’s critical acknowledgment of the historical and political dimensions of black popular music. The backlash that Beyoncé experienced in the wake of this performance reflected discomfort with her validation of the black resistance movements most committed to confronting police violence in historical and contemporary eras. At the same time, her performance, which celebrated blackness and confronted persistent racism, unsettled the prevailing national fantasies of a postracial America. The video for the song “Freedom” on Lemonade anticipates “Formation” in paying tribute to the mothers of black men who have been victims of vigilante and police violence, including Wanda Johnson, the mother of Oscar Grant; Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin; Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner; and Lezley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown. These women also appeared with Beyoncé at the VMA awards in 2016 and have been called mothers of the movement, revealing Beyoncé’s commitment to Black Lives Matter and another dimension of her advocacy for mothers and children at the national level, bridging this contemporary movement with earlier civil rights activism.
In “Formation,” Beyoncé visualizes landscapes historically linked to African American subjectivity through a history of slavery and the lingering repercussions of this history, which conditioned the South as a symbolic ancestral home in the African American imaginary. For Beyoncé, the South’s ongoing traumas are recollected in atrocities such as contemporary antiblack police violence. This song reflects a landscape haunted and shadowed by this painful past. It is not only a black southern history but stands in as American history itself, as she scripts herself as a representative and symbolic subject within the nation who has reached the pinnacle of success. She accomplishes the task of embodying national selfhood by remaining grounded in her Texas ‘Bama identity and closely moored to her family of origin, while continuing to honor and pay tribute to southern legacies in her public claiming of her identity as a wife and mother.

In the “Formation” video and in her 2016 Super Bowl performance, Beyoncé underscores the utility of embracing alternative and hidden histories and challenges her audiences to envision the United States as a nation where white subjectivity is not always the center of its national selfhood. Increasingly, since the 2009 inauguration, Beyoncé’s epistemology on the South has moved from margin to center in her artistry and increasingly informed its aesthetics, presenting a counternarrative to purist, nativist, white-centered notions of American identity and, in continuing to spotlight southern history, bringing her full circle from the earlier event. Beyoncé’s subversive deployments of black southern identity and culture highlight their relevance and utility for advancing political activism. Invoking the South as an essential home in the project of constructing black authenticity, including black femininity, has some clear limitations and problems, such as risking the replay of nostalgic and romantic formulations of black identity, which repress the region as a site of lingering and continuing trauma and entrenched racial and social inequalities. Nevertheless, Beyoncé’s “Formation” is valuable, and even revolutionary, in challenging her audience to think toward a new and more visionary and inclusive politics of race, sexuality, gender, and nation formation, in which she, and we, too, can sing “America.”

While Phillis Wheatley is the earliest illustration of a black woman national icon during the late eighteenth century, in the years this nation emerged as a republic, figures such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman are among black women born in the antebellum era who crystallized as national icons during the era after slavery because of their courageous and daring work as abolitionists. This was a period during which the most ubiquitous and
familiar images of black womanhood in the national arena were premised on
gross stereotypes such as Aunt Jemima. Born in the post-Emancipation era,
Mary McLeod Bethune heralded the litany of black women who would stand
on their shoulders and establish platforms as political leaders that advocated
for freedom and prioritized children. Like her predecessors, she challenged
the prevailing pathological scripts of black mothers as mammies that gained
popularity in the years after slavery, which were iterated in the matriarch by
the postwar era, along with later stereotypes, from the welfare queen to the
baby mama, premised on the disparagement of black mothers. Bethune's
ubiquity as a symbol of the black freedom movement established foundations
for the civil rights movement and for the emergence of a leader like Rosa
Parks, whose iconicity as a mother figure and advocacy for children during
the civil rights era resonated with Bethune's leadership legacy. Bethune's leg-
endary friendship with the Roosevelts, participation in FDR's Black Cabinet,
and emergence as an iconic mother who advocated for black children enabled
her to help promote the concerns of African Americans on national agendas
during the era of Jim Crow and to engage with policy issues in a way that
served as an important precedent for the cabinet-level positions that leaders
such as Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice occupied by the end of the twen-
tieth century and into the new millennium, models that nominally invoked
civil rights but were paradoxically steeped in reactionary political agendas.
The policy maneuverings of the Bush administration empowered the right
wing and established foundations for the rise of Donald Trump; Rice played a
primary role in advancing the Bush agenda. That his administration dropped
the ball during Katrina is eerily similar to Trump's neglectful response to the

Given Bethune's birth in the years after slavery and the specter of segrega-
tion that still loomed large at the time of her death, on the cusp of the civil
rights movement, she could scarcely have imagined the election of a black
president in the United States. She would likely see a figure such as Beyoncé
as being uniquely advantaged and well positioned to make a difference, given
her connections to the nation's first black president and First Lady. Bethune
would readily recognize the potential of Beyoncé as a figure in popular culture
to build on her special friendship with the president and First Lady to make a
difference and promote policies to better the lives of African Americans and
other people in the United States and around the world who still feel excluded
from the nation's ideals of freedom and democracy and alienated within the
national body.
As I conclude this book, I am amazed and inspired by how much a black and southern woman such as Beyoncé encapsulates the diverse contours of national femininity that I have explored in relation to black feminine figures in this study, including its liberatory and reactionary dimensions, its grounding in histories from slavery to Jim Crow to the civil rights era and beyond, and its investments in narratives related to family, children, and futurity. In recent years, Beyoncé’s status as an iconic black mother, prominent voice advocating for the empowerment of black women and girls, and political activist has expanded her influence and made her all the more captivating for her audiences. Like her black female predecessors, her iconic force has been serviceable in making black femininity more legible and palatable in shaping more inclusive notions of American subjectivity in the new millennium. Increasingly, it has also helped to expand representational possibilities for black queer and trans women. Such dynamics render black feminine bodies less a premier marker of abjection when abstracted in contexts from global to national, and more entirely readable, believable, desirable, and imaginable as a quintessential embodiment of a new and more democratic kind of America, and as a symbol of all the greatest possibilities imaginable within its futures to come.