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**SELF-DEFINED: A WOMANIST EXPLORATION OF MICHELLE OBAMA, VIOLA  
DAVIS, AND BEYONCE KNOWLES**

by

**IDRISSA N. SNIDER**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

2019

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION

Approved by:

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Advisor

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful mother, Veronica Silmon, and my grandmothers, Jacqueline Silmon and Ocie Mae Hunter—who have all gone to be with the Lord. They taught me how to be and live as a Black woman with standards and pride. I am eternally grateful.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This dissertation was also inspired by the beautiful Black men in my life. My father, Rodney C. Silmon always encouraged me to my best authentic self, and my husband, Verdell Snider, has supported me every step of the way to accomplish this goal. To my children, Verdell II and Vann, I do this work in the hopes that you will be proud of me and continue our family legacy, which is to champion for the community. Lastly, I thank Dr. Donyale Padgett for your invaluable direction during this process.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Eschewing controlling images is essential to the social progression of Black women. According to Collins (2005), these stereotypes are “the gender-specific depiction of people of African descent within Western scholarship and popular culture” (p.350). Some of the most common types identified in the United States are mammie, Jezebel, Sapphire, and the tragic mulatto. These characterizations are the prototypes on which many nuanced labels are based. Included among them are: angry Black women, strong Black women, bad bitches, baby mamas, and THOTs (that whore/ho over there) along with other insidious stereotypes too numerous to cite here. The overarching problem with controlling images is that these characters were created from a White patriarchal perspective, for the purposes of maintaining political and economic power. Perhaps it wouldn’t be necessary to concern ourselves with stereotypes if they existed only as images, exclusive of damage or effect. Because these images come out of slavery and still remain highly salient, they possess a ubiquitous quality and have been normalized to the extent that “even though the images themselves change in popular imagination, black women’s portrayal as the Other persists” (Collins, 1991, p. 78).

Unfortunately, controlling images create a tainted and polarized representation of some of the most esteemed individuals. In other words, any woman of color can be mistaken for a stereotypical character, regardless of her level of achievement, education, or class. And while Black female celebrities may symbolize a sense of influence, they are not exempt from these vile typecasts. The harm in associating stereotypes with Black women who use their notoriety to bring attention to social injustice is that their efforts and contributions towards improving racial

inequality can become overshadowed or diminished when the individuals are compared to untruthful portrayals of themselves.

Despite these potential challenges, Black women have been instrumental when using their celebrity status as agents of change. For example, in 1926, Josephine Baker's topless banana-skirt performance in the *Danse Sauvage* helped to broaden the avenues Black women could use for activism internationally and in the United States, thus making her the world's first African American superstar (Guterl, 2009; Jules-Rosette, 2009). When she performed at the Foliés-Bergere in Paris, French critics celebrated Baker's bold display of sexuality and cultural flair, but in her native country, both Black and White audiences condemned her for what was then considered to be a provocative routine. Most Americans found it difficult to celebrate what would become a groundbreaking exhibition because Josephine Baker's artistry was controversial, and because she presented the unfamiliar narrative of a powerful Black woman. Her ability to manipulate the trope was compelling and it forced Americans to examine their idealizations about women of color.

The mysterious jungle scene act, which displayed White men fixated upon the Black female body, was a realistic reflection of the nation; it was art imitating life, and the overtly sexualized image of Jezebel was personified. However, during the dance, Baker disempowered the White male gaze by forcing the audience to see her as the subject, and not as a sexual object. As she gyrated and moved her body sensually and playfully for a group of onlookers comprising European male characters dressed in safari costumes—as if to suggest that she was some animal or exotic creature—Baker was not perplexed or fazed by their attention. Thus, viewers watching the performance are not fixated on the White male characters or what they could possibly do to her. At the close of the scene, she looked back at them with a joking expression and walked away—unharmful and untouched. In this instance, Baker becomes the gazer and asserts her

authority from the perspective of an oppositional viewpoint. Likewise, today's Black feminist scholars are urged by second wave Black feminist researchers to examine controlling images using a comparable assessment. West suggested the oppositional gaze "requires us to critically examine, challenge, and ultimately deconstruct stereotypical images" (2005, p. 287). In contrast to the autoethnographic gaze, the oppositional gaze is interrogational, consciously aware, seeking to document, and concerned with issues of race and racism (hooks, as cited in Boylorn, 2008, p. 414). Equally importantly, Boylorn (2008) acknowledged the oppositional gaze resists intended and embedded ideologies based on racist and internalized racist views (p. 414).

Considering this performance occurred during a time when White male rape of Black women was common and often went unchallenged, it is quite revolutionary and deserves additional attention within Black feminist discourses. Unlike most Black female performers of her time, Baker was able to reclaim her sexual power on the stage. Although she could have chosen to adopt a presentation style that would embody respectability politics, she rejected the idea that Black women should only display themselves as having a good-girl image. Baker chose to express herself sexually, but not as a stereotypical character. In one book review covering her life and art, Thomas (2007) maintained that Baker's success was built upon her talent to "consciously create narratives and scripts from essential images as building blocks, which also functioned as justification for her life choices" (p. 209). In addition to deconstructing Jezebel, Baker became a spy for the French Resistance and adopted 12 ethnically diverse children, disrupting the trusting, jovial smile of the nurturing mammie. In fact, she often put her children on public display in lavish performances to promote her political agendas (Guterl, 2009). Because of Josephine Baker's passion and ability to integrate her personal convictions into her artistry, she changed the trajectory of how Black women celebrities could participate in the fight against social injustice.

Her influences are attributed to individuals like Dorothy Dandridge, Lena Horne, Mahalia Jackson, Shirley Chisholm, and Nina Simone—all of whom were able to bring awareness to the issues of their time. Acknowledging Baker as a principle character within the study of womanist identity development is critical to understanding the premise of self-defining. African American women in the 21st century are no different from Black women during Baker's time, and many of them choose self-defining as a means to access and claim individual empowerment. Former First Lady Michelle Obama, award-winning A-list actress Viola Davis, and pop icon and superstar Beyoncé Knowles are three of the most highly recognizable and influential women in the world, and each woman developed her platform for the use of activism. The purpose of this dissertation project is to establish how these women's actions constitute profound demonstrations of self-defining in resistance to controlling images. To be specific, this study analyzes performances by Obama, Davis, and Knowles. This project focuses only on enactments that have occurred during the last 10 years and that are either historical or highly significant in terms of their visibility to the general public. By using a womanist framework, and utilizing a textual analysis methodology, I will identify staple self-definitive enactments and also uncover potential problem areas that Black women can face when choosing to self-define.

To examine self-defining as a macro phenomenon, I selected demonstrations performed by elite individuals who hold a high level of influence within the Black community and also with mainstream audiences. Establishing that resistance to controlling images is incredibly necessary for Black women with status and prestige, I am making the case for how much more difficult this challenge is for those who are underprivileged. Also, affluent Black women with fame have a greater opportunity to speak out against the mistreatment of the community. Thus, this investigation focuses on statements and performances designed to reject conventional notions of

Black womanhood, according to prominent and privileged African American women celebrities, who are in turn speaking for themselves and the community of Black women at large. The study of self-defined images helps us to better understand how culture and identity are communicated in mass media depictions. Using Black women celebrities is meant to represent a snapshot of current concerns surrounding this subject matter.

With this premise, I suggest the following research questions to guide my examination:

1. *What specific ways do privileged Black women who self-define, resist and reject controlling images?*
2. *How do self-definitive acts change/alter preexisting image representations of Black women?*
3. *Do any new characters/characteristics emerge from self-definitive acts? If so, what are they and how do they alter our understanding of Black women?*

The conceptualization of self-defining developed during the second-wave feminist movement, but research on the subject matter remains limited in Black feminist studies. Nonetheless, many third-wave hip-hop feminists are making great strides in the areas of analyzing and uncovering the agency of Black female hip-hop artists who self-define. These academics mainly address the oppressive nature of hyper masculinity along with offering critiques concerning the sexualization and objectification of the Black female body—which is often identified within urban Black music genres like rap and hip-hop. Their studies are useful in pointing to ways Black women resist the Jezebel controlling image; they also work to highlight Black women's agency in deconstructing such stereotypes. Yet, hip-hop self-definitive studies are niche because they strictly examine the Black female population within urban society. The implications of this study infer a womanist feminist position, and womanism seeks to examine Black womanhood holistically and



as an integrated community. Even though this project takes a particular interest in highly visible mass media images of Black women, the approach to self-defining used here considers how this category of activism may impact African American females in various stages of life (i.e., working mothers, students, middle and older aged, etc.).

Besides, celebrity influence has proven to be a vital aspect of shaping African American culture in positive and meaningful ways. These case studies are intended to demonstrate how privileged Black women alter implications of race, gender, class, and activism in relation to stereotypes. Controlling images have the potential to establish and reinforce systems meant to destroy Black women. hooks (2015) was vehement when encouraging womanist researchers to have a sense of urgency, even centuries following the signing of the 13th Amendment. She argued, “Devaluation of black womanhood after slavery ended was a conscious, deliberate effort on the part of whites to sabotage mounting black female self-confidence and self-respect,” because, without such efforts, existing social hierarchies dissolve (p. 59). Tackling the impact of controlling images is no small feat. These depictions were created to support ideologies that are needed for the justification of an existing rape culture, economic disenfranchisement, and the continuation of upholding a political community that devalues and ignores Black women as citizens.

### ***21st Century Womanism***

Today’s epistemological assumptions should include methods that are fundamental to advancing Black women’s activism in the now and in the future, and theoretical predictions must address unique Black feminist goals. As in the case of recognizing parties responsible for the conception and purpose of certain stereotypes, Black women are better suited to realize the concerns of their own community. Davis (1998) reasoned historically Black women’s discursive and non-discursive practices are deemed as inconsequential to understanding the human condition

in distinct ways (p. 78), but she reminds us of the value that stems from research produced by Black women concerning Black women. Besides, studies about feminist identity development are vast and encompassing. Due to the disproportionately small number of womanist scholars, however, examinations with an eye toward ideas of self-defining are lacking.

This study attempts to turn our attention past commonly found discussions about stereotypes. Making connections between privileged everyday Black women and the greater community of African American females, even if only theoretically, further sustains the usefulness of intersectional studies which is ever evolving amongst Black feminist practitioners (Nash, 2008). Sadly, controlling images are not just imageries from the past; they remain as dangerous obstacles which people of color continue to resist and reject. Although these stereotypes are painfully unfitting, much of our understanding of African American people intertwines with these representations. Therefore, self-defining is the apparatus for gaining and creating knowledge about how to distinguish and recognize Black women. According to Boisnier (2013), “Previous research suggests that the experiences of feminist identity development may differ for women from different racial or ethnic groups, or those with different racial identities,” which reiterates the need for additional studies about identity formation across feminist camps since self-defining is a womanist identity concept (p. 211).

Within those studies about African American women, assertiveness is often acknowledged as a basic component of Black women’s survival and empowerment (Collins, 1991). Informative and educational opportunities like this equip women with the appropriate tools with which to respond when they are associated with these warped images. Where womanist discussions have been essential to diagnosing the marginalization of stereotypes, research towards self-defining is not as robust. As Lorde (1984) put it, “We have no patterns for relating to our human differences

as equals. As a result, those differences have been misnamed and misused in the service of separation and confusion” (p. 115). The normalizations of White and Eurocentric ideas, or mythical norms, as she is referring to, are what most Americans are forced to accept. The main takeaway from Lorde’s position is that Black women should not over-consume themselves with trying to educate or explain who they are to those who do not understand their struggles. Instead, Black women should be more concerned about tending to their own needs by making a collaborative effort to create avenues for advancement. Progression occurs for African American women while they are in the act of self-defining because they are no longer being pigeonholed; self-defining allows them to determine who they are as individuals. It also provides them with a sense of autonomy needed to determine their path in life.

### ***Black Women & Celebrity***

Capturing moments of self-definitive acts displayed by Michelle Obama, Viola Davis, and Beyoncé Knowles highlights instances when Black women were able express their opinions to large audiences about the harm in being compared to controlling images. The *New York Times* (2008) reported 38 million viewers tuned in to watch then-Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama’s party acceptance speech; Michelle Obama was also a featured speaker. Viola Davis, who is an accomplished movie and prime-time television A-list actress, appears on ABC’s hit show *How to Get Away with Murder* (HTGAWM). Variety (2016) stated, “‘HTGAWM’ rose 107% from its live-same-day mark to a 2.9 rating (equating to 14.6 million viewers) with adults 18-49 for its third season opener” which was a good indicator that the show was still popular amongst its core target audience. Billboard (2016) announced, “Beyoncé’s total solo album sales stand at 17.2 million.” Reports estimate that the three women combined have a net worth totaling upwards of 500 million dollars. When considering the accolades and accomplishments obtained

by this group, it is easier to understand why their words and actions cause the world to take notice. Each woman's ability to manipulate the media for her purposes is meaningful.

Obama caught our attention on various occasions during her tenure in office. She exuded a frankness and transparency that is not typical of First Ladies, and this caused her to stand out. Her 2008 National Democratic Convention (NDC) speech, 2015 Tuskegee Commencement speech, and farewell interview with Oprah Winfrey (2016) share a common thread –to identify Michelle Obama as an individual. In her speeches, she is characteristically upfront about her intentions and is clear in explaining what she feels. At the 2008 NDC she told the crowd:

Serving as your First Lady is an honor and a privilege. But back when we first came together four years ago, I still had some concerns about this journey we'd begun. While I believed deeply in my husband's vision for this country, and I was certain he would make an extraordinary President, like any mother, I was worried about what it would mean for our girls if he got that chance. How will I keep them grounded under the glare of the national spotlight? How would they feel being uprooted from their school, their friends, and the only home they'd ever known? See our life before moving to Washington was filled with simple joys. And the truth is, I loved the life we built for our girls, and I deeply loved the man I had built that life with –and I didn't want that to change if he became President.

After Barack Obama's second win, Michelle Obama continued to voice her concerns about being the President's wife and she did not shy away from discussing the difficulty in being a Black First Lady. Obama's Tuskegee address offered more insight about how race and gender impacted her in this role. Although, the graduation ceremony took place in a relatively small and controlled space, it was televised for the nation via C-SPAN. Therefore, Michelle Obama was well aware that she was also addressing the American public when she told a crowd of Black graduates:

They [mainstream America] don't know that part of you. Instead they will make assumptions about who they think you are based on their limited notion of the world. And my husband and I know how frustrating that experience can be. We've felt the sting of those daily slights throughout our entire lives –the folks who crossed the street in fear of their safety; the clerks who kept a close eye on us in all those department stores; the people at formal events who assumed we were the 'help' –and those who have questioned our

intelligence, our honesty, even our love of this country (Tuskegee University Commencement Address, 2015).

And as she exited the White House, Obama succinctly explained to Winfrey, “Color. Wealth. These things that don’t matter still play too much of a role in how we see one another” (Producer, 2018).

Viola Davis’s public discussions about the entertainment industry often address the difficulty Black actresses face when having to play particular roles. In fact, many of her articulations express how she utilizes her gift for the greater good of the African American female community. Davis told Variety Magazine:

I think being an actor, in terms of the business is the least powerful position you could be in. When you see your entire career as a journey, and when, as an actor, you’re gaining power, I think you need to be the change that you want to see. I want to be able to look back at this time, this renaissance, when you have so many different narratives out there on television, and understand, that I pulled some weight in it –that I was a participant, that I was at the table, that I was active. I’m always talking about opportunity or lack thereof for people of color, so at some point I have to put my money where my mouth is. So, producing –the opportunity afforded itself to me, and I took it (Wagmeister, 2016).

This statement, and several others made by Davis align with womanist concepts related to resistance and self-defining.

Equally, important to the discussion are Beyoncé’s lyrics to her songs. She has always possessed a confident feminine quality, and this theme underlines her body of work. In the LP *Independent Ladies Pt 1* (2001) she claims,

*I worked hard and sacrificed to get what I get  
Ladies, it ain’t easy being independent  
Question, how’d you like this knowledge that I brought  
Bragging on that cash that he gave you is a front  
If you’re going brag make sure it’s your money you flaunt  
Depend on no-one else to give you what you want*

The overarching message identified from each woman is centered upon self-reliance to overcome challenges and/or setbacks facing Black women. Secondly, these messages speak to

negating stereotypical qualities aimed at stripping African American women's power to operate freely within society. As celebrities, Obama, Davis, and Knowles have the ability to make statements that ultimately yield a response –either from their critics or from the women who support them as public figures.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Why Womanism?*

The term *womanist* was originally coined by novelist and poet Alice Walker (1983) in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. To be specific, a *womanist* refers to a Black feminist or one who unapologetically loves and appreciates Black women's culture and the strength of other Black women (Hamlet, 2000, p. 421). Womanist ideology, which is used here interchangeably with Black feminist thought (BFT), is a feminist theoretical perspective that explicitly acknowledges the intersections of race, class, and gender oppression. As pointed out by Griffin-Padgett and Allison (2016),

“One of the foundational differences between womanism and feminism is that while feminist epistemology mainly ranked different systems of oppression and thus prioritized the liberal agendas of certain groups,” womanist epistemology projects race, class, gender, and sexuality as codependent variables that cannot readily be separated and ranked in scholarship, in political practice, or in lived experience” (p. 152).

These intersectional categories are innately existent during moments of self-defining. Crenshaw (2015), who is credited with creating the term, suggested advocates use intersectionality to frame their circumstances and to fight for their visibility. She went on to reiterate, “Intersectionality has been the banner under which many demands for inclusion have been made,” but was also careful to recognize its limitations, explaining, “the term can do no more than those who use it have the power to demand” (p. 999). Supplementary research investigates the similarities and degrees in differences of self-defining in direct relation to class and race.

In a study examining Black women's feminist identity development in relationship to class Alinia (2015) suggested, "As groups occupy different positions, they have different access to power and resources, play different roles in shaping oppression and resistance, and have different experiences and goals" (p. 2338). Alinia (2015) also claimed, "U.S. Black women are simultaneously privileged and penalized within a global matrix of domination" (p. 113), which highlights that privileged-oppressed Black women have the clout to marginalize Black women in other subordinate categories. The relevance here, is to determine what connects all Black women to the same legacy of struggle. Intersectionality illuminates the limitations that are placed upon Black women regardless of prestige and status, and it can be used to explain why and in what ways an examination of Obama, Davis, and Knowles is fitting to address the concerns of Black women as a whole.

### ***From Controlling Images to Self-Defining***

Patricia Hill Collins's book *Black Feminist Thought* (1991) laid the groundwork for explaining the theoretical context underlining the types of self-definitive demonstrations evaluated in this project. Collins and other womanist scholars indicated that liberation occurs when Black women are able to foster and develop a collective voice. Unlike in Western traditions, individuality is not encouraged, and "self is not defined as the increased autonomy gained by separating oneself from others." Rather, "self is found in the context of family and community" (Collins, 1991, p. 113). Although these women's actions are personal, the assumption is that they represent the thoughts and opinions belonging to the majority of African American women. Some demonstrations are more elaborate and sophisticated than others, but self-definitive performances can be carried out simplistically and seem effortless at times. Still, these presentations are multidimensional and layered.

In fact, Collins’s articulation of self-defining comprises extended passages. To organize the exhaustive lists of tenets, a delineated table of self-definitive attributes are included below:

#### **THE PURPOSE OF SELF-DEFINING**

- to resist controlling images
- to address the intersections of Black women’s oppression
- to invoke power (a powerful act)
- to promote ideas and actions that force rethinking concepts of hegemony
- to force women to “jump outside” the frames and systems authorities provide
- for Black women to create their own frames
- to foster action
- to rearticulate Black women’s experiences by infusing them with new meaning
- to dismantle controlling images without replacing them with other controlling images (be they positive or negative)
- to allow Black women not only to question what has been said about African American women by others, but also to question the credibility and the intentions of those with the power to define.

#### **WHAT SELF-DEFINING CONSISTS OF...**

- acting in a way that is unexpected
- assuming a womanist standpoint
- demonstrating a concerted effort
- articulating a survivor’s voice—as opposed to a victim’s voice
- assuming an outsider/within standpoint
- rejecting controlling images in safe spaces (Collins identifies these three: Black women with other Black women, music as art and through Black women writers) however, these safe spaces are not the only safe spaces
- rejecting controlling images in non-safe spaces
- transforming acts of silence into language
- describing the self-regarding connectedness to others

TABLE 1.1

To define the term precisely, self-defining denotes internal or public articulations that involve Black women resisting controlling images through prompting or invoking acts of power while assuming a womanist standpoint (Snider, 2018).



## CONTROLLING IMAGES

### *Mammie*

Each controlling image is unique and serves a specific purpose, but many share certain commonalities. For example, mammie is identified as the oldest stereotype, and the characterizations of the strong Black woman and the Black matriarch developed from the premise of this character. Collins maintained, “The mammie image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all black women’s behavior” (2001, p. 71). Literary references typically deem mammie’s attitudinal behaviors as compliant and unconcerned about herself. She is also recognizable because of her distinct physical traits. Mammies are portrayed as dark-skinned, overweight, asexual, and older. In the most traditional sense, this maternal figure is usually dressed wearing a skirt that stops slightly above the ankles, an apron, a long-sleeved shirt, and a handkerchief covering her hair (or wearing a black-and-white maid’s uniform).

Mammie is the antithesis of White Victorian beauty standards, operating in direct juxtaposition to her White mistress. Some of the earliest depictions of this controlling image date back over a century and a half. Harriett Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and vaudeville performances from that time period showcase variations of mammie. Make no mistake, these characters still exist in contemporary pop culture and have even been portrayed on screen by famous Black men actors and comedians like Martin Lawrence, Eddie Murphy, and Tyler Perry. In addition to present-day mammie roles, the mammie image also currently functions as a marketing tool for some companies. In Natchez, Mississippi, the Mammy’s Cupboard restaurant is housed in a building that has been made to look like a 30-foot-tall mammie figurine. The Quaker Oats corporation has used the image of mammie as the face of its Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix since 1890. Due to demands from consumers, Quaker Oats was eventually forced to present an updated

(or more politically correct) adaption of Aunt Jemima, and in 1989 the illustration lost its traditional red bandana head scarf in exchange for a soft curl hairdo and pearl earrings (Downs, 2014). These images' popularity and mainstream visibility makes it easy for society to accept propagated and stifling beliefs about Black mothers. One of the most insistent ways that mammie has been used to oppress Black women stems from how the image subconsciously encourages Black females to take ancillary jobs within the workforce.

Society at large assumes successful career women are incapable of being good mothers (Pew Research Center, 2014). Except when it comes to Black women, mammie's distinct traits further obscure the public's perception of what African American mothers are supposed to be. Some individuals believe that mammie is real and the stereotype is so believable because influxes of Black women were pushed into working in domestic roles for affluent Whites during and following slavery (Davis, 1983). Subsequently, whenever African American mothers choose to occupy identities not ascribed to mammie, they are met with great opposition, which is evident in these cases. Still, we cannot concern ourselves with whether or not real representations of mammie exist. hooks (2015) raised the point, "It is not really important that there are black women who resemble the mammie stereotype, it is important that white people created an image of black womanhood which they could tolerate that in no way resembled the great majority of black women" (p. 84).

The reality is, many African American women take pride in caring for their children while actively pursuing their career aspirations. Besides, socioeconomic status cannot truly evaluate the quality of one's parenting skills or lack thereof, and this narrow spectrum of motherhood also ignores Black women who decide to take on the duties of a stay-at-home parent. Although, historically speaking, usually a greater percentage of Black women represent the workforce in

comparison to White women. Regardless, today's Black woman has more options. Ultimately, the fundamental design of mammie is to prohibit Black women from pursuing careers they desire and to hinder Black women from creating families of their own.

### ***Sapphires to Angry Black Women***

In order to understand the controlling image of Sapphire, one must know the checkered history of its origins. Sapphire originated as a character featured on the trendy first all-Black cast television show, *Amos 'n' Andy*, in 1951. *Amos 'n' Andy* originated as a radio show; developed in 1928 by two White men, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll. The creators initially intended to take their characters onscreen in blackface, but later decided to hire real Black actors instead. Ernestine Wade played Sapphire, a character who would eventually become the poster child and introductory prototype of what we now recognize as the angry black woman (ABW).

Sapphire, like other controlling images, embodied the “coon” and “clown-like” traits that White racist ideology often associates with Black individuals. The popularity of the show alarmed Black activists of its day because the depictions were painfully demeaning. Bogle (2001) affirmed that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) released the following statement in protest of the sitcom, which aired in 1951: “Negro women are shown as cackling, screaming, shrews, in big mouth close-ups, using street slang, just short of vulgarity.”

Another significant aspect of Sapphire was her ability to emasculate and degrade the value of her husband Kingfish, a Black male. To distinctly clarify the developments of Sapphires, Harris-Perry (2011) explained,

The myth of the black women's emasculating anger has not been studied as much detail as the Jezebel and mammie images. But the extant literature does suggest that while Sapphire is one name for the myth, the angry black woman has many different shadings and

representations: the bad black woman, the black “bitch” and the emasculating matriarch.  
(p. 88)

This controlling image specifically promotes the myth that Black women do not have respect for Black men or hold them in high regard.

Yet, there is an even greater concern at stake. If we take a closer look into what it explicitly means to identify and classify Black women as Sapphires, we uncover that this controlling image is as injurious in creating misleading beliefs about single Black women and Black wives as it is in using African American women to downgrade Black men. Since the *Amos 'n' Andy* show, television networks have circulated a number of variations on Sapphire. From *Sanford and Son*'s Aunt Esther in the 1970s to *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*'s star Kenya Moore, recent scholarship has suggested that even in instances of so-called reality, Black women are “portrayed as disloyal, bitchy, lazy, difficult to work with, and a threat to others” (Padgett & Allison 2016, p. 149).

The major difference between a Sapphire and an ABW is that a Sapphire's anger is directed towards Black men, while an ABW's combative and threatening attitudes are aimed towards anyone, and in most cases, this image shows Black women in opposition with one another. The hyper, over-the-top antics of an ABW is feasibly the most frequently used trope today, especially within the genre of reality television. Television personalities like Omarosa Manigault, Nene Leaks, Chrissy Monroe, and several other Black women continue to cash in on the ABW gravy train. Since there are so many Black women characters on television who portray themselves as ABW, viewers might assume that this is how the majority of Black women choose to portray themselves. Although, Harris (2015) argued,

It is not that reality producers have mostly angry black women to choose from when casting the latest ode to consumerism and trifling behavior. A mad black woman aloft like a Valkyrie, weave flying and eyes ablaze, gets ratings and days of viral video and lights up social media like a Christmas tree. (p. 78)

### *Jezebel*

“The Jezebel stereotype—which branded black women as sexually promiscuous and immoral, was used to rationalize sexual atrocities” such as rape, mutilation, branding, breeding, and other deviant physical deeds, thus making White sexual misconduct germane to the slave culture (West, 2008, p. 294). From the time that African women and men were placed on ships, transported through the Middle Passage, and sold on auction blocks upon the shores of America, they were viewed as baby-producing machines and as erotic toys to be used however their White owners saw fit. Violence against and abuse of Black bodies were standard practice, leaving deep psychological scars and wounds on the psyche of the African American community.

The Jezebel identity did and still does portray women of African ancestry as sexually sinful, hypersexual, and overtly unrestrained. During the inception of Jezebel, imagery created about White women exemplified evangelical, pious, and modest traits. Extreme oppositions in depictions ranked White women as a pure and virtuous group, while on the other end of the spectrum, Black women were classified as unworthy and not fit for marriage. As acknowledged by Farrington, “one of the most notorious displays of the nude African woman’s physique was that of the ‘Hottentot Venus’ from 1810 to 1815” (2005, p. 16). The exhibition of Saartjie Baartman revealed the lascivious nature of White men, who for fear of social rejection were too ashamed to admit to their physical attraction to women of other races. Placing Baartman in a zoo-like environment for the consumption of viewers helped to paint the picture that Black women were inherently fit for

prostitution. As a result, White viewers could compare the curvature and shapeliness of the Black women's body to females of European background.

Jezebel is also a propaganda image created to symbolize a so-called "authentic" persona. In addition to skin color, other ethnic physical traits are appropriated to render an actualized perception of the Black woman as a sexualized object. Kinky hair, broader noses, and dark-colored eyes are commonly found features on Black people and are thought to distinguish these individuals from those of other races. As with Baartman, originally a member of the Khoi-Khoi tribe of South Africa, the genetic makeup of many Black women is of a particular curvature (e.g., rounder buttocks, shapeliness). Pseudoscience once regarded these body shapes as abnormal; this train of thought also helped to establish how the Black female body would eventually symbolize the prototype to which the overtly sexual Black woman could be idealized. Hence, Jezebel became a focal point of objectification in reality, in artistic representations, and within the media.

Unfortunately, the controlling image of Jezebel is common in today's society and is routinely exploited by members of the Black community. Sexual depictions of women are a central concern within many feminist camps. Amongst womanist circles, opinions vary about what constitutes liberation and what is objectification. Whether one deems her or himself to be on the conservative or the liberal side of the argument, problems with appropriation of the Black female body are centuries old and remain a grave concern when it comes to women's safety and respect.

Crenshaw (1993) wrote, "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities such as race and class" (p. 1242). In addition

to the rape epidemic plaguing the community, the archetype of Jezebel can hinder sexual freedom and expression. Jezebel has a negative perception, and therefore when Black women choose to display themselves as sensual creatures, the connotations previously associated with the group are worsened. These demonstrations have the potential to translate into Black women being classified under other negative labels, like “whores” (“ho’s”) and “bitches.” Whereas White women have used and continue to practice sexual communication as a means of empowerment (e.g., the SlutWalk movement), other groups of women discover that sexual liberation may intensify existing issues within the identity politics of that community.

For illustration, consider the debate over images of Black women in hip-hop and other forms of music like pop. Rappers Lil’ Kim and Foxy Brown have maintained that showing off their bodies helps to emancipate Black women from controlling images and can be compared to the dismantling of stereotypes, which is similar to the stance that Josephine Baker held during the 1920s. Conservative and “conscious” female rappers like Queen Latifah and MC Lyte have promoted a more desexualized identity to combat stereotypes found in the mass media. Nevertheless, there is no surefire way to remedy this problem. What matters is that, when members from within elect to exemplify these characteristics, a more multifaceted and authenticated identity emerges than when one is thrust onto the group.

### ***Tragic Mulatto***

To be a person of African descent living in the United States means that society recognizes you through a singular lens, which is customarily subordinate. As such, the tragic mulatto (TM) exemplifies when an individual is of mixed ethnic heritage, if there are traces of Blackness within that person’s lineage, she or he is only identified by their African origins. Regardless of some of the profound distinctions acknowledged in racial differences, this person of color is still classified

as only Black. Yet, this individual is not Black enough to be socially relegated to all of the negative connotations of being purely African. Irrespectively, individuals of mixed heritage are also not categorized as authentically European, which would allow them to inhabit full White privilege. As with other stereotypes, the TM has the ability to overly simplify an individual's makeup.

Davis (1955) defined TMs as “a commonly used American fiction and drama characterization. It denotes a light colored, mixed blood character (possessing in most cases a white father and a colored mother) who suffers because of difficulties arising from his biracial background” (p. 195). The most popularized biracial fictional character to date is Zora Neale Hurston's (1937) Janie Crawford, from a staple African American literary work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie is misidentified as a tragic mulatto by the other characters in the book, but she fights to live on her own terms and goes to great lengths to reclaim her identity. Peola, renamed Sarah Jane, from the film *Imitations of Life*, which was released in 1934 and again in 1959, is another well-known mixed character. Fredi Washington, who was actually part Black portrayed the role originally. However, Susan Kohner identifies ethnically as Mexican-Austrian. Kohner's racial background further reiterates the industry's lack of sensitivity for Blacks and Black characters. The strength of the film lies in its attempt to address the challenges African American mothers may face when raising biracial children. Nevertheless, it is shortsighted in the sense of suggesting that mixed individuals prefer to inhabit only their Whiteness. As pointed out by Melnick (2010), studies indicate, “most mixed people tend to suppress or reject their white ancestry altogether and claim to be entirely African American.”

### ***Colorism***

Between gender and racial labels lies a host of sub categorical stereotypes that involve how dark or light the hue of a Black person's skin may be. Skin-color prejudice (like hair texture



prejudice) heightens and disrupts the notion that racial disparities hinge on ethnic differences alone. Scholars have indicated that skin color can sometimes complicate how Black women are perceived by others and it may challenge how they perceive themselves (Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013). It would be negligent to not recognize these issues matter when it comes to being able to evaluate the controlling images that Black women resist. Including skin-color analysis is not intended to be clichéd, nor am I suggesting the women who are the focus of this paper fit color-based stereotypes. Colorism acknowledges the intersectional differences involved in identity politics as it relates to the discourse of womanist studies.

Russell-Cole, Wilson, and Hall (2013) highlighted, “It was only after Alice Walker used ‘colorism’ to describe the phenomenon that its more systemic nature, intimate relationship to class, and historical development could be better recognized and studied” (p. xiii). When examining Black Americans, especially as a unique ethnic culture, skin tone is at the heart of the discussion. This is primarily the case because many Black Americans comprise of mixtures of other ethnicities. Slaves were forced into sexual relations with White slave owners and therefore numerous Blacks living in America possess some traces of White ancestry in addition to their African heritage. However, the mixing of races did not expand how society views Whiteness. Individuals born with variations of racial backgrounds are classified under the umbrella of Black ethnic identity, and this is primarily a result of the one-drop rule established during slavery. Blacks with lighter skin tones have been privy to passing for White and to receiving better treatment than those who are of a darker hue. This caste system of socially placing lighter skinned Blacks ahead of dark-skinned Blacks also plays out in the media and political arenas.

When we trace the history of dark-skinned Black women on television, characters like Florida Evans (*Good Times*), a variation of mammie, and Aunt Esther of *Sanford and Son*, a

variation of Sapphire, come to mind. Annalise Keating, who is played by Viola Davis in HTGAWM, is a progressive representation simply because she is not ascribed to a controlling image. This character encompasses a variety of identities: she's bisexual and educated, and she's not a mother. Because she is dark-skinned, the expectation is that her Blackness must supersede every other facet of who she is. Self-defining is equally concerned with defining the self in addition to its Blackness. Throughout the analyses of Obama, Davis, and Knowles, discussions about their appearance are required and tie into how these women resist the particular controlling images ascribed to them. Incorporating dialogue about their exteriors/physical features is not to evaluate them on the basis of their looks per se, but skin color can be used to better explain how each woman identifies herself and constructs a public persona.

## **THEORY**

### ***Contesting Controlling Images Through Crooked Room Theory***

When similarities between real Black women and stereotypes of Black women overlap, it is easier for some individuals to associate a specific woman with a particular stereotype. Michelle Obama, Viola Davis, and Beyoncé Knowles have struggled with being compared to certain controlling images, and still each woman has attempted to reclaim her own individual identity by contesting widely accepted misperceptions about her personality. The difficulty that arises in this process is not necessarily because Black women find it particularly challenging to be their authentic selves or to openly deny behaviors they do not practice. Instead, African Americans experience adversity while self-defining because challenges arise due to the barriers or constraints developed from within the environment that woman is attempting to confront. The objective is to uncover the validity of and to identify the agency in Black female celebrities who use self-defining to reject controlling images while also trying to encourage activism amongst community members.

It should not be taken for granted that this level of influence is easier just because a Black woman is privileged. As noted by Balaji (2010), “Blackness and sexuality are often presented beyond African American female performers’ ability to self-define” (p. 8).

To this point, Harris-Perry’s (2011) metaphor of the crooked room paradigm as a theoretical technique best fits this situation because it recognizes limitations within unique spaces, which actually become a subtext from which knowledge can be generated. The crooked room theory provokes an awareness needed to explain the restraints involved in self-definitive demonstrations. In her book *Sister Citizen* (2011), Harris-Perry explored how Black women use identity to leverage political empowerment. She took the metaphor from a study conducted to examine field dependence post-World War II, in which psychologists discovered most individuals would skew their own visual perceptions in order to attempt to stand upright or to align vertically in an obscure space (p. 29). Harris-Perry suggested this phenomenon symbolizes the experience of Black women in America as equivalent to the difficulty of standing up straight in a crooked room.

Using this basis, I propose that each respective industry Obama, Davis, and Knowles occupies is a *crooked room* containing its own set of ideologies and boundaries. The political arena, Hollywood, and the music industry have extensive histories of subjugating and misnaming Black women. The crooked room theoretical framework is conducive for positing an intersectional approach to the case study, since it can concurrently account for the impact of race, gender, and socioeconomic status upon African Americans. Although womanist scholars believe all Black women are susceptible to confronting controlling images, those in the public eye have an especially tough task. Black women celebrities are vulnerable to being identified as or compared to

stereotypes because they are typically involved in industries with preexisting overarching narratives that have survived throughout history.

Another useful tenet of the crooked room theory is that it submits controlling images prohibit citizenship, or what is known as a “problem of recognition.” Harris-Perry’s (2011) explanation was derived from Hegel’s 18th-century philosophy of recognition, and summarizes that social contracts should afford individuals more than just access to resources like food, shelter, and money. In her discussion of the crooked room, Harris-Perry (2011) argued that citizens “desire meaningful recognition of their humanity and uniqueness, and they are willing to make the sacrifices to get it” (p. 36). Ultimately, the crooked room theory emphasizes the wrongdoing involved in the denial of an individual’s citizenship. Within the confines of the paradigm, citizenship is thought to be “membership in a body politic, a nation, and community” (p. 36). Though some Black feminist scholars claim that sexual and racial politics are two separate issues (hooks, 2015) and thus should be recognized independently from one another, crooked room theory appropriately tackles variations within identity politics, in that it is a reminder of how damaging misrecognition of any kind can be. Plus, misrecognition is a frequently used theme in the discourse of African American studies.

Obama, Davis, and Knowles individually seek to make an inimitable impact within their respective industries. What is fundamental to their activism involves an intrepid approach to displaying their public personas, and that often results in audiences witnessing what may appear to be a blurred line of distinction between the controlling image and the supposed authentic representation. It is extremely difficult to see Black women as they really are because, “When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black

women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion” (Harris-Perry, 2011, p. 29). In another assessment of the theory, Norum-Grace (2014) argued Harris-Perry’s crooked room forces Black women to “self-police, whether via black women’s respectability politics, or through deferment to the leadership of black men” (p.2). The adjustments made by Black women when they are self-defining reveal that Black women are deliberate and intentional about their actions. The crooked room is valid as a theoretical concept because it assists researchers to adequately analyze and criticize the oppressive forces responsible for creating barriers and limitations within various communal spaces (Norum-Grace, 2014). Naturally, womanist scholars are using a multifaceted approach that complicates how we interpret self-definitive performances. Taking a deeper look into the effect of self-defining is required so that researchers do not miss what is truly at stake, which is how we contribute to the larger story about Black women performers. To remedy this issue, Balaji (2010) suggested, “Black women must assert agency in how they are represented on screen and must fight to keep the distinction between an on camera image and the one held outside the industry” (p. 16).

Balaji’s perspective aligns with why Harris-Perry (2011) insists, “To understand why Black women’s public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior,” and these limitations vary between industry, organization, and space (p. 29). Utilizing characters from Ntozake Shange’s *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, Harris-Perry addresses the burden of the entire group by referring to those who are the most disadvantaged. Which is not to suggest that poor Black women have no hope or that wealth and status undo discrimination, but her point is to stress the weight and burden Black women experience when dealing with controlling images whether

they are privileged, disadvantaged, or aged. These problems are often worsened when accompanied by other social concerns, like poverty. Through the application of the crooked room theoretical framework, self-definitive studies “gives voice to black women and acknowledges the challenges they face” (p. 30). By concentrating on those women with a public persona, they are representing a larger group of African American female communities.

One potential drawback of the theory may be its overly simplistic analysis of describing the challenges Black women face when trying to communicate an authentic self to others. The crooked room metaphor adequately and beautifully illustrates the process of Black women attempting to distinguish themselves on their own terms, but the theory is limited in explaining what that process may involve. Plus, it is relatively new to the discourse. Nevertheless, Harris-Perry’s crooked room application is widely respected by Black feminist scholars and other academics interested in Black women’s resistance. A recent example using the paradigm of the crooked room is an intersectional study involving identity studies on Black women with disabilities (Bailey & Mobley, 2019), and there are other investigations involving the crooked room theory, such as Dabney’s (2017) thesis on representations of Black women in film.

This project is distinguished from those studies that seek to address only the impact of stereotypes in its focus on specifically explaining how and in what ways Black women choose to stand up straight in obscure racist-sexist environments. A self-definitive project, assist to further substantiate the usefulness of the theory while also providing more insight about what is involved when Black women self-define in crooked spaces.

## METHODOLOGY

Studying communication around resistance increases our knowledge about Black women as self-defined identities. Collins's work is seminal and establishes the parameters for which this process starts. Harris-Perry's crooked room analysis acknowledges its challenges. However, key examples are missing from those discussions and without prominent demonstrations marked, disapproval of the structures seeking to work against Black women who resist controlling images lacks criticism. To identify prominent instances involving self-defining, I selected a total of 12 demonstrations performed by three privileged Black women. Obama, Davis, and Knowles are accomplished and highly recognizable. Each woman expresses a strong interest in women's empowerment, and especially in Black women's resistance. Also, all three individuals have a solid media presence. Likewise, Obama, Davis, and Knowles often make public statements about these issues of concern. Thus, the text selections were critical to shaping the examination. As pointed out earlier, this analysis is concerned with attending to contemporary/third-wave self-defining activity as a macro-phenomenon. To ensure this investigation reflects current social and political movements, the performances selected had to occur within the last decade, except for the songs "If I Were a Boy" (2008) and "Independent Women Part 1" (2000). This consideration was given to the examination on Beyoncé Knowles since she is the only subject who initially identified as a mainstream feminist and then became a Black feminist.

In order to narrow down what instances could be used as texts, demonstrations were selected upon using the following criteria: 1) they deviated from what was expected or typical of the role that each plays; 2) they had a certain magnitude of visibility; these opportunities gave each woman maximum exposure; 3) they aligned with a womanist agenda, and; 4) they had a historical significance. Using these guidelines, I was able to identify between three and five primary texts

per individual. Obama's consisted of two speeches and a televised interview. Davis's texts included the roles of two characters, an award speech, and two primary interviews, and Knowles's texts are composed of the lyrics and videos of three of her songs, and a major concert performance.

The objective of my analysis was aimed at challenging racist and sexist discourse dealing with stereotyping, while simultaneously focusing on the value of what Black women articulate about themselves. To be specific, an Afrocentric rhetorical examination is a natural fit, and it is germane to describing how it is that these rhetors' words attend to Black women as a community. Afrocentric rhetoric also evaluates moral consequence (Asante, 1987), and womanist studies are anchored in Afrocentric philosophy (Stewart, 2011). This particular branch of feminist discourse strives to emphasize the significance of community amongst people of color. Secondly, rhetorical criticism allows me to systematically evaluate and interpret the persuasiveness and effectiveness of these messages. "Critical rhetoric as practice (not theory), seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power," which in this case is controlling images (McKerrow, 1987, p. 91). McKerrow acknowledges that a critique of domination can proceed from four ideology types. They are as follows:

1. Ego ideologies—refers to core themes that identify who we are (p. 95)
2. Recognizing that the issue is not one of simple oppositions (p. 95)
3. The world of the social is not this simple (p. 96)
4. A critical practice must recognize that the critique of domination alone is not an exhaustive account of the potential discourses of power which govern social practices.

Yet, my primary method of analysis involved a close read of the performances and it also entailed coding the selected texts. I was able to substantiate claims about Black women's images and representation according to Black women, using a qualitative approach. This methodology



required for me to interpret and provide value about what the performances involved. Therefore, I used an iterative analysis method to systematically code the words and actions of each subject. Tracy (2013) explained, “Rather than grounding the meaning solely in the emergent data, an iterative approach also encourages reflection upon the active interests, current literature, granted priorities, and various theories the researcher brings to the data” (p.184). I was initially made aware of these demonstrations because they were visible to the community via national television networks, and/or through internet based outlets like YouTube. As a viewer, I watched and listened to these moments as they occurred during the real-time of their releases. After deciphering specific moments as texts, as a research practitioner I watched and listened to the presentations multiple times while also utilizing transcriptions of these women’s words. To extract new knowledge and designate emergent themes from these presentations required that a textual analysis be put into place. A close textual analysis was applied to each round of coding, and served two purposes. Firstly, I qualified these enactments as self-definitive, and secondly, I identified specific knowledge about how Black women identify themselves. To clarify Obama’s, Davis’s, and Knowles’s articulations as self-definitive, their verbiage was placed into specific categories: 1) resists controlling images, 2) invokes action/prompts power, 3) assumes a womanist standpoint, and 4) womanist performance. These groups were developed from Table 1.1, which was created to organize Collins’s (1991) exhaustive list of what self-defining consists of and its purpose.

During the second round of coding, a similar process occurred. I examined the tables used to cipher each performance in order to identify the phrases, statements, words, and other verbalizations that were spoken repetitively in each instance. Once a pattern was established, I could then clarify that subtext as a theme. Those patterns that were most frequently used were noted to describe in detail what self-defining looks like when carried out, and what it is thought to

specifically promote, according to what Black women said. In the final round of analysis, the themes identified from each woman were used to determine what characteristics/image were present and consistent—from all of the subjects.

As stated previously, these women's acts are not merely intended to convince people to think differently. If this becomes the goal of self-defining, Black women are likely to lose momentum in their social progress. The persuasive element that warrants consideration is whether or not Obama, Davis, and Knowles were able to articulate an authentic sense of self and about Black women's experiences. It is not necessarily important whether their acts influenced individuals to now identify these women in opposition to the controlling images that they are resisting, even though authentic images should produce these results. Lastly, textual analysis is appropriate for dealing with the actual verbiage and physical appearance of each person. It allows me to consider questions like, "Who is the intended audience? What was the intention of Michelle Obama, Viola Davis, and Beyoncé Knowles?"

## **CASE STUDIES**

As the only Black First Lady of the United States to date, Michelle Obama is a historical figure in and of herself. Born on January 17, 1964, she also represents the middle-aged group of Black women whose adolescent years were shaped by the height of the civil rights movement and the end of segregation. Therefore, she comes from a generation of Black people whose views on society were focused on gaining equality, fighting for justice, and being recognized for their contribution to the community. As a national and global symbol, she epitomizes all things American and modern. During her Democratic Convention (2008) speech, Tuskegee University commencement speech (2015), and farewell address interview with Oprah Winfrey (2016), she resisted the controlling images of mammie, angry Black woman, and strong Black woman. In

examining the case of Michelle Obama, what specific ways does she empower Black (and other) women (i.e., those who do not share the same level of success and social visibility) through self-defining? Given that she is a global figure, how does she impact how society views Black women as a whole?

Viola Davis exemplifies a second example of how invigorating it can be for Black women to self-define and to do so freely. Davis's character in the movie *The Help* (2011), Aibileen Clark, is a housemaid working for a prejudiced White woman in Mississippi during the 1960s. Aibileen is the quintessential mammy. So why does an elite Hollywood actress take on playing a character who embodies one of the oldest and most pervasive stereotypes of Black women? She is choosing to stand up in a crooked-room entertainment industry, because the character fights back against the way that she is treated. In an equally compelling role, Davis's character Annalise Keating in the television series *How to Get Away With Murder* directly confronts stereotypes, fitting into multiple nonconventional typecasts. Although Davis is not responsible for creating characters, nor does she write the scripts, she is selective about the roles she seeks to play. Davis looks for characters that she can advance through performance. How she approaches the part allows her to emphasize certain aspects and adds to the character's personality. When possible, Viola Davis consults with decisions makers to adjust the roles. Lastly, the analysis will evaluate Davis's acceptance speech for the Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series Award at the 67th Emmy ceremony. As an African American actress, how does Davis manipulate or utilize her presence in the mass media to reject stereotypical images of Black women in the media? How do her choices as a Black actress align with or upset trends in Black women's activism? Furthermore, what connections does Davis have to the community of entertainers from the past, like Baker and Dandridge, or to her peers?

Beyoncé Knowles has enjoyed popularity in the public spotlight for longer than the other two women being evaluated. She started out at the age of 14 as a lead singer in the R&B and pop group Destiny's Child. In 2003, she released her first solo album and took the world by storm with her number-one hit singles and one-of-a-kind dance moves. She is simply known as "Beyoncé" or "Queen Bey," and her signature leotard costumes and long blonde tresses are reminiscent of performers like Baker and Tina Turner. From the beginning of her career, she routinely sang songs about women's success and independence. Eventually she matured, and has now evolved into a bona fide sex symbol. She is also considered to be an avant-garde fashionista. For these choices, Beyoncé has been celebrated as an artist and placed into icon status.

After such immense success, it seemed befitting for the then 35-year-old, multiple Grammy award-winning, multi-millionaire to acknowledge the ills facing her community. To be quite frank, her visual album *Lemonade* was reflexive about what was taking place in mainstream America at the time of its release. Beyoncé did not generate or prompt a new conversation about race relations; she simply joined the dialogue. Police in Tampa threatened to boycott the singer-songwriter by withholding security at her concerts because her video "Formation" features a scene with a young Black boy holding a poster reading, "Stop Shooting Us." It became apparent that when Knowles decided to sing about the concerns and issues facing Black women, the mainstream was not ready to accept her on these terms.

With this example, we have another blatant instance in which a Black woman is validated and even celebrated for exuding ass-shaking, Jezebel-type traits. The problem occurs when she decides to articulate herself in a way that questions societal expectations. The reaction of the police seems to suggest that Black women are better off remaining silent or ignorant about the challenges facing them and their communities. Questions about how self-defining works when the Black

woman is not seen as a political figure arise. To be specific, is there a different response and reaction to those who self-define in comparison to women who are expected to, like activist and political figures?

## **DATA COLLECTION**

For this project, texts were chosen from a mixture of primary and secondary sources. I purchased Knowles's *Lemonade* and watched all of the speeches as they occurred in real time. On the other hand, utilizing a variety of video and Internet journal sources allowed me to have transcripts of each subject's words and to view what was occurring during the time of the performances. Identifying self-definitive acts along with situating those deeds in relation to how the public responds to Black women's resistance is imperative. These performances are communicative acts; and they should be brought to our attention. They are meant to inspire members of marginalized groups and therefore are regarded as models for future demonstrations. The data utilized here is necessary to uncover the advantages and drawbacks of such public presentations.

From its foundational premise, Collins (1991) affirms that "black women's efforts to find a voice have occurred in at least three safe spaces," including Black women's relationships with one another, through the tradition of the blues (and other forms of music), and through the voices of women writers (p. 96). Some of these demonstrations occurred within what Collins (1991) specifically identifies as a safe space. Still, many of the performances transpired in highly precarious environments, making Obama, Davis, and Knowles especially vulnerable to criticism and monetary loss. Through strategic planning and having the confidence to take risks, Obama, Davis, and Knowles carved out intra-safe spaces within places that could have negatively threatened their reputations or ended their careers. These case studies reveal that self-defining can

also occur in absolute perilous settings. As indicated in the moments selected for this dissertation, safe spaces of any type and even non-safe spaces encourage a vitality and creativity within Black women that inspires them to be unique and courageous.

## **DISSERTATION OUTLINE**

In addition to the introductory section, this essay includes four s. The primary function of each chapter is to make a case for and to substantiate in what ways the selected demonstrations constitute self-definitive acts. The second chapter will comprise a textual analysis of Michelle Obama's oratory remarks that condemn or reject stereotypes of Black women. This chapter exclusively investigates her inclusion of certain messages into her public statements, as opposed to choosing not to discuss them openly. Along with questions about her technique, word choices and her attire selections will also be examined. The analysis will uncover what types of descriptors and adjectives Obama uses to speak about herself and other Black women. Chapter Two answers the question, "Does her approach simply rearticulate how she defines herself, or does it criticize verbiage intended to describe her and other Black women as stereotypes?" Afterward, her responses are placed accordingly with the purpose and functions listed in the self-definitive table included earlier. Next, the analysis will be used to identify themes.

In the third chapter, I will examine Viola Davis's Emmy award speech in the same fashion as the study conducted on Obama. In addition to textual considerations, I will discuss Davis's performances as Annalise Keating from *HTGAWM* and Aibileen Clark from *The Help* (2011), as they represent an attractive dichotomy in image representation. In these examinations, the questioning interrogates ways moral impetus applies to Black women's images. Why is it important for Davis to play a conservative, church-going character as well as a bisexual lawyer?

The fourth chapter covering Beyoncé Knowles is the final case study. It will consist of evaluations of Knowles's womanist anthem "Formation" (2016) from her solo project, the visual-audio album *Lemonade* (2016). Within Beyoncé's self-definitive performances, she resists the tragic mulatto and Jezebel stereotypes. To be precise, I am going to examine the evolution of Beyoncé's brand of feminism, which initially aligned with a mainstream feminist perspective. The lyrical content and videos associated with the songs "Independent Women Part 1" (2000) and "If I Were a Boy" (2008) represent Beyoncé's journey to adopting a racialized feminist stance. Also, the 2016 Super Bowl halftime show featured Beyoncé dressed in black leather attire reminiscent of Black Panther regalia, and it sparked a huge public response. The song that generated the most feedback during the routine was "Formation" (2016). Although there are similar elements in the Super Bowl performance and the music video, these two instances will be treated as separate texts because of the different contexts surrounding each unit.

One of the issues that I will address about Knowles in particular concerns itself with the difficulty Black women face with respect to their opinions and actions being legitimized. From the very beginning of Knowles's career, her brand has consistently included and promoted mainstream feminist content. But, she is routinely questioned, discredited, and scrutinized for her ideological beliefs. Analyzing Beyoncé's texts will allow me to ask the questions "Who is capable of assuming a Black feminist self-definitive position? Are there unwelcoming barriers within mainstream feminist ideology that spill over into Black feminist ideologies? How do intersectional differences prohibit or promote self-defining even for privileged Black women?"

The final chapter discusses and analyzes themes identified in each case study. Also, throughout the chapters, when applicable, editorials from selected media sources will be incorporated, evaluated, and critiqued to better explain and predict how the media and the public

respond to self-defining. In conclusion, womanist discourse does not seek to replace one stereotype with another. Resistance is varied by each group, and when Black women embrace parts of images or roles that seem restrictive to others, they should be granted the opportunity and space to do so. The problem occurs when women cannot decide for themselves what type of woman that they desire to be. Black women are overexposed and bombarded with images of themselves, created by others, from the time of their birth. Undoing these perceptions requires that they become reflexive and determined to be have a genuine sense of self.



## CHAPTER 2 “Michelle Obama: Self-Defined in Political Spheres”

I’m not that into labels. So if you laid out a feminist agenda, I would probably agree with a large portion of it. But I wouldn’t identify as a feminist just like I probably wouldn’t identify as a liberal or a progressive. (Michelle Obama, quoted in *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2007)

### INTRODUCTION

Cunningham (2015) wrote, “[Michelle] Obama rhetorically constructs herself as a family-oriented black woman in a public sphere that is not always welcoming to the ‘Mom-in-Chief’” (p. 217). The rhetorical frames that Obama creates through public display are certainly purposeful and intentional. Plus, Obama accepts the gravity and the enormous obligation of the prestigious title of First Lady of the United States (FLOTUS). Equally significant, she seems to be especially cognizant of the weight and symbolism of being the first Black woman to hold the position. Though she was successful at implementing several national and global campaigns aimed at assisting all Americans, with operations like “Let’s Move” and “62milliongirls,” her actions reveal traces of a woman who is obviously devoted to the community that shaped her, and the African American people are those to whom she seems to indicate she is most indebted.

Obama’s conceptualization of Black America is underlined with pride and adoration; it also provides a reasonable explanation for why she routinely acknowledges her Blackness, the challenges facing African American people, and African Americans’ rich history. Historically speaking, First Ladies’ platforms have been developed to embrace humanitarian efforts. Grey (2016) explained, “FLOTUSs have used their office to advocate for social programs that served vulnerable populations, such as Rosalyn Carter’s work for mental health awareness, Grace Coolidge’s embrace of the deaf, and Florence Harding’s efforts on behalf of soldiers returning from war,” but never before did our nation have a First Lady who openly served the Black community—which is also vulnerable to multiple forms of disenfranchisement (p. 565).

When Michelle Obama speaks about her life before the White House, she indicates that her formative years growing up on the South Side of Chicago in a working-class family were filled with precious times of warmth and love. She is well aware of the fact that her father, the late Fraser C. Robinson III, worked tremendously hard to provide for her and her older brother Craig despite his battle with multiple sclerosis. “Having come of age at the tail end of the Black Power movement and possessing ruling-class educational credentials, she wears her working-class roots as easily as she wears Narciso,” wrote Little and Chambers (2017), and this description reveals why even when Obama stood side by side with the leader of the free world, advocating for Black people was standard. It would be safe to assume that Obama had already learned some of the valuable lessons about racial inequality that many Blacks come to realize as they move up through the ranks of society. *The Washington Post* quoted Michelle stating:

My experiences at Princeton have made me far more aware of my “blackness” than ever before...I found that no matter how liberal and open-minded some of my white professors and classmates try to be towards me, I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus; as if I really don’t belong” (Little & Chambers, 2017, p. 24).

Rather than trying to accommodate the expectations of people who lack understanding about her cultural or ethnic background, she seems to indicate that she finds solace in continuing to embrace individuals who are of the same identity, and she appreciates individuals who share common values. Michelle Obama announced to the crowd during Barack Obama’s second run for office:

We learned about dignity and decency—that how you work matters more than how much you make; that helping others means more than just getting ahead yourself. We learned about honesty and integrity—that the truth matters—that you don’t take shortcuts or play by your own set of rules; and success doesn’t count unless you earn it fair and square. We learned about gratitude and humility—that so many people had a hand in our success, from the teachers who inspired us to the janitors who kept our school clean. And we were taught to value everyone’s contribution and treat everyone with respect. (Democratic National Convention, 2012)

Her perception of identity encompasses race and community connectedness. Notwithstanding, Obama's affinity for her own group does not hinder her ability to appreciate people from different ethnic backgrounds or those who might hold dissimilar principles and beliefs. As First Lady, she managed to make many connections and her humanitarian efforts indicated her ability to do so.

The road to the White House was paved with challenges. Many of the problems she faced were based upon identity-respectability politics. Not long after the Obamas hit the 2008 presidential campaign trail Americans came to the realization that the former Michelle LaVaughn Robinson wasn't just another politician's wife. It was as if she was concurrently running for office with her husband and then-candidate hopeful, Barack Obama. Americans were equally interested in getting to know about the first potential Black First Lady of the United States as they were about the Black man with the infectious smile and funny name. Mrs. Obama was different from her predecessors and the media coverage surrounding her fascinated American citizens. One of the first major stories that began circulating about her occurred after accusations surfaced claiming that she had used the racially suggestive term "Whitey" during a talk at her local church.

Shortly thereafter, *The New York Times* (2008) reported that her image needed softening. The *Times* also suggested Michelle Obama's debut on the hit daytime talk show *The View* was an attempt to "emphasize her humble roots." As chatter about the alleged incident continued to swarm, Obama did not remain silent. She responded to the accusations by matter-of-factly stating, "I mean, 'whitey'? That's something George Jefferson would say. Anyone who says that doesn't know me. They don't know the life I've lived. They don't know a thing about me." In this instance, her retort revealed two very distinct things about her character. Firstly, Michelle Obama is straightforward. Secondly, she does not allow others to speak for her, and thus she is responsible for maintaining control of her public identity. Even though this situation could have possibly cost

Barack Obama the election, when everything settled, the Obamas were able to minimize the damage stemming from that particular incident, and Michelle Obama continued to have a strong presence in the media during the remainder of the campaign.

Although President Obama's final term ended January 20, 2017 –his wife remains at the center of many public discussions on the subject of what it means to exist and be an African American woman living in the United States, particularly one who is on the world stage. In the fall of 2018, Michelle Obama released her memoir *Becoming* and “sold 1.4 million copies in its first week and quickly became the best-selling book of the year” (Merry, 2019). Michelle Obama has support from numerous and diverse groups. One CNN headline read, “Commentary: Michelle Obama, stir up the White House” (Steiner, 2008). In an exclusive column, Aol.com (2018) celebrated her accomplishments as FLOTUS and as a woman of color. Obama has graced many magazines covers, from *Vogue* to *Shape*, and she also has represented the nation on a variety of causes, including health care and women's rights. Whether or not you admire the former First Lady is indeed a matter of personal taste, but what is for sure is that she has made a profound impact on how we view Black women, and she has made an even more significant impression on how African American women see themselves.

Before Obama's eight years as FLOTUS, she was a talented career woman. She worked for a brief stint in corporate law. Then she entered the public service arena in 1991 and served under the direction of Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley to create instrumental projects concerning the development of the City of Chicago. Next, Obama set her sights on becoming the executive director for the Chicago Office of Public Allies, and before switching gears to support her husband full-time in his political pursuits, she worked as the Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago. Notwithstanding, the analysis here focuses explicitly on Michelle Obama

during her term as First Lady and as a public figure, as the rationale behind this project is to concentrate on highly recognizable self-definitive performances.

## TEXTS

### *Physicality, Colorism, and Beauty Standards*

Standing at 5'11", Michelle Obama is fit, but also full-figured, and her complexion is brown, meaning that she is not considered to be dark-skinned or light-skinned. Since colorism plays such an integral role in identity politics, highlighting Michelle Obama's skin tone and racial background is intended to substantiate the Obamas as a Black family. Because Barack Obama's interracial marriage was initially met with skepticism by the general public, his marriage to Michelle, solidified his desire to be classified as a Black man and it also reaffirmed Mrs. Obama's take on having a Black family. If Michelle Obama were of a lighter skin complexion and possessed European-like features, this would complicate the Obamas' ability to fully represent the African American community. Carter and Dowe (2015) argued,

The presence of Barack Obama's wife Michelle and her unmistakable "blackness" enhanced the discussion of racial identity.... His marriage to Michelle Robinson proved that Barack Obama made a conscious choice to identify with black people and to raise his children as African-Americans. For whites, however, she became a negative reminder of his blackness. (p. 110)

Michelle Obama's sense of identity politics also signifies her awareness that Black femininity is often misconstrued as a negative characteristic, but it is obvious that she does not see herself through a White-male patriarchal lens. Throughout this examination, I will discuss multiple instances when Obama used her voice and platform to remind herself, along with other Black women and the public at large, that Black womanhood is to be celebrated and appreciated for its unique qualities, rather than cast aside as some inferior feminine position.

### ***Obama & Fashion Sense***

Except for Grace Coolidge, the 30th FLOTUS, and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, the 35th FLOTUS, most First Ladies have tended to dress in a standard uniform: conservative, not baring skin, simple, and elegant—but lacking personality. As the first Black First Lady, Michelle Obama's choices in clothing are necessary to consider to understand how and to what degree her Blackness impacts how she chooses to present her public persona. Examining her fashion sense may also expose the ways in which Americans relate to Black women. Matthews et al. (2015) conducted a study to determine the impact of Obama's apparel choices on everyday women; the study also noted that many academic discussions fail to examine First Ladies from a fashion perspective (p. 1). Consequently, this research reveals three specific themes about the influence of Michelle Obama's style: 1) relating through authenticity, 2) permission to defy norms, and 3) making positive impressions on brand endorsements.

These three qualities correlate with a self-definitive agenda. The outfit she wore for her 2012 Democratic National Convention speech, a sleeveless, light pink and baby blue, gold-printed Oscar de la Renta dress, was about more than pushing the “fashion” envelope. A simple analysis of the dress will explain that Michelle Obama is not so concerned with traditionalism or conforming to the expectations for presidents' wives. Conventionally, wearing prints and sleeveless dresses are faux pas at such events, but there is more to her pick than meets the eye. Her selection of this dress revealed that Obama is deliberate and intentional about how she uses her platform to represent who she is.

Fashion designer to the stars Oscar de la Renta had dressed many presidents' wives, including Nancy Reagan and Hillary Clinton. But after the Democratic Convention, due to his public and critical commentary about Michelle Obama, she refused to wear his clothing until

several years had passed. According to CNN Entertainment, de la Renta was quoted as saying, “Michelle Obama wasn’t the trendsetter that most seemed to believe.” He also criticized Obama’s choice to wear a cardigan to Buckingham Palace in 2009, and he went on to insult her again for opting to put on a European designer’s dress for a state dinner hosted for Chinese dignitaries at the White House. In an interview shortly before his death in 2014, the famous designer admitted to being critical of Mrs. Obama and referred to her as an extraordinary woman. When asked why she had elected not to wear his designs for the majority of her stay in the White House, despite the long-standing tradition for de la Renta to dress First Ladies, Obama responded by explaining that women should be able to wear what they want to wear, and that she would much rather discuss more important topics, like military families. Despite seeming flippant on the topic of Oscar de la Renta, Michelle Obama recognized the influence of her fashion choices. After opting against de la Renta designs, she decided to wear clothing by up-and-coming designers of color including Tracy Reese, Naeem Khan, and Jason Wu amongst others.

Neither the designer nor Obama revealed why she chose to wear an Oscar de la Renta gown in 2012, but her decision not to seems obvious. For Michelle Obama, her appearance makes a statement. It is political in the logic that she is constructing her image, and she is employing her power through her choice of dress. Her style is signature and practical, and also obviously a matter of importance. From a feminist research perspective, examining women’s attire could plausibly be a step in the wrong direction, and may appear to reinforce stereotypical or sexist assessments. In one regard, researchers should be careful to not minimize these types of discussions to the point of recycling superficial, vain, or shallow critiques about women. Scholars examining image and identity shouldn’t be reluctant to consider how women adorn and clothe themselves. Clothing can’t fully reveal any individual’s personality and even can be misleading. Regardless, style and

appearance are highly useful in providing information about one's individuality, culture, and social status (Hollander, 1993).

### **MICHELLE OBAMA'S SELF-DEFINITIVE PERFORMANCES**

While Obama was in attendance with queens, kings, dignitaries, and other renowned figures, Americans were able to get a glimpse of significant moments showing her true nature, but there are at least three specific instances that align with womanist ideology on self-defining. Firstly, on September 4, 2012, during the Democratic National Convention, Michelle Obama delivered a typical yet inspirational political message, and she also managed to insert some noteworthy rhetoric about her responsibility as a woman. She stated:

Serving as your First Lady is an honor and a privilege. But back when we first came together four years ago, I still had some concerns about this journey we'd begun. While I believed deeply in my husband's vision for this country, and I was certain he would make an extraordinary President, like any mother, I was worried about what it would mean for our girls if he got that chance. How will I keep them grounded under the glare of the national spotlight? How would they feel being uprooted from their school, their friends, and the only home they'd ever known?

Because she had already served in this capacity for four years prior, the expectation might have been that she would bring the house down with more verbiage about hope.<sup>1</sup>

Although this speech had many resemblances to the one she gave during the 2008 campaign, Michelle Obama seemed to be more forthcoming than before and less worried about political agendas. She had decided to focus on personal concerns, and the subject of maternal relationships became a reoccurring theme throughout the speech. Obama made warm, reflective statements about special exchanges with her mother, Marian Shields Robinson. Later in the address, Obama even referred to herself as an "exhausted mom," which is in stark contrast to the

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<sup>1</sup> Shepard Fairey created a widely popular political poster for Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. The wording on the sign spelled "hope" and became a commonly used theme during the election in conjunction with Obama's slogan "Change we can believe in."



picture-perfect images that we normally see of First Ladies. Then she closed with one of her most memorable lines to date: “At the end of the day, my most important title is still ‘mom-in-chief.’” She used this particular national platform to articulate the importance she places on being a parent.

The second self-definitive performance occurred during Michelle Obama’s commencement address to Tuskegee University on May 9, 2015. Tuskegee is one of the nation’s most sought-after and prestigious Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs). The school was founded by activist and entrepreneur Booker T. Washington in 1881 and is home to the legendary Tuskegee Airman plaza. Michelle Obama’s speech and appearance at the university were met with great pride by the African American community and outwardly condemned by those who feared that she was too pro-Black. Despite the naysayers, Obama unapologetically and openly discussed racism by condemning those Americans who seek to devalue Black people and their establishments. During the commencement address, Michelle Obama explained:

You might remember the on-stage celebratory fist bump between me and my husband after a primary win that was referred to as a “terrorist fist jab.” And over the years, folks have used plenty of interesting words to describe me. One said I exhibited a “little bit of uppity-ism.” Another noted that I was one of my husband’s “cronies of color.” Cable news once charmingly referred to me as “Obama’s Baby Mama.”

She was equivalently precise in those statements where she was able to reclaim narratives about “lazy” and “incapable” Blacks. During the speech, she replaced negative stereotypical terms about African American students and women with characteristics that she feels best suit the group. At the commencement speech at Tuskegee University, the First Lady appeared to be especially comfortable and frank while addressing the crowd. The graduation message was reminiscent of an African American Baptist preacher’s Sunday morning sermon. She opened up her speech with the customary formalities of acknowledging the significant people in the room, and then she named other key individuals who are vital to the school. This Black tradition of paying honor to others

before you speak to a crowd is much like the Black Southern cultural practice of speaking and saying “hello” whenever you enter into space where others are. She began talking about the rich history and legacy of the school. Then the message hit a crescendo, as she tackled the hard issues and openly acknowledged how being a First Lady challenged her. But in the end, she celebrated like many black pastors do while hooping—which signifies a moment of celebration and joy when overcoming a test or trial.<sup>2</sup>

The speed at which she spoke accelerated before she closed the message, as she brought up more critical concerns about race. She was careful to forewarn the graduates, who were mostly African Americans, to understand that their education would not spare them racial mistreatment. She told them:

The world won’t always see you in those caps and gowns. They won’t know how hard you worked and how much you sacrificed to make it to this day –the countless hours you spent studying to get those diplomas, the multiple jobs you worked to pay for school, the times you had to drive home and take care of your grandma, the evenings you gave up to volunteer at a food bank or organize a campus fundraiser. They don’t know that part of you.

The matters addressed within Michelle Obama’s remarks reveal a real and hyper-racial atmosphere. At Tuskegee, the FLOTUS was attempting to prepare other Blacks for the challenges that she knew would lie ahead, and she voiced her concerns to the nation because during this time, the media was fixated on discussing her looks. Kohl (2017) explained, “Michelle knew whatever she would do, some people would criticize her.” Because of her Blackness, her femininity was constantly under attack, although former First Ladies Hillary Clinton and Barbara Bush had been

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<sup>2</sup> Hooping refers to the celebration in the close of a sermon or message. In the tradition of Black spiritual leaders/pastors to signify the ending of the message or the “joy” of overcoming, some black preachers began speaking in a song-like rhythmic tone referred to as hooping.

praised for adopting stereotypical masculine traits; in this regard intersectionality components surrounding the oppression of Black women are evident.

To illustrate the difference between how masculinity is reviewed when White women make an attempt to show strength, consider the calculated image adjustments made by Hillary Clinton. Clinton made a conscientious effort to appear to be more manly and assertive while running for the office of president. *The Washington Post* (2016) compared her to Margaret Thatcher, who was able to achieve immense political success during her tenure as a British stateswoman and the prime minister of the United Kingdom after altering her public persona to be less feminine. Though, Michelle Obama endured countless onslaughts of racist, sexist, and crude comments, from being depicted as a man to having her likeness compared to an “ape in heels” (Smith et al., 2018, p. 7). The racially insensitive and negatively biased characteristics allude to traits belonging to the controlling image of an ABW. The importance in abstracting Obama’s responses to these attacks points to womanist strategies. She never reduces herself to speaking about her physical makeup in a way that would cause her to continue to be objectified.

At Tuskegee, amongst other Black people, Obama decided this platform would be appropriate to bring up some of the prejudiced insults she had previously encountered. In response, she could have chosen to speak positively about the shade of her skin tone, or she could have used rhetoric to celebrate the beauty and the curvature of some Black women’s bodies. Instead, though, she preferred to acknowledge her individual personality traits. During a subsequent interview, Obama insisted that using race and gender to define a person is “ridiculous” (Kelly, 2016). In *Black Sexual Politics* (2005), Collins claimed “racism and heterosexism also manufacture ideologies that defend the status quo” (p. 96), which in this case is that First Ladies are White and from the upper echelons of society, and that presidents’ wives are to be more or less seen and not heard. From

Obama's defined arm muscles (Unterberger, 2009) to her choice of hairstyles—as indicated in a *Time Magazine* article entitled “Everyone is Loving This Pic of Michelle Obama's Natural Hair” (Cooney, 2017)—the media constantly emphasizes what she looks like. She, however, concentrates on talking about what she believes in. The presentation of Michelle Obama's outward appearance is also an act of self-defining and self-valuing.

Lastly, on December 19, 2016, Michelle Obama sat down for an intimate and candid interview with media and business mogul, former talk show host, Oprah Winfrey. Winfrey, who openly endorsed Barack Obama, and is a highly accomplished and influential Black woman in her own right, joined Mrs. Obama at the White House to discuss her plans for the future following her husband's final term. The First Lady's choice to air this discussion with Winfrey via television broadcast denotes to the womanist standpoint, which suggests that Black women find safety and comfort amongst other like-minded Black women (Collins, 1991, p. 96). This space was relatively safe because she did not have the worry of needing to resume her role of First Lady again; and the gist of the talk centered around getting feedback from Obama about her perception of herself as First Lady.

When Winfrey asked Obama how she felt being identified as an ABW, Michelle Obama responded with disappointment.

That was one of those things where you think, “Dang you don't even know me.” You sort of feel like, “Wow where did that come from? You think, “That is so not me.” But then you sort of think, “Well this isn't about me. This is about the person or the people who write it.”

This conversation took place shortly after then president-elect Donald Trump's misogynistic and dangerous “locker-room”<sup>3</sup> discussions that encouraged men to sexually assault women by

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<sup>3</sup> According to CNN (2017, November 28), during a *Hollywood Access* interview with Billy Bush, Donald J. Trump was recorded stating that he grabs women by the [explicative] crotch. When confronted by the press as to why he would make such statements, Trump apologized and stated that it was “locker-room” banter.

grabbing them by the [crotch] were released. Michelle Obama openly condemned Trump for his statements, and she made sure to emphasize she would continue to use her platform to advocate for women's rights. As Oprah Winfrey put it during the opening credits of the special, this interview was about bringing attention to "Michelle Obama, who is on the precipice of starting her own unique chapter."

Examining the previously outlined occurrences helps to better determine what self-defining is, as well as efficiently explain what self-defining consists of when carried out. Within the same realm, the primary purpose for studying these events is to establish how Black women identify as individuals and as community members, aside from the associations to controlling images. Yet, this study does not omit the acknowledgment of the manner in which certain stereotypes have been able to impact Black women's ability to understand themselves. Self-defining is equally concerned with providing solutions and responses Black women can use as tools of empowerment when confronted with these misrepresentations.

By many standards, the former FLOTUS could feasibly be considered the most influential Black woman in the world. Utilizing her as a starting point allows us to recognize the vast opportunities that develop from self-definitive activism. Consequently, the information produced through this research will be used to identify issues with self-defining that may occur with Black women in less prominent positions. If Michelle Obama is forced to push through these barriers while possessing a high level of influence, then perhaps all Black women will be. Ultimately, each case study is expected to produce the following four categorical outcomes: 1) determine self-defining moments, 2) provide characteristics and traits associated with self-defining, 3) identify possible themes that emerge from self-defining, and 4) recognize problem areas connected to self-

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defining. This case study is distinct from those of Viola Davis and Beyoncé Knowles because Obama is the first and only African American FLOTUS; it is also distinguishable from those of the other women because Obama's role as FLOTUS indicates that she is supposed to represent others. She is a symbol of the nation.

## **THEORY**

### ***Managing Self-Defined Identities in Crooked Room Political Spaces***

Political positions held around the globe often lack the presence of women. In the United States, the critique of government also involves the fact that many elected officials are male, White, and wealthy. According to *US News* (2017), a survey reported, "Despite white men comprising only 31 percent of the population, 97 percent of all Republican elected officials are white and 76 percent are male. Of all Democratic elected officials, 79 percent are white and 65 percent are male, according to the study." It's not surprising that until Barack Obama, America had never elected a Black president, nor had the country experienced what it would be like to have a Black First Lady. Despite the efforts of many Black women politicians, like Shirley Chisholm, who in 1968 was the first Black woman elected to Congress, and also was the first African American woman to run for the office of presidency with a major party, American politics is not welcoming to women or people of color. Chisholm was highly vocal in describing the challenges she faced while having to work within a predominantly White male environment. She was once quoted stating, "Tremendous amounts of talents are lost to our society just because that talent wears a skirt," and on another occasion she proclaimed, "racism is so universal in this country, so widespread, and deep seated, that it is invisible because it is only normal." Only 19 of the 115 individuals in the 115th U.S. Congress are Black and female.

America's political climate reveals a crooked room space that seeks to isolate Black women, and it also attempts to discredit the voices of African Americans. In 2017, former Fox News political pundit Bill O'Reilly openly insulted Rep. Maxine Waters (D-Calif.) by referring to her hair as a "James Brown wig" (Bever, 2017). Unfortunately, this particular incident was not an exception. Waters and other Black women politicians routinely encounter disrespectful attacks because they are Black and female. As demonstrated in the previous examples, Black women are gravely misrepresented in political arenas, and they find it incredibly difficult to be themselves without experiencing negative backlash. Although Michelle Obama is not a politician, she is a political figure, and this means that she endures and navigates through the same crooked political world as the Black women who came before her, as will those who follow. For African American women, occupying this crooked space fosters opportunities for sharing and demonstrating representations of Black women that disrupt stereotypical concepts of Black people as powerless. Since American political spaces are distorted by sexist, racist, and classist ideologies, when Black women seek to self-define within them, it may prove to complicate perceptions about their identities, as is the case with Michelle Obama.

Throughout this case study, it is apparent that Michelle Obama frequently confronts the controlling images of mammie and the ABW. Acquiring the political status that she and Barack Obama have earned instinctively classifies her as an anomaly. Before Michelle Obama, there was no example of what a Black First Lady would actually be like. Thus, she is socially relegated to the common and familiar stereotypes by those who are not progressive in their thinking nor accustomed to witnessing real Black women. Throughout these performances, there are instances when Obama adjusts herself for the sake of preserving her identity, and she also alters her

behaviors for the community she represents. These adaptations are not to be misread as pretentious or as cowardice. Rather they are indicative of the crooked political space that she occupies.

## **THE HYBRID SELF**

### ***Michelle Obama on Marriage & The Identity of Black Wives***

There is a certain hybridity to Michelle Obama's image. She conflates a modern powerhouse, overachieving career woman and a simple, traditional family woman. While these qualities are not present in stereotypes, they are certainly existent in real Black women, both privileged and not. To understand the ways she navigates through these two separate identities, her cultural background and individual identity traits have to be equally considered. Every woman's choices are impacted by her own personal desires, and the degree to which they are made meaningful is contingent upon the world she must live in. As an act of self-defining, stepping into certain roles is about more than individual choice. Personal decisions can be leveraged to impact the community. Take into consideration the differences between how Black and White American women have used marriage to advance women's rights.

Ideas about marriage vary from one feminist group to the next, and the differentiations date as far back as first-wave feminist movements and beyond. Some people believe this institute was created under a patriarchal design for the benefit of men and that its primary purpose is to oppress women. On the opposite end of the debate, there are individuals who view marriage as a sacred and highly spiritual relationship. Grant (2017) suggests,

There is definitely still an impulse to think that all marriages should be what our culture thinks of as a "typical" marriage: It occurs between a man and woman, very often in a church, and before any children arrive. With each generation, however, we're better understanding that not only is that not always the case, but moreover, that it doesn't have to be the case. The participants might be of any gender; not everyone sees marriage and religion as forever intertwined; you can have babies without being a "legal" couple first — or choose not to have babies at all. Many may also resist the idea of marriage all together,



understanding that a piece of paper doesn't have to define you or your relationship in any way, shape, or form.

Despite the various opinions some people have formed throughout history about marriage, today many heterosexual and lesbian women find it necessary to continue to fight for political advancement, using their status as wives. Considering Michelle Obama's marriage to Barack through a womanist lens reveals how Black women may utilize the wife identity as a progressive means to access empowerment—especially when those women also occupy positions of privilege. Although similar to other feminist causes that are prioritized according to the need of the group, racial differences impact Black women's concerns about marriage in ways that non-Black women may not experience. Intersectionality specifies Black women's issues are not so easily separated or compartmentalized to any one singular point, as is the case with some White feminist causes.

Zaeske (2002) explained the long history of political bullying women in the United States endured during the 1830s while White women sought suffrage and emancipation for Black Americans, and she points out White women's feminist groups' tendency to promote their own political agendas by joining efforts with those in less prominent social positions. Black women are doubly confronted within political spaces, with barriers created by White men and independently by White women. Nevertheless, White women endured their own unique hardships; they could not even sign their names without being granted permission from their husbands. According to Zaeske, the signature represented a mark of "distinctive personality," (p.421) and it assisted White women, with the help of Blacks, to gain political ground. Simply being able to acquire signatures proved to move mainstream feminist movements forward. Pioneer and activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton went on the record making statements about marriage as a state of bondage and oppression, and by using her voice, she was instrumental in helping to liberate women (Zaeske 2002, p. 422).

Through the efforts of convincing supporters to sign their petitions, Stanton and other White American women were successful at acquiring social change for their group.

Life was incredibly hard for Black Americans living during the 19th century and they faced tremendous obstacles. Although White women were able to progress politically with the assistance of Blacks, this crooked room was more difficult for Blacks to navigate through. It was still illegal to teach African Americans how to read and write, and the practice of treating Black people as second-class citizens was considered to be socially acceptable. For example, Black people were not allowed to legally join in matrimony until the 13th Amendment abolished slavery, for as “long as they were in a state of bondage, they lacked the capacity to enter into any legally enforceable contract” (Goring, 2006, p. 301). Slavery, coupled with the Jim Crow era and other systemic practices designed to disintegrate the Black family, consequently forced Black women to contend with problems affecting solely their communities. Unlike feminists who classify marriage as a restrictive design, there are Black women who do not view marriage this way. Rather, larger numbers voice their concerns about singleness or about Black men’s disloyalty to Black women.

According to Hannah Brukner (2009) from the Center for Research on Inequalities and the Life Course at Yale University, “Black men are more likely to marry outside of their race, and black women are more likely to marry outside of their education.” In another study conducted by Raley et al. (2015), statistics revealed “compared to both white and Hispanic women, black women marry later in life, are less likely to marry at all, and have a higher rate of marital instability” (p. 89), which isn’t to forgo the groups of Black women who do not desire partnership. Heterosexual notions of marriage are separate from the issues facing the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community; it is more likely that Black heterosexual women will experience distinctive gender and/or role identity issues. Regardless, it is important to acknowledge that despite

challenges and adversities, marriage provides an avenue for financial and career support, and some women desire to raise their children within the partnership of a two-parent household. Michelle Obama identifies as a heterosexual Black woman and her relationship with her husband is one of the reasons why the nation is so fascinated with the Obamas. Michelle and Barack Obama are both highly successful, educated, and in many ways traditional.

They are the Huxtables come to life, and America had never seen the likes of an all African American family with these characteristics on such a public display in reality. Arango (2007) suggested that the depiction of an “upwardly mobile black family” portrayed in NBC’s former hit television series *The Cosby Show* “succeeded in changing racial attitudes enough to make an Obama candidacy possible.” In August of 2016, Miramax partnered with Roadside to release the independently produced movie *Southside with You*, a coy biopic covering the first date of Michelle and Barack Obama. The two have shared the account of how they met many times. They state that their initial encounter took place in Chicago during the summer of 1989 after she was selected to mentor Barack Obama, who was then an intern at the law offices where she worked.

Before becoming the Obamas, Barack and then Michelle Robinson, continued to date over the next few years and were married on October 3, 1992. They have two daughters, Malia, who was born in 1998, and Natasha (Sasha), who came three years later, in 2001. The rest, as they say, is history. Moreover, their career statuses remained similar to what they were prior to Barack Obama becoming the president. Michelle Obama was highly accomplished and in some ways more established than her husband. So it was only natural for her to rise to the occasion and figure out how she could uniquely position herself as his wife and as an individual during his presidency.

This analysis interjects womanist viewpoints concerning Obama’s conceptualization of herself as a married woman, and it is a departure from mainstream feminist ideology on Michelle

Obama, wife and political figure. Mainstream feminist author from New England, Cathi Hanauer demonstratively wrote about Mrs. Obama's role, claiming,

Michelle is Michelle. And I can't wait to see what she does next. And what she does after that, when her children are grown and she can focus with far fewer distractions on her career. She has said she'll never run for president herself. To that, I say: Never say never, Michelle. Let's just see where we all are a decade from now. (Hanauer, 2017, p. 100).

The arguments presented throughout this case study suggest that Hanauer was misreading the impact of Michelle Obama's choice to promote her family life over her career or political aspirations in relation to her being a Black woman. Kohl (2017) also acknowledged the dissimilar opinions from mainstream and Black feminist groups about Obama's image representation as a married woman, mother, and political figure. She wrote,

White feminists looked toward her as a self-assured, professional woman who would further women's agenda. Yet, she became, predominantly, the "Mom-in-Chief"—a fall back to the 1950s or 60s? As Melanye Price, Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University stressed: "What black woman, ever, had had the choice; the choice to be a stay-home mom; to concentrate on social and philanthropic engagements; to counter numerous stereotypes associated with black womanhood?"

The representation of Michelle Obama as a Black First Lady, wife, and mother introduced a never-seen-before image to the nation. It was not that Black women had never been wives or mothers engaged in civic activities. To the contrary, African American women have been highly instrumental in contributing to the betterment of this country while raising children. It is Obama's privilege and status that force America to take notice, and it reminds us of the impact that they have always had. Likewise, her seemingly effortless ability to carry out these functions with distinction and success is not the typical image representation that is displayed about African American women as controlling images.

Self-defining correlates with transparency. Thus, Michelle Obama speaks candidly about the challenges of juggling personal time with a demanding occupation. When Obama's statements are probed more closely, they indicate that maybe the career is the distraction from what she most appreciates and longs to do. The former First Lady continues to use her political position as a wife and mother to inspire others. Within the process of self-defining, self-valuation occurs. Collins (1991) claimed, "Self-defining speaks to power dynamics...the theme of black women's self-valuation addresses the actual content of these self-definitions," which emphasizes one's own ability to speak for oneself, and questions the usefulness of adding or interpreting what others think or believe a Black woman should be saying, doing, or meaning when they talk about themselves (p.107).

During the Democratic Convention Michelle Obama stated:

But eventually, I realized that if I wanted to keep my sanity and not let others define me, there was only one thing I could do, and that was have faith in God's plan for me. I had to ignore all the noise and be true to myself—and the rest of the world would work itself out. And the answers to those questions have resulted in the woman who stands before you today. A woman who is first and foremost a mom. Look, I love our daughters more than anything in the world, more than life itself. And while that may not be the first thing that some folks want to hear from an Ivy League educated lawyer, it is truly who I am. So for me being "Mom-in-Chief" is, and will always will be, job number one.

In another instance, Obama explained the importance of how professional experiences helped to shape her identity. She told Winfrey:

Let's not forget, I didn't just wake up First Lady. I mean, I went to law school, I practiced law, I worked for the city, I ran a nonprofit [and] I was an executive at a hospital. I've been in the world. I've worked in every sector, and you don't do that without coming up against some stuff."

Having these experiences, coupled with her transition into the White House, impacted Obama's character development and understanding of herself as an African American.

## **MICHELLE OBAMA’S SELF-DEFINITIVE THEMES**

Textual analysis was used to conduct multiple rounds of coding, utilizing four separate schemes or four womanist precepts: resists controlling images, invokes action/prompts power, assumes a womanist standpoint, and womanist performance. These categories were developed from grouping together similar self-definitive traits identified within the chart presented in Chapter 1. After these groups were classified, words/phrases and statements, along with other performative elements (e.g., attire and environment) were placed into the most appropriate and befitting category. Lastly, once all texts were analyzed, the researcher examined and determined at least five prominent themes from Michelle Obama’s self-definitive presentations: 1) characterizes the self with traits that the individual values, 2) advocates for others, 3) condemns judgments/false judgments, 4) authenticity—acknowledging one’s strengths and weaknesses, and 5) being unapologetic in the presentation.

### **Resists Controlling Images**

Resisting controlling images consists of an activity that either rejects or condemns one’s association to or with the pervasive controlling images identified here (e.g., mammie and Sapphire; Collins, 1991). In doing so, Black women determine and outwardly state what they are not. They also acknowledge the problem of misrecognition. Resisting controlling images is concerned with saying, “This is who I am.” Although its sole purpose is not about replacing negative traits with more positive ones, it does affirm the self.

### ***Characterizes the Self with Traits That the Individual Values***

Stereotypical representations possess monolithic personality descriptions that pigeon-hole or box Black women into a specific type. Michelle Obama’s previously discussed self-definitive performances indicate she is most often associated with the mammie and ABW stereotypes. She

addresses these labels within her articulations about herself as a mother and also when she addresses being accused of being masculine or aggressive. In Collins's (1991) description of self-defining, she explains that resisting controlling images should rearticulate Black women's experiences by infusing them with new meaning. Black women in the public spotlight have a rare opportunity to speak to the masses.

In this capacity, African Americans can bring awareness to issues and redirect age-old narratives by either generating new dialogue or continuing to move conversations forward. Therefore, Obama is careful to frame her rhetoric as a counter to commonly found misnomers about Black women. Obama's response to Winfrey on being referred to as an angry black woman resulted in Obama concluding that she should make it a point to show the world who she is authentically. She ended the discussion saying, "Okay, well, let me live my life out loud so that people can then see and then judge me for themselves." Obama displays a pattern of making sure to describe who she is, according to how she thinks of herself.

### ***Authenticity/Acknowledging Her Strengths & Resilience as Well as Her Weaknesses***

The words and statements pulled from Michelle Obama's self-definitive acts describe an individual who possesses honor and who commands the regard of others. Stereotypes devalue Black women and are disrespectful. Whether they are used to describe the First Lady of the United States or to define a single mother living on welfare, controlling images paint an improper and incomplete image of a person. As for self-defining, characterizing oneself is the initial step to reclaiming one's identity. Ultimately, Black women have to decide whether or not they are going to buy into the images and personalities the dominant society sets before them. By assuredly expressing your character traits, you affirm for yourself, and you also signal to others, how you desire or prefer to be acknowledged.

While coding Obama's three self-definitive incidences, the researcher discovered she repeatedly used these particular words to describe herself or other Black people:

<i>Authentic</i>	<i>Decent/decency</i>	<i>Honest/integrity</i>
<i>Hopeful</i>	<i>Humble/Humility</i>	<i>Inspired</i>
<i>Gratitude/grateful</i>	<i>Mature, grown-up</i>	<i>Mom, Mom-in-Chief</i>
<i>Not perfect</i>	<i>Privileged</i>	<i>Resilient</i>
<i>Resourceful</i>	<i>Smart/educated</i>	<i>Successful</i>
<i>True</i>		

The next statement from Obama summarizes and puts the previous descriptors into context.

You know having your feelings hurt, having people say things about you that are not true. Life hits you, so over the course of living, you learn how to protect yourself in it. You learn to take in what you need and get rid of the stuff that's clearly not true. (Michelle Obama Says Farewell to the White House, 2016)

Allowing the speaker's words to resonate without interference is an important aspect in understanding defining the self.

### **Invokes Action/Prompts Power**

Collins (1991) suggested Black women's journey to being able to openly and willingly self-define stems from anger rather than sadness (p. 105). In rage, individuals are prompted to respond and seek restitution, which is not to replace or deny the power of silence—because within the tradition of practicing self-defined Black women's behaviors, remaining quiet is much more about strategy and maintaining control, not submission (p. 92). Action involves Black women creating their own frames; to communicate with a unique and authentic voice, they must 'jump-outside' of existing boundaries and participate in civic engagement and activism (p. 95). When Black women's consciousness remains within the confines of self-identifying through controlling



images, they become restricted and unable to alter the existing world around them. These next three modes of influence were invoked during Michelle Obama's self-definitive performances.

***Advocates for Others, Self-Improvement***

Throughout the history of this nation, many Black women with access to resources and power have made it their humanitarian responsibility to advocate for the less fortunate. Michelle Obama demonstrates this practice consistently. She addresses the struggles of her African American ancestors and she is concerned about Black people in the generations to come. During her Tuskegee commencement speech, she questioned and condemned those who referred to the Tuskegee Airmen as "childlike, shiftless, unmoral, untruthful—and if fed compliant 'boys.'" She mentioned their misrecognition when explaining how the pilots were not given the same honor and respect as White military members. Obama told the crowd the Black airmen were denied salutes upon their return to U.S. soil and argued, "Folks treated them like they were nobody." She went on, saying,

Now those airmen could have easily let that experience clip their wings. But, as you all know, instead of being defined by the discrimination and the doubts around them, they became one of the most successful pursuit squadrons in our military (Tuskegee University Commencement Address, 2015).

The FLOTUS's rhetoric emphasizes the importance of character over acquiring only monetary success. She is mindful to talk about her humble beginnings whenever possible to show relatability with working class citizens. With Obama's connection to "plain folks," she is typically explaining how challenging the struggles are for the majority of Black and White Americans while also painting the picture that these are the people who work the hardest, but are not necessarily the most rewarded. These kinds of statements are meant to challenge elitist ideology by appreciating

those with less. Obama stands up for forgotten communities and recognizes their ability to do great things. Thus the idea of passing the torch is often a focal point of her expression. She routinely mentions the “pressures” of having to fight against racial inequality and speaks frequently about typical everyday challenges that all people face. Consider the following remark taken from the Tuskegee address:

Generation after generation, students here have shown that same grit, that same resilience to soar past obstacles and outrages—past the threat of countryside lynching[s]; past the humiliation of Jim Crow; past the turmoil of the Civil Rights era. And they went on to become scientists, engineers, nurses, and teachers in communities all across the country—and continued to lift others up along the way (Tuskegee University Commencement Address, 2015).

Military families are another particular group for which she routinely advocates. During all three of the enactments mentioned within this study and also in several other appearances, Obama spoke up for this community. Military service employees and their family members face extraordinary challenges. These families are often underserved and taken for granted. The *Military Times* (2016) reported that Mrs. Obama’s and Dr. Jill Biden’s collaboration to improve the “civilian-military divide, use of media campaigns and corporate connections to tackle issues like veteran’s unemployment, military spouse credentialing and veteran homelessness was met with high praise” (Shane, 2016).

In addition to Michelle Obama’s commitment to serving the military community, she and President Barack Obama were able to inspire and empower thousands of U.S. citizens by turning the White House into the “people’s house.” As Michelle Obama put it, “We wanted to change things up a bit...we wanted to open the doors really wide to folks who don’t usually have access to this place.” They set an initiative to welcome in citizens from all walks of life to enjoy activities at the White House. For example, the Obamas hired the first-ever cisgender male social secretary and transgender person as staff personnel. They also acquired *Resurrection* (1966), a colorful

acrylic painting created by Alma Thomas while living at the historical residence; she is the first African American painter to have artwork placed there. Black, brown, and yellow girls and boys from underserved communities were able to witness and experience happenings at the historic site because of Michelle Obama's efforts to define herself as a person for the people.

### ***Political Activity***

From as early as 2010 Michelle Obama's approval ratings outshone her husband's and those of former predecessors like Bill and Hillary Clinton, and they continued to remain high until the end of President Obama's final term. With such popularity and likeability, supporters often have suggested that Michelle Obama should run for political office. She continues to respond with the same level of disinterest. In her talk with Oprah Winfrey, Mrs. Obama stated the following about being a politician:

I don't like to hear the back and forth of the political process. I don't like to hear the chit-chat and the pundits talk.... If I were interested in it, I'd say it. I don't believe in playing games.... You don't just ask a family to do this for four more years. (Michelle Obama Says Farewell to the White House, 2016)

Nonetheless, she is careful to encourage citizens to participate in civic engagement. In the same television special, she spoke about the gravity of choosing "smart" candidates and routinely encouraged American citizens to vote. Her belief is that political engagement provides "hope" and is needed to encourage marginalized communities.

### ***Education***

A *New York Times* (2017) study revealed, "Even after decades of affirmative action, black and Hispanic students are more underrepresented at the nation's top colleges and universities than they were 35 years ago." Ashkenas et al. (2017) noted, "the share of black freshman at elite schools

is virtually unchanged since 1980.” As a self-identified Ivy League college graduate, Obama’s educational experience is one of privilege. In college, she faced the challenges that many Blacks undergo in predominantly White educational institutes. However, the benefits of a prestigious degree outweigh the obstacles of obtaining it. Her education afforded her to have the career opportunities she leveraged to become the woman she is today.

During self-definitive moments she expresses pride and significance in having been educated at two of the nation’s premier institutes, Princeton and Harvard. Throughout her speech at Tuskegee, she was emphatic in encouraging students to excel academically. In her 1985 undergraduate thesis, entitled *Princeton Educated Blacks and the Black Community*, she wrote:

The path I have chosen to follow by attending Princeton will likely lead to my future integration and/or assimilation into a white cultural and social structure that will only allow me to remain on the periphery of society, never becoming a full participant. (p. 3)

Later, after reflecting on her time in college during an interview with MSNBC in 2007, she stated that initially she felt as if she could not “compete” but came to realize that the White students weren’t necessarily smarter than she: “They just believed in themselves in a way that’s very different” (Rogak, 2009). Perhaps Obama’s lack of confidence in the beginning stages of her academic career stemmed from the fact that Black women tend to lack representation in the kinds of spaces that she was seeking to enter. Her questioning of self could be a direct correlation to identifying with controlling images, and these representations indicate that Black women do not have the ability to meet such standards. While this may not ever be proven for certain, it is evident that once Obama realized her Blackness was not an indicator of what she could not do and accomplish, she was able to flourish.

Interestingly enough, Obama's take on education aligns with womanist precepts and recognizes the multifaceted challenges of navigating through academia as a Black woman. Therefore, the wisdom that she shares in her attempt to prepare and empower others for the rigors of pursuing an education is intended to encourage members from the African American community to obtain degrees, and it is also intentional, to forewarn them so that they might be able to better navigate through potentially severe academic pitfalls.

### **Assumes a Womanist Standpoint**

This category reflects some of the foundational and key markers of Black feminist thought. Womanist performances replicate statements and actions that primarily reflect these three concepts: uses a survivor's voice, demonstrates an outsider/within standpoint, and questions the credibility of individuals or organizations that seek to oppress Black women. A distinguishing feature of Black feminist thought entails the concept that Black women should utilize an outsider-within standpoint. "As outsiders within, black women have a distinct view of the contradictions between the dominant group's actions and ideologies," which is useful in helping them to protect themselves and to obtain knowledge from their oppressors (Collins, 1991, p. 11). This view stemmed from Black women domestic workers who used their position in the homes of White slave owners or employers to listen in on conversations, in order to acquire firsthand knowledge from those with the ability to inflict their power. Being able to identify weaknesses and the plans of individuals who practice discrimination helps Black women to prepare for potential setbacks and challenges. Which leads to the next point: a womanist standpoint also questions the credibility of those with authority by identifying the self from a position of triumph or a survivor, as opposed to adopting a victim mentality.

A survivor's voice directly connects to operating from the position of an outsider within. As put by Audre Lorde (1984), "In order to survive, those of us for whom oppression is an American as apple pie have always had to be watchers." (p. 114). Described as a "curious and peculiar" view, this vantage point allows Black women to gain insight into the thinking and psychological wellness of individuals who may cause them harm. What is especially important and useful about this position is that once Black women have the appropriate knowledge necessary to challenge individuals in positions of power, they can then use their intelligence to question authority advantageously.

Additionally, a survivor's voice is distinctly different from that of the controlling image of the strong Black woman (SBW). The stereotype of the SBW suggests Black women need not be vulnerable and that they must absorb the weight of the world. Davis (1981) wrote, "Black women must have been profoundly affected by their experiences during slavery. Some no doubt, were broken and destroyed, yet the majority survived, and in the process, acquired qualities considered taboo by the nineteenth-century ideology of womanhood" (p. 11). However, a survivor's voice, as described from a womanist perspective, is not solely about living through challenges; it is one of moving from being a victim to being an activist.

### ***Condemns Judges/False Judgments***

One of the significant problems with the institutionalization of controlling images is that perpetuation of these characters ultimately works to validate the voice of the oppressor. Since self-defining is concerned with authenticating those who are customarily denied the right to be heard, Black women who self-define seek avenues to speak out against those who condemn and falsely judge them. When Michelle Obama was questioned about the media's comparisons of her to controlling images she responded, "Well, this isn't about me. This is about the person or the people

who write it.” Her willingness to call out wrongdoing also applies to her political agenda. She expressed her disappointment with the lack of encouragement Barack received while in office. Michelle Obama told Winfrey, “There were leaders in Congress who did not support his presidency, which was something that was not good for the country. It was good for politics.... And that wasn’t the right way to approach it.” In these two instances and in other moments mentioned throughout the case study, it is evident Michelle Obama is comfortable with defending herself. This tactic is especially empowering when considering that in times past Black people could lose their lives for challenging authority.

### **Womanist Performance**

*Performance* signifies the essence of the moment and the intentionality of the actions constituting self-defining. The presentation aspect of the enactments identified involves incorporating an element of surprise or doing something unexpected. To be specific, these moments are dedicated to the transformation of “silence into language.” When speaking about the voices and performances of Black women writers, Collins (1991) mentioned the need for creative expression to transform sites of resistance (p.102). Creative outlets capture the attention of the audience and make room for different interpretations. Likewise, the speeches and words expressed by Michelle Obama are very much artistic and add a particular value to the discussion surrounding them.

### ***Authentic & Unapologetic—(Acknowledging One’s Strengths and Weaknesses)***

*Salon* magazine (2017) reported that abusers engage in psychological tactics intended to demean and belittle the character of others by exploiting their victims’ deficiencies. Biographies like that of Mary Prince, who is one of the first slaves to write and publish a narrative about her experiences as a Black female slave, illustrate similar behaviors between slave owners and

captured Black peoples. In modern society, we recognize these patterns within our judicial, educational, and workforce systems. As a result, sometimes Black women struggle with the need for balancing their imperfections with the pressures of wanting to be stellar in order to compete and stand up straight proudly in a world that constantly diminishes their value. True freedom from oppression lies in the Black woman's ability to self-evaluate and self-validate. Obama's likability comes from her skill to do the exceptional, but simultaneously be confident enough to be transparent and honest.

The former FLOTUS candidly makes comments like, "This is hard, you [I] better brush it off, and I wanted to keep my sanity." What is more remarkable is when and where she chooses to share these things about herself. For instance, during a national political convention, most politicians and their spouses are putting their best faces on, and the terminology and wording that they use during speeches are often inflammatory. These comments are meant to promote themselves to the public for votes. During the 2012 Democratic National Convention, Obama was a straight shooter when referring to herself as "an exhausted mom." Those are not the words that one would think of to include in a moment like the one she participated in. Nevertheless, it worked, and she was able to stir up even more conversation by calling herself "mom-in-chief." She simply stated, "And let me tell you something, I say all of this tonight not just as First Lady, no not just as a wife. You see at the end of the day my most important title is still 'Mom-in-chief.' My daughters are still the heart of my heart and the center of my world." (Democratic National Convention, 2012).

During the Tuskegee University commencement address, Obama's speech was available to the nation via broadcast by C-SPAN. There she discussed the challenges of being the only Black FLOTUS. The audience probably expected to her make positive statements about HBCUs and the



importance of Blacks seeking higher education. However, when she began to review the nature of her identity, challenging age-old stereotypes while also acknowledging that it is her faith in God that sustains her, at that very moment—the audience was surprised. The crowd stood up and cheered in the middle of her speech, their response indicating their appreciation for her using that platform to share such insightful words. Obama’s talk with Winfrey is also an example of a performance. The setting was staged and the nature of the conversation was controlled and preplanned.

### ***Unapologetic***

Throughout the self-definitive demonstrations mentioned in this chapter, Michelle Obama’s tone and demeanor remained consistent. The world has witnessed her singing karaoke, dancing, rapping, and doing other jovial things that most dignitaries customarily keep private. Regardless of what she is saying or what her actions are, onlookers get the sense that they are observing a woman who is very much comfortable being who she desires to be. Her capability to be authentic encourages other women to have the confidence they need to display themselves not only as individuals who are in the fight for their lives, but also as individuals who are just trying to be themselves. This premise supports that Michelle is unapologetic about the choices she makes in constructing her public identity. If Michelle Obama were consumed with people-pleasing and political correctness, she could not self-define.

### CHAPTER 3 “VIOLA DAVIS: Self-Defined in the Hollywood Spotlight”

*“The one thing I feel is lacking in Hollywood today is an understanding of the beauty, the power, the sexuality, the uniqueness, the humor of being a regular black woman.” Viola Davis, Essence Magazine, 2013*

#### INTRODUCTION

When celebrities use the phrase “from rags to riches” to describe their journey of going from a meager existence to a life of fame, it is not always an attempt to express humility. Viola Davis’s accounts of growing up in a rat-infested home, wetting the bed until age 14, and not having enough food to eat, are eye-opening and reveal just how far she has come. In an explicit description of her takeaway of what it meant to grow up financially struggling she claimed,

If you haven’t experienced poverty, you can’t image it...Homosexuals, the transgender community, women, blacks- they’re mistreated. With poor people, it’s not mistreatment. You’re not even there. You don’t exist. It seeps into your brain. Our whole lives were about hiding, not sharing the secret. Because you’re afraid of being judged. You’re afraid of the shame. I just wanted to get out, to be somebody. I was always so hungry and ashamed. I couldn’t get at the business of being me. (The New Yorker, 2016)

Although her fans admire Davis’s talent and determination to succeed, acknowledging that her ability to project and transcend emotion spawns from a place of pain helps us to appreciate the totality of who she is. It is also necessary to explain how Davis uses her gift to champion for Black women.

Born on August 11, 1965, in South Carolina to Mary Alice and Dan Davis, Viola Davis was one of five children. Neither of her parents received more than a middle school education and her father was illiterate until the age of 15. The dysfunction and instability she experienced during her childhood led Davis to seek opportunities for escape. After entering a local contest to appear in a commercial as a young adolescent, she discovered acting was her saving grace. As she continued to mature and develop as an actress, dramatic interpretation also proved to be a beneficial way for her to share her thoughts and opinions about her lived experiences as a Black

woman in America. As such, this case study seeks to interrogate and examine self-definitive methods Viola Davis employs in order to manipulate the roles of the characters she plays.

Viola Davis was 43 years old before she received her big break in Hollywood but, she was no newcomer to the world of acting. Prior to sharing screen time with fellow critically acclaimed Oscar-winning actress Meryl Streep in *Doubt* (2008), she played a string of small but significant roles. It was her ability to captivate the attention of the audience for a brief couple of minutes as a heartbroken mother who discovers her son might have been molested by a priest that opened up the door to her career as a powerhouse leading lady. Her role in the film occurred almost two decades ago. Since then, Davis has received numerous nominations and she is also the recipient of countless honors; the most noteworthy include an Oscar, an Emmy, two Tonys, four NAACP Image awards, and multiple BET and SAG awards. The success she has acquired since her breakout performance has won Davis a great deal of media attention. Consequently, she utilizes television, social media, and interactions with the press as platforms to bring attention to the concerns and issues facing African American women.

Additionally, Viola Davis uses acting as a means to reject controlling images that she and other Black women like her are often associated with. What distinguishes Davis from most actresses within the industry is her approach to interpreting the identities of her characters. For instance, because she is middle-aged and has a darker skin tone she is often cast as a mammie or as a female character lacking sensuality. Even though she accepts these roles, Davis does not idly conform her interpretation of the role to fit preexisting conventional traits. To explain how she enhances the part, the researcher expounded on the tactics the actress uses when approaching stereotypical parts. After examining her reenactments, the investigation was able to reveal that Davis disrupts the controlling images of mammie and Jezebel by doing at least one of the following

three things: 1) adds layers to the character and complicates overly simple versions of the role, 2) shares her concerns with decision makers and asks for specific changes to be made, and 3) joins her efforts with those of other Black women in the industry. By intentionally and purposefully manipulating or altering the kinds of parts ordinarily responsible for perpetuating stereotypes about African American women, Davis is creatively carving out unique ways to self-define.

## TEXTS

### *Physicality, Colorism, and Beauty Standards*

In comparison to White women in Hollywood, the majority of Black actresses—dark-skinned or not—face greater resistance in establishing themselves. Davis (2012) told *Newsweek*, “I mean, I’m a 46-year-old black actress who doesn’t look like Halle Berry...and Halle Berry is having a hard time.” If Black women are to confront Hollywood, they have to be able to challenge the notions and standards deriving from racist European ideology. Davis’s willingness to try unorthodox approaches to acting and to create different spaces of inclusion allows her to tap into a higher level of success than what might be expected for a woman with her physical makeup. Conforming to mainstream beauty standards by making extreme alterations to her appearance (i.e. plastic surgery, skin-lightening, or attempting to look White) is not the trend that she seeks to follow, and still Viola Davis continues to thrive in the industry because she is persistent in challenging directors and audiences to accept supporting Black women who play in non-traditional roles. Likewise, the idea of embracing Black beauty is more visible now in entertainment and also plays an important factor in Black women affirming themselves. Lupita Nyong’o, Whoopi Goldberg, Leslie Jones, and Angela Bassett are mature Black actresses with dark skin tones who are also influencing idealizations of beauty.

Typically, dark skin complexions and non-classically European defined facial features would cause Davis to be deemed unattractive or not especially beautiful or sexy by most mainstream standards. Davis's natural hair is not permed, and she often wears her kinky coif in short-cut styles. Self-defining and redefining characters assist in diminishing limitations for the actress. She notes, "There were a lot of things that people did not allow me to be until I got...Annalise Keating [her character on *How to Get Away with Murder*]. I was not able to be sexualized. Ever. In my entire career" (Lahr, 2016). In conclusion, this declaration points to obtainable and favorable outcomes that develop from self-definitive activity. Had Viola Davis never taken it upon herself to question the complexity of her characters, and, more importantly, made the choice to incorporate her understanding of what Black womanhood is, she could have been limited to starring in mostly single-layered stereotypes.

## **VIOLA DAVIS'S SELF-DEFINITIVE PERFORMANCES**

### ***Deconstructing Controlling Images: Contesting Mammie & Jezebel***

The spectrum of characters represented by Viola Davis is identified in two of her most noticeable roles to date. Aibileen Clark, a mammie-type housemaid featured in *The Help* (2011) and her recurring role as Annalise Keating, the lead character on ABC's popular drama *How to Get Away with Murder* (*HTGAWM*) both signify as self-definitive performances. Aibileen's character is one of the oldest and most familiar stereotypes, and Annalise fits into no one particular characterization. Each role was selected by the researcher to demonstrate the versatility Davis encompasses as an actress. Using these two characters also helps to validate that diverse representation of Black women is needed on the small and the silver screen because, in fact, Black women are not a monolith. This analysis is concerned with how Viola Davis portrays make-believe women as depictions of authentic Black women who have varied experiences and ways of seeing

the world. In this case study, to decipher a self-definitive analysis, the words and expressions from these two characters, along with Davis's articulations about how these representations may damage or empower Black women, were used to contextualize the value and sensibility of activism deriving from self-defining. To be specific, the evaluation in this chapter encapsulates Viola Davis's rationale for selecting the roles and it explores her approach to interpreting the parts. After considering the background information that has been presented about Viola Davis's career and personal life, it is easier to understand her choices for portraying Aibileen Clark and Annalise Keating.

### ***Aibileen Clark***

Aibileen, also known as Aibi, is an older Black woman who has spent her entire life raising the kids of affluent White families living in Jackson, Mississippi. Despite having lost her only son and not having the support or compassion of the people that she works for when needing to cope with grief, Aibileen is still especially kind and loving to the children she was hired to care for. In the opening scene of the movie, she states "I was born 1911 [sic], Chickasaw County, Piedmont Plantation...[I knew I was going to be a maid because] my momma was a maid, my grandmamma was a house slave" (*The Help*, 2011). Asked about the movie, Davis told *Variety* (2011), "The women in this story were like my mother, my grandmother...from the Deep South working in fields...taking care of other people's kids, cleaning homes."

As a Black woman with a similar personal background, Davis captures the humanity of Aibileen. The job of every actor is to transform into the person who is described on paper. Actors who lack the ability to bring a character to life do not fully resonate with audience members, especially those who are skeptical of being misrepresented. To be the kind of performer who is able to push forward inner qualities of a familiar and one-dimensional character requires more

from the actress than “looking like” the character. Davis is not playing a mammie; she is acting as a Black woman character who also so happens to be a housemaid named Aibileen. Since she personally understands the feelings and emotions of the women whose lives the role is seeking to emulate, she is believable and resonates with other Black women who watch her films. When Black women can see themselves in representations that align with their experiences—both in struggle and in accomplishment—they can better relate.

The storyline of *The Help* (2011) gives Davis a chance to express this dichotomy. As an unfulfilled domestic worker, Aibileen finds it comforting and therapeutic to share her stories with Eugenia “Skeeter” Phelan (played by Emma Stone), who is on a personal quest to publish a book about the degradation of small segregated Southern towns, after graduating from college in New York. Although Davis confesses there were some oversights in the film about how Black women really felt about working for racist White families, Aibileen’s character reveals the courage it took for Black women to fight against discrimination, after she is able to disclose personal information about the Leefolts and end her employment with the family. In an interview with the *New York Times* (2018), seven years following the release of *The Help* (2011), Davis admitted to having regrets for playing in the film. She insisted,

I just felt at the end of the day that it wasn’t the voices of the maids that were heard. I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They’re my grandma. They’re my mom...and I know that if you do a movie where the whole premise is, I want to know what it feels like to work for white people and bring up children in 1963, I want to hear how you really feel about it. I never heard that in the course of the movie.

The inhibitions Davis spoke about in retrospect disclosed the conflict she feels and experiences whenever she has to confront controlling images that come in the form of characters. Despite her doubts about the role, she was still able to complicate the mammie stereotype of Aibileen and introduce a nuanced approach to the characterization, just not to the extent to which

she desired. Equally notable, Aibileen's approach to standing up against racism mirrors Davis's method for acting.

### ***Annalise Keating***

As soon as Viola Davis landed her most celebrated role to date, as the narcissistic and shrewd professor-lawyer on *HTGAWM*, she was instrumental in developing the character's layers and giving Annalise Keating a unique personality. Lahr (2016) wrote that Davis pushed Peter Norwalk, the series' creator, to "dramatize Annalise's interior world and to show the private moments of this tough, brilliant professional, who has a difficult and promiscuous past." On playing the part, Davis told Lahr (2016), "I'm working to convey all this history, this sexual assault, and all the pain. She [Annalise] said, 'It happened to all the women, that's our curse. It happened to my mother. It happened to her mother.'" The explanation or rationale that Davis provides for Annalise's behavior confronts the controlling image of Jezebel theoretically and explains what Harris-Perry's crooked room effect seeks to illustrate. Typically, when Black women are shown as sexually aggressive, the narrative used to accompany the behavior implies that somehow Black women are inherently promiscuous.

Bearing in mind how sexuality has been used to violate and downgrade Black women, it is important to give African American characters a contextualized experience—not necessarily to justify their behaviors, but as a means to humanize and undo the objectification of Blacks as purely sexual bodies. Recounting Annalise's private lifestyle also brings forth how women's physical and psychological well-being are impacted by their sexual lifestyles in relation to how they function and behave socially. Davis's recommendation to create a background for Annalise allows viewers to better appreciate the character. Notwithstanding, Black women have been boxed into identifying either as Jezebels—desiring sex with anyone and lacking common decency—or as mammies—



asexual, maternal, or prohibited from finding pleasure in intimacy. Both controlling images paint extreme versions of Black women's sexual-political identities. Self-defining suggests actual explanations for why this may be the case, even if a Black woman's practices align with one or the other sexual type.

### ***Barriers & Backlash: Self-Defining off the Screen***

In addition to conducting a textual analysis of her characters Aibileen and Annalise, Davis's 2015 acceptance speech at the 67th Emmy Award Show for best leading actress in a drama series was also identified as a key text for examination. Davis's inclusion of a statement made by Harriet Tubman in the late 1800s and acknowledgment of her fellow Black women actors are rhetorically interpreted as womanist in scope. Dressed in a long, white, sleeveless Carmen Marc Valvo trumpeted gown adorned with tiny detailed black leaflets embroidered in the bodice, her natural semi-picked coif glistening beautifully, and holding the Emmy in her right hand, Davis delivered her Emmy acceptance speech (*New York Times*, 2015). She stated:

In my mind, I see a line. And over that line, I see green fields and lovely flowers and beautiful white women with their arms stretched out to me over that line. But I can't seem to get there no how [sic]. I can't seem to get over that line. That was Harriet Tubman in the 1800s. And let me tell you something: The only thing that separates women of color from anyone else is opportunity. You cannot win an Emmy for roles that are simply not there. So, here's to all the writers, the awesome people that are Ben Sherwood, Paul Lee, Peter Norwalk, Shonda Rhimes. People who have redefined what it means to be beautiful, to be sexy, to be a leading woman, to be black. And to the Taraji P. Hensons and Kerry Washingtons, the Halle Berrys, the Nicole Beharies, the Meagan Goodes, to Gabrielle Union. Thank you for taking us over that line. Thank you for the Television Academy. Thank you. (Davis, 2015).

This speech also is critical to the analysis because it qualifies as a historic moment in the history of television. Viola Davis is the first, and so far only, Black woman to win this coveted award. Unfortunately, groundbreaking moments or major accomplishments earned by people of color are not always well received.

Initially, the media coverage surrounding the event praised the actress for this particular milestone, but this was soon overshadowed by reports discussing a string of racially insensitive tweets by *General Hospital* actress Nancy Lee Grahn shortly after Davis's win. She wrote from her Twitter account: "I wish I loved #ViolaDavis Speech, but I thought she should have let @shondarhimes write it. #Emmys." Rhimes, a well-known executive producer who is responsible for the success of hit shows like *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal*, is credited as *HTGAWM*'s executive producer. Equally important, Rhimes is a Black woman, and she has been extremely vocal about her intentionality to create diversification within the industry. Rhimes's career is largely built upon creating and writing television programs with the intent of expanding roles for people of color. Grahn's Twitter statement about Davis and Rhimes undermines their work as allies because it is through their collaborative efforts that they are able to ensure creative control over the content of the projects they are involved in.

Regardless, Grahn's absurdity did not cease there. Moments later, her anger intensified, and she continued her hateful rant writing: "I'm a fucking actress for 40 yrs. None of us get respect or opportunity we deserve. Emmys not venue 4 racial opportunity. ALL women belittled." This particular statement was later deleted from her personal Twitter account; however, it was captured and recirculated by BuzzFeed. Still, Grahn was not finished posting about Davis's win. She took it a step further and spoke from a place of deep-rooted White privilege. Nancy Lee Grahn seemed to have felt justified to make misinformed judgments and opinionated claims about Davis's lived experiences as a Black woman. She tweeted, "I think she's the bee's knees but she's elite of TV performers...Brilliant as she is. She has never been discriminated against" (Lee, 2015).

Incorporating a discussion of Grahn's responses and of the framing identified in the media reporting are not intended to accentuate the voice of individuals who seek to oppress others—over

Black women actively engaged in reassessing controlling images. Obviously, this project encourages the types of actions and behaviors that have been described throughout this discussion of self-defining. And yet, this study also makes the case for why identifying negative backlash is valuable to the discourse. The overall goal of this dissertation is to incite activism that should lead to favorable outcomes. Accordingly, integrating antagonistic components highlights the potential pitfalls and challenges Black women face when self-defining.

Additional secondary texts include conversations Davis made about the previously mentioned roles. During interviews given throughout the timespan of the release of *The Help* (2011) and post multiple seasons of playing on *HTGAWM*, Viola Davis made many meaningful womanist claims publicly via mass media outlets. Audiences got a glimpse into the actress's personal life off the silver screen when she protested in the streets hand-in-hand with everyday women. Once she arrived at the place in her career where she was solidified as an A-lister and highly respected artist, Davis opened up about the personal challenges she faces as a Black entertainer. She is particularly transparent when discussing the hardships she encountered while growing up. Viola Davis's claims are a part of a larger narrative within women's movements taking place in the 21st century. Mainstream movements in the past generally overlooked Black women's perspectives, but the visibility of Black women celebrities is instrumental in guaranteeing that Black feminists are appropriately acknowledged for their contributions within political and other social spheres (Greene, 2016).

Correspondingly, among those secondary text selections are two additional interviews. Just weeks after the historic 2018 Women's March on Washington, D.C., the actress sat down for a candid interview before a crowd of women and men with *Vanity Fair* Editor in Chief Tina Brown to share her perspective on the #MeToo movement and her position as a woman of color in

Hollywood. During the conversation, she emphasized intersectionality components facing Black women, such as colorism, classism, and sexual politics, while arguing “Pay me what I’m worth!” In another taped talk, Davis spoke at length in a one-on-one conversation with Jess Cagle from People Entertainment. Davis told Cagle that “You (the industry) don’t put me in a box.” For her, acting is about “creating a human being, not a trope or stereotype –a real woman.” In both of these talks, Davis communicated a self-definitive womanist standpoint about who she is as an individual, not as a character.

To summarize the texts selected for this case study, all commentary or verbiage expressed by Viola Davis in the previously mentioned scenarios facilitated this investigation into uncovering the usefulness of privileged Black women’s resistance. Specifically, the analysis involves an assessment of the characters stated. The primary focus of this chapter evaluates what Davis says about these controlling images and her interpretations of Aibileen and Annalise, and it involves Davis’s perspectives about what it means for her to be a Black woman living in the United States. By broadening the kinds of texts selected for this dissertation, the intention is to identify and acknowledge in what ways self-defining occurs within non-safe and safe spaces not previously identified by Collins. New knowledge and contexts should be discovered within today’s social–political climate in addition to the artistic tradition of the blues, since Black women are making a significant impact within the television and movie industries. As mentioned in Chapter One, the discourse lacks pragmatic self-definitive moments. Including Viola Davis’s self-definitive demonstrations integrates a unique approach to the subject. Davis’s performances are multidimensional in the sense that she is occupying the space of each character, along with the self, to resist controlling images.

## THEORY

### *Managing Self-Defined Identities in Crooked Room Hollywood Spaces*

Collins (1991) argued, “Institutions controlled by the dominant group such as schools, the media, literature, and popular culture are the initial source of externally defined controlling images” (p. 95). These establishments play a major role in disseminating materials promoting racist ideology; these entities are also known for carrying out systemic discrimination practices. Hollywood is one such crooked room establishment. Nevertheless, Black people are infiltrating industries once occupied solely by Whites, and thus organizations known for stigmatizing certain groups are now being looked upon as avenues to access empowerment. One shining example is identified in this case study of Viola Davis. Davis’s take on being an actress in Hollywood illustrates the influence of self-defining on the big screen, but her approach to addressing these challenges is mixed with strategies that could easily be misread as contradictory.

One question that often arises is whether or not Black women should ever act in roles personifying traits associated with the various stereotypes or controlling images. As previously indicated by Lorde (2007), the problem with controlling images is not that Black people sometimes share resemblances with these false characterizations. The greater issue stems from the appropriation of the character, and how that particular image is used to create an incomplete and skewed picture of a community of people in order to maintain systems of racialized social hierarchies.

Davis’s actions are an example of the *bending and tilting* that occurs when Black women attempt to self-define in crooked rooms. The portrayal of Aibileen is also useful in pointing out the agency of Black women actresses who reject controlling images. Davis and other critics concerned with the representation of Black women in the film, like Jones (2014) in her assessment

of the *The Help* (2011), are not arguing the movie entirely misses the mark. From their perspective, the *The Help* (2011) lacks credibility in authenticating the depths of aggravation or anger experienced by many Black women housemaids from the South during a particular time period. Nonetheless, *The Help* (2011) is instrumental in challenging stereotypical images of mammie, brings attention to the strength of Black women's connections with each other, and reiterates the value in Black women connecting with ally community members.

Within the entertainment industry, ethnicity is often utilized to socially shun members of the Black community, but when used appropriately, racialized characters can be used to build cultural pride and societal prominence. Consider the impact of vile representations like black-face portrayals in the late 18th century and those present-day loud-talking, fist-fighting Black women that incessantly saturate movie and television screens daily. There are also a handful of Black Hollywood industry professionals like Mona Scott, the executive producer of the controversial hit reality television franchise *Love and Hip-Hop*, who choose to capitalize on displaying images of Black women as tacky and violent. African Americans who share Scott's ideology argue that all Black women deserve a platform regardless of the extent of negativity a certain identity may promote. When probed about her show, Scott stated, "I don't always agree with the choices that they [the reality stars on her show] make. Do I try to provide them with a platform to promote, leverage, take them to where they're trying to go? Absolutely. Do I always agree or subscribe to how they choose to get there, no. But again, I'm not here to pass judgment" (Huffington Post, 2013).

While Black feminist movements developed from a need to create a more inclusive space within mainstream women's movements, as pointed out in the example of Scott, even amongst Black women there exist a variety of approaches to expressing supposed authentic representations

of Black womanhood. Griffin, Alison, and Padgett (2016) suggested in order to distinguish whether or not a genuine Black feminist framework is being utilized to construct genuine Black women's identities, "we point to the patriarchal ideologies of white supremacy, devised during slavery to sustain subjugation" (p. 154). In the case of some reality stars and other mainstream characters, the image aligns only with representations created from a racist White male lens. Therefore, we can conclude that simply because a Black woman is demonstrating a particular image does not mean that she is self-defining. Womanist ideology proposes Black women use the media as an opportunity to present, change, or introduce realistic representations of Black people in contrast to those imageries created from a patriarchal perspective. Viola Davis's methodology for playing a familiarized trope involves more than merely recycling the characteristics and behaviors audiences are accustomed to seeing.

In lieu of continuing dialogue which helps to paint a picture of Black people as victims, bringing attention to African American women in the industry who resist the temptation to cash in on lucrative projects focused on exploiting the Black community helps to center self-definitive research within the types of conversations that move in the direction of emphasizing empowerment. Davis is admittedly selective about the projects she agrees to, and she makes it a point to seek out non-traditional roles. The greater takeaway is to recognize Davis's approaches to tackling discriminatory and sexist practices in crooked room Hollywood spaces.

## **THE HYBRID SELF**

### ***Viola Davis, The Artist & The Activist***

Womanist scholars interested in identity development should pay close attention to the tension transpiring between Davis, the woman, and Davis the actress. From a self-definitive standpoint, she wrestles with understanding the depths of history and harm tied to certain images

of Black women, along with playing the part she was selected for. When Davis acts as characters fitting stereotypical tropes, and manages to simultaneously present them in a multifaceted and authentic style, she exemplifies crooked room ideology. Harris-Perry's (2011) theoretical framework explains why it sometimes seems as if Black women are playing up to the very images they despise. For Davis, when self-defining occurs the hybrid self of an activist and an artist emerges. Though, the act of celebrities using their platforms is not especially noteworthy; many entertainers speak out against social ills. Evaluating the hybrid identity formed as a result of self-defining is unique. The dyadic image that develops within crooked rooms gives the performer agency to challenge the industry she is also actively involved in.

### ***Self-Defining is Unmasking***

Viola Davis claims to be in the business of transparency. She often states revealing a character's pathology is what she hopes to accomplish through a script or a scene. During an interview with *Variety* (2011), she explained unmasking detail: "My gift is exposing, exposing mess—the humanity, the vulnerability of what it means to be human. I think that that is what acting is about anyway. At the end of the day, most people gotta put on a mask. Only in acting do people literally take it off, and it's embraced-celebrated." Respectively, Black women's identity studies reveal African American women are often expected to "wear the masks," or in other words, assimilate. Even within academic circles, Black feminists reiterate "the unapologetic black woman is scary, not because she is rude, disrespectful, or angry but because she is truth" (Walley-Jean & Grange, 2016, p. 3). Similar sentiments come through in Aibileen's most significant line in *The Help* (2011). During an interview with Skeeter, Aibileen states, "No one had ever asked me what it felt like to be me," and in this moment audiences are reminded of how often Black women are denied an opportunity to share their perspectives, or for their thoughts and opinions to be valued.



Particularly speaking, this quote is indicative of African American women's social status during that time period. As domestic workers, and caregivers, they were deemed as people with no value. The point of the film was to state otherwise. Also present within this reenactment is the emergence of a powerful version of a Black woman domestic worker. Each case study is concerned with uncovering variations of authentic empowered Black women's images.

Similar to Michelle Obama, Viola Davis is a privileged and widely famous Black woman. Likewise, comparable to Obama, Davis relies on the support and affirmation of women from her community to maintain her public spotlight. In short, these two women direct their attention to the needs and concerns of other Black women, even though they enjoy notoriety with and have obtained acceptance from crossover audiences. Given that this particular chapter looks at the fictitious characters played by the actress and examines Davis as an individual, this case study aligns with the self-definitive performances discussed earlier, but also differs significantly in two distinct ways. Firstly, Davis steps into her roles and actually embodies the one-dimensional stereotypes, while also managing to disrupt them. Secondly, Davis's background and private life reflect intersectional dualities in self-defining. Davis comes from extreme poverty, but now she is considered to live a privileged lifestyle. Regardless of the wealth she has accumulated as an actress, she self-defines as a Black woman from the modest socioeconomic background from which she started. These factors distinguish this case study from those of Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles.

## VIOLA DAVIS'S SELF-DEFINITIVE THEMES

Seven prominent themes were identified in Viola Davis's self-definitive presentations: 1) authenticity/complexity of Black women's characters or personalities; 2) transparency; 3) power in sisterhood-partnerships/advocating for others; 4) using talent to access platforms; 5) using talent as an escape; 6) exposing; 7) being fearless and courageous.

### **Resists Controlling Images**

#### *Authenticity/Complexity of Black Women's Characters or Personalities*

One of Davis's most noteworthy performances as Annalise involves a scene in which the character is intensely examining herself while sitting in front of a mirror. From the earliest forms of the show's conception, Davis proposed that she "wanted to be a woman who takes off her wig, and wipes off her makeup, and you see who she is underneath" (Lahr, 2016). Peter Norwalk referred to Davis's decision as an act of elevating the character, which subsequently elevates Davis. This scene is symbolic of what it means to unmask or show one's authentic self, and Davis was responsible for incorporating Annalise's actions into that particular episode. Black women have been in the practice of wearing masks from the inception of slavery. The ability to hide or conceal one's true feelings often functions as a coping or protective mechanism, similar to the communicative actions described when in silence or in outsider-within positions. Performing from the perspective of what real Black women experience and feel allows Viola Davis to show deeper degrees of authenticity within African American women characters.

Through Aibileen, dual masking practices are occurring, and perhaps limiting Davis on how much she could bring to the character. For example, maids working for racist White employers during the 1950s and 60s could have faced dangerous and life-threatening outcomes for carrying out the activities Aibileen did. As noted previously, Jones's (2014) essay entitled "The

Divided Reception of ‘The Help’” recognized criticisms of the film’s lack of realistic representation regarding the extreme violence endured by Black people during Jim Crow and the Civil Rights era. Jones (2014) argued that most Black viewers of the film found fault with the movie for its “tone deaf” portrayal. The essay also claimed the majority of Whites who watched *The Help* (2011) were left with a false and/or naïve understanding of what African American activists were actually up against. In this instance, the heroic mask worn by the character is partly fictitious, since the movie leans toward a lighthearted approach to portray the intense struggle of Black women workers. Aibileen’s heroic mask celebrates her actions, and yet it actually functions to conceal how courageous Black women are who fought for and continue to fight against injustice. If detailed accounts about Aibileen’s internal battles were introduced, audiences could better share in the experiences of the character, but these elements were not explored significantly.

Additionally, any Black woman contesting the imagery of a controlling image has already been masked by the dominant group. During her discussion with *The New Yorker* about the scene, Davis explained, “Colorism and racism in this country are so powerful...As an actress, I have been a great victim of that.” In order to reclaim narratives or a sense of individual identity, Black women have to disrupt the mask or outer layer of the stereotype in order to distinguish themselves on their terms and to be recognized beyond the idealization of the label. Ultimately, whether unmasking is intended to reveal the true feelings belonging to African American women, or to negate falsehoods preceding controlling images, the idea of taking off masks is critical to self-defining. When masks are removed, the complexities of an authentic Black woman shine through. To this point Davis contended,

“The black artist cannot live in a revisionist place. The black artist can only tell the truth about humanity...Caucasian actors know that. They understand that when you bring a human being to life you show all the flaws as well as the beauty. We, as African American artists, are more concerned with image and message and not

execution. Which is why every time you see our images they've been watered down to the point where they are not realistic at all. It's like all our humanity has been washed out. We as artists cannot be politicians. We as artist can only be truth tellers." (The Tavis Smiley Show, 2012).

## **Transparency/Advocating for Others**

### ***Intersectionality of Poverty, Sexism, & Racism***

Davis is a product of her environment as much as she is an advocate against the racial and socioeconomic barriers she fights to overcome. She states, "Nothing can be great unless it costs you something." And her philosophy towards life is expressed by her mantra, "I don't give speeches, I give testimonies." For Davis, the goal is not to forget her past nor to hide it from the public in shame. She uses the privilege that she has acquired to shed light on a population of people she believes are overlooked. Poverty is a problem facing the African American community and is largely due to a number of systemic factors, including lack of or meager education, scarce job opportunities, along with a prison industrial system that is sustained by incarcerating people of color, amidst other influences. Black women are seeking to close the poverty gap by taking on financial responsibility for themselves as well as by seeking opportunities not to simply survive, but to create long-term stability and independence. Winship et. al (2018) claimed, "the big finding is that race gaps in intergenerational mobility largely reflect the poor outcomes for black men." In another comparable measurement, The National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) revealed degrees conferred on Black women rose to 64% in comparison to 46% of Black men. Black females lead both male and female whites, Asians, and Hispanics in percentage numbers of individuals who hold degrees; Native American women are the only exception. On average, individuals who earn college degrees earn 56% more over their lifetimes than individuals who only graduate from high school, which is the highest recorded difference ever (Rugaber, 2017).

Black women's efforts towards academic and career success are not about seeking to obtain a status of superiority within their communities or within the community at large. Recognizing the noticeable problematic areas facing African Americans explains how Black women are specifically targeting certain agendas. Financial security and the ability to acquire or pass down generational wealth is one form of empowerment needed to leverage against social inequality. With proper economic principles, people of color can thrive autonomously and create opportunistic avenues for success. Viola Davis is one of many Black women who is leveraging financial security as a tool and means of social progression. She and her husband, Julius Tennon, created JuVee Productions to ensure creative control over projects. These two are also bringing other people of color to the table as decision makers.

According to the establishment's official website, their mission statement describes JuVee as “an artist-driven production company that develops and produces independent films, television, theater, VR, and digital content across all spaces of narrative entertainment...With an emphasis on producing narratives from a diverse range of voices alike and crafting dynamic stories spanning the broad spectrum of humanity.” Viola Davis's testament to overcoming poverty translates as authentic, and it is one of the reasons she is inspirational to others. Ultimately, Davis self-defines as a person who has lived lifestyles from two very extreme socioeconomic classes. In these worlds, she articulates an aspect of Black women's concerns about class warfare and how it can impact one's ability to view oneself in relation to others who are in the same or different class categories.

### **Invokes Action/Prompts Power**

#### ***Power in Sisterhood–Partnerships***

Since its earliest inception, Black women have had their fair share of time on television and in movies, but the number of varied roles portrayed by the group has lacked considerably over

the years. According to Dabney (2017), “unlike white actresses who can choose from diverse roles at virtually every age in their careers, black women who look a certain way and who are over a certain age are type-cast as mammies and ‘black ladies’” (p. 41). Trailblazer Black women actresses like Cicely Tyson and Diahann Carroll made it a point to push the envelope, and to recognize the power of having a strong authentic image. Tyson told *Essence Magazine* (2014), “If, in fact, I have, in some way, been the inspiration for any of them, I will feel that I have accomplished what I set out to do, and that is to break the mold and the concept that limited people’s vision of what we, as black women, or black actresses, could do in this business.”

During an interview with one of the original Black supermodels, now turned blogger, Veronica Webb, Diahann Carroll explained why Black actresses cannot be timid in vocalizing their apprehensions to confront Hollywood leaders. Carroll, who was the first woman of color to be nominated for an Emmy in the category of leading actress in a comedy for her portrayal as the nurse in *Julia* (1968), stated this about her role as the earliest image of an African American woman working professional seen on prime time TV:

Hal Kanter, who created “Julia,” had also created The “Amos ’N Andy Show.” My mother never let me listen to it, which he was surprised to hear. I said, “You’re a white Southern man. What is there for my mother to be happy about that came out of your pen? Nothing. But you’re turning yourself around and exploring new territory with “Julia”—whether you enjoy it or not (The Root, 2018).

As once-newcomers to the business, Tyson’s and Carroll’s objective was to broaden the scope of representation in the hopes that one day Black women actors could play all types of characters, and as complex human beings. Tyson and Carroll represent an era of progression and departure from the roles that had been played by Ernestine Wade and Hattie McDaniel. Since Tyson’s and Carroll’s heyday, many African American women have begun to occupy decision-maker job capacities as writers, producers, and casting and cinematic directors. Their creative

agency on and off the screen is proving to advance and evolve the kinds of roles, storylines, situations, and even environments that these actresses are seen in. Equally necessary to create change are the relationships Black women in the entertainment industry are developing and fostering with one another. These bonds are needed to inspire and motivate Black women in Hollywood—and they are proving to be effective for carving out and creating safe spaces designated for self-defining within non-safe spaces.

For example, Viola Davis took it upon herself to request Cicely Tyson have the part of Annalise's mother on *HTGAWM*. The show's executive producer and co-creator, Shonda Rhimes, has spoken on numerous occasions about the dialogue that she is generating with other Black women like Davis, Kerry Washington, Oprah Winfrey, and so forth to further advance women of color as professional talents. Whenever Davis is asked who inspired her passion for acting, she repeatedly proclaims her adoration and respect for Cicely Tyson. About Viola Davis, Tyson (2015) told an Access Hollywood reporter,

“She qualified my concept of her being... There was something about the depth of her being that reached me, not only as an artist but as a human being and that is what qualifies her to be the artist that she is.” She went on saying, “And so I knew that this was someone super special and so when she... took it upon herself to go to the powers that be and say, ‘I want Cicely Tyson, to play my mom,’ I can’t tell you what that means to me.”

Even though today's media market is bombarded with far too many outrageous and eyebrow-raising images of Black women, and while the struggle for diversity and equal pay still remains at the forefront for those who work in Hollywood, springs of water seem to be erupting in dry places. Davis's actions suggest she fully appreciates and is aware of the barriers that were broken down for her and others who are now experiencing opportunities that former Black actresses fought for and desired. Similar to Michelle Obama, Viola Davis is adamant in acknowledging her foremothers and fathers and routinely pays homage to the Black women and

men who inspired her to be who she is today. The relationships between Black women are critical sources of motivation and support, especially in a country that seeks to deny them the value of their worth. Davis's actions are an example of how self-defining gives one the confidence she needs to navigate through homogenized and predominantly White career spaces.

### **Assumes a Womanist Standpoint**

#### ***Viola Davis's Outsider-Within Take on Hollywood: Talent as an Escape***

The next passages highlight at least three ways in which Viola Davis utilizes an outsider-within perspective as a Hollywood elite, which also supports the premise that Davis self-defines. Collins (1986) claimed from this position, Black women who work with and for high-status Whites are likely to experience a "demystification of white power" (p. S14). Within these relationships, both sides find the interaction to be mutually beneficial. This occurrence manifests when Black women workers were affirmed and credited for their contribution within non-Black spaces. Conversely, Black women come to realize the advantage enjoyed by their White counterparts is not due to any sense of actual supremacy, but is solely based on a system of racist beliefs. Davis's theatrical training was shaped by a similar experience.

During her time at Juilliard, she was recognized for her great skills on the stage, but she was criticized for having "too much gravitas" and initially identified that opinion as one of her weaknesses. Later in her studies, she was given a chance to practice acting in the Gambia. There she came to appreciate her "extreme passion" for expression (Lahr, 2016). Viola Davis's tactics towards navigating through the industry parallel the experiences of Black women who learned how to thrive in outsider-within positions during slavery. "It was good to see how other people see me. Because then I began to have an inner gauge as to how to direct myself, how I'm coming off," says Davis. Interestingly enough, the actress appears to be neither intimidated by nor resentful



about the ills of her profession (Lahr, 2016). She was once quoted as stating, “You can’t be hesitant about who you are.” In another public appearance during her 2012 Crystal Award for Excellence in Film acceptance speech, Davis proclaimed:

I believe that the privilege of a lifetime is being who you are, truly being who you are. And I’ve spent far too long apologizing for that- my age, my color, my lack of classical beauty- that now at the age of 46, I’m very proud to be Viola Davis, for whatever it’s worth (Elle, 2017).

Throughout her career, we have witnessed Davis becoming incredibly vocal about how she develops her acting as an instrument to participate in Black women’s activism. Within these specified comments, Davis discloses having exceptional talent and a seemingly open-minded perspective on the entertainment industry—she views Hollywood and the media from an outsider position. Davis’s approach to performing and her physical appearance do not fit the standard norms usually displayed by Hollywood actresses, Black or other.

### ***Exposing***

Secondly, when analyzing the world from an outsider-within standpoint, Collins (1986) claimed, “Black women’s ideas are honed at the juncture between movements for racial and sexual equality.” These forms of marginalization are also what White (1984) believed to be the motivation for Black women’s resistance in both areas (p. S15). Davis’s characters often confront a broader spectrum of Black inequality, but also contest norms of gender and sexual orientation. Davis sees the images of the characters she plays as prospective sites of resistance, and in her personal time, Davis advocates for Black women. All of these occurrences lead to Collins’s argument, which states that the outsider-within vantage point fosters creativity and resourcefulness.

Collins’s reference is based upon Mannheim’s (1936) observation that this unique position has two sides. The first position is identified as a painful psychological space that could be extremely difficult for Black women to process. The second aspect of this standpoint suggests the world is a

potentially creative place for Black women to devise unforeseen and unlikely modes of resistance. Undoing racial and gender-specific restraints while acting as characters who resemble controlling images is ingenious and also reminiscent of Baker's deconstruction of the Jezebel trope. The practice of using art as apparatuses for improving humanity is longstanding and ties back to the teachings of Greek philosophers like Plato. Likewise, Davis routinely engages in portraying Black women whom audiences have either never seen or are very limited in being introduced to (e.g., Marvel character Amanda Waller). These elements indicate self-definitive traits of carrying out activism are unique and may occur in unexpected and surprising ways.

### **Womanist Performance**

#### ***Owning the Stage, Using Talent as a Platform: Fearless & Courageous***

Viola Davis's Emmy win was an sensational moment, especially considering that she had been twice nominated for an Oscar and now, with her first Emmy nomination, she had snagged a win (Desta, 2015). Davis's Emmy signified an important achievement for all Black women. It pointed to a shift in mainstream media representations and indicated audiences accept and desire to see varied depictions of Black women in non-stereotypical roles. The celebratory mood, however, was disrupted by one ill-guided actress, *General Hospital's* Nancy Lee Grahn. (Grahn's spiteful comments were introduced earlier in this chapter.)

The assessment involved in this section of the analysis is not concerned with nor concentrates on Grahn's statements. Bringing attention to the backlash self-defining generates from opposing feminist and/or racial viewpoints is an attempt at locating possible motivators for Black women's desire to resist controlling images, which is also highlighted within the previously mentioned discussions about masking (e.g., the mistreatment of the Leefolts led Aibileen to speak out). To best explain what self-defining analysis is able to determine, the degree or extent of the

challenges Black women face must be clearly identified to avoid overlooking the value of the characteristics that are being said to emerge from self-defining. Viola Davis's approach for responding to, or decision not to respond to, certain sexist and racial remarks takes courage and fearlessness. Self-definitive examinations encourage Black women to continue to use public spaces to share their concerns, but this investigation also forewarns Black women to be aware of and prepared for the potential negative backlash. African American females possess courage and fearlessness when they speak about identity concerns publicly, especially if and when they are expected to be politically correct.

In lieu of the fact that mainstream media outlets have made some advancements towards redefining negative images of Black women as authentic representations, the struggle for Black women to create their own idea of social identity remains evident and deeply embedded in American culture. Viola Davis's Emmy win and speech presented an opportunity and platform for progressive racial dialogue to be had. When Grahn's tweets were publicized, this opportunity was diminished. The focus shifted towards controversy and attending to the concerns of privileged White voices. Revisiting Davis's speech redirects the intention and focus back to Davis's initial subject. These moments should also serve as reminders about how tenacious Black women have to be, even within moments of what appears to be progress.

Moore (2015) reiterates, "Since TV's infancy, the march toward fair representation for various races and ethnicities has been circuitous and rocky. Most minorities remain underrepresented, while African-Americans found their place in TV's version of the world routinely shortchanged or disparaged by producers, networks, and sponsors." Ethel Waters was the first Black actor (female or male) nominated for an Emmy in a leading role in 1962. Diahann Carroll was the first African American actress to receive an Emmy nomination for the lead role in

a comedy series in 1968, and was also nominated for subsequent individual and/or guest roles. But, it was not until 1982, when Debbie Allen became the first Black woman to be nominated for her leading role in a drama for her part in “Fame.” Nearly thirty-four years had passed and not one Black female actress had been awarded this achievement, which further exasperates Davis’s insistence to speak critically of the industry. For these reasons, many Black organizations have designed and created awards (e.g. The NAACP Image Awards, BET Awards, etc.) to provide avenues to celebrate and acknowledge the artistic values of members from the community. While important, no Emmy nor any other award created by Whites is needed to solidify or validate the talents of Black actors. Yet, outward signs of respect and appreciation are always good indicators of racial equality.

Award ceremonies are a specific type of media text. As these shows continue to grow in popularity, they are now considered to be the ideal sharing space or platform for artists. A recent trend for musicians and actors has been occurring, when entertainers use their time for an acceptance speech to openly discuss social concerns they would like to bring to the forefront. In recent years, demonstrations have included recipients addressing poverty, equal pay, and issues facing the LGBT community. Most literature concentrating on Blacks on television focuses on the pejorative nature of stereotypes. Nakayama and Krizek (1995) argued, “White’ is a relatively uncharted territory that has remained invisible as it continues to influence the identity of those both within and without its domain...It wields power yet endures as a largely unarticulated position...The place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place” (pp. 634-635). Grahn’s Whiteness rendered her jealousy almost invisible to those who fail to see when Whiteness is used as a weapon. Media framing is an identifiable means of pinpointing the elusive nature of White supremacy, without seemingly or directly performing as acts of racism. Davis’s resistance

to those frames is understated, yet witty and courageous, because her words brought deep-rooted racial issues in the industry to the forefront.

### **Emergent Descriptors**

Terms like *animalistic*, *unintelligent*, and *slave* have been used to label mammies and Jezebels. Throughout her self-definitive demonstrations, Viola Davis used different specific terms to describe herself and other Black women. These descriptors directly reject and negate the characteristics belonging to Black women who have been categorized as controlling images. Davis used the following descriptors frequently while self-defining; they are as follows:

<i>Asserted</i>	<i>Complicated/diverse</i>	<i>Confident</i>
<i>Hero/Power</i>	<i>Failures</i>	<i>Imperfections</i>
<i>Messy</i>	<i>Not confrontational</i>	<i>Pay me/Talent</i>
<i>Private</i>	<i>Real</i>	<i>Relatable</i>
<i>Scars</i>	<i>Shy</i>	<i>Worthy</i>

Below are a couple of pertinent quotes; some are included to help place these descriptors in context:

It's rare to find characters that, especially if you're an African-American actress, you can identify as a human being and not a facilitator or archetype. She [Aibileen] went on a full journey and was intricate and subtle. She had a lot of different colors. Variety, 2016

I consider myself a hero. I don't have a cape; I don't have a golden lasso. I had a call to adventure, a call to live a life bigger than myself. I found the elixir. The New Yorker, 2016

Asked about her thoughts on the audience's reaction to her acceptance during the 67th Emmy speech, Davis responded:

I wasn't so concerned with that, because my whole life I've been focused on approval, on acceptance, on shame and all that. I've been focused on it for so much. One day it lifted...[There is] an unknown responsibility of celebrity. There is no line in my life and in my spirit, but there is a line in the culture for me as a woman and me as an African-American. *Variety*, 2016

As black women, we're always given these seemingly devastating experiences—experiences that could absolutely break us. But what the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls the butterfly. What we do as black women is take the worst of situations and create from that point. *Essence Magazine*, 2011

What keeps me in the business of hope, and that's the hope that women of color are also a part of the narrative, that our stories are just as potent because we also have the power of transformation. We also have the power to be quirky, and sexy, and different, funny, heartfelt and all of those things. *At Elle Women in Hollywood*, 2011

## CHAPTER 4 “Beyoncé Knowles: Self-Defined in the Entertainment Industry”

*“I can never be safe; I always try and go against the grain. As soon as I accomplish one thing, I just set a higher goal. That’s how I’ve gotten to where I am.” Beyoncé, (Billboard, 2011)*

### INTRODUCTION

Since her start in the 90s girl group Destiny’s Child, Beyoncé Knowles has been recognized as a musical sensation. After leaving the group, Beyoncé’s –(whose stage name is her first name) star continued to rise, and ultimately placed her into an elite class of world renowned performers. As a solo artist, Beyoncé has been awarded a total of 23 Grammys and she has achieved musical success comparable to Michael Jackson’s and Madonna’s. Even though Beyoncé is considered to be one of the most popular living entertainers, female or male, perceptions about her image are mixed with contradictions, thus making it difficult to truly understand who she is. Maybe it is because she embodies the kind of manufactured qualities that cause individuals to question the authenticity of her artistry.

For example, while promoting his book *Racism: From the Eyes of a Child*, Matthew Knowles, the singer’s father and former manager, told *Ebony* magazine (2018) that his daughter’s success is in part due to the visibility she receives as a light-skinned Black woman. Matthew Knowles’s perspective on how colorism has elevated Beyoncé’s career was somewhat jarring, yet he raised a valid point about how African American females are marketed in the music industry. His observation also plausibly explains why Beyoncé has such a great presence in the media. Regardless, how Beyoncé rose to such a pronounced level of fame is under question for reasons beyond how she presents herself externally. There also is some confusion about her messaging. Some critics are equally perplexed by her prominence in the music world, because there are apparent inconsistencies within the content and value of her lyrics and performances.

In one of her numerous girl-power anthems, Beyoncé sings, “Who run the world? Girls!” (Knowles, 2011, track 12). Conversely, in several other songs, she frequently expresses a weaker feminist identity as she voices the anguish and heartbreak she experienced when cheated on by her husband, Shawn Carter (professionally known as Jay-Z). She seems to be almost weeping when she croons “Because you lied” (Knowles, 2006, track 10). And she also allows audiences to get a glimpse into her intense anger and disgust when she screams, “Ring the alarm, I’ve been through this too long, but I be damned if I see another chick on your arm” (Knowles, 2006, track 5)—all while dancing in skimpy clothing or in one of her signature leotard costumes. Beyoncé’s empowerment messages to women don’t resonate with some listeners because she has remained married to a partner who has publicly disclosed that he was an adulterer throughout parts of their relationship. Bringing attention to Jay-Z’s infidelities is not to suggest that privileged women are excluded from experiencing hardships and challenges while in monogamous relationships. Incorporating personal details about the star’s private life assists in getting to the core of who Beyoncé is authentically as a woman.

Acknowledging the singer’s responses to her husband’s behaviors suggests why her grandiose statements about women ruling the world are considered less than inspiring by some women’s standards, because it appears as if she is allowing herself to be taken advantage of by a man. The singer’s lyrical content about her partner, often align with the familiar stereotypes of women as weak, emotional, and unstable creatures. Feminist and hip-hop critic Salami (2017) has blasted the lyrics from songs on Beyoncé’s self-titled album released in 2013 and she condemns Jay-Z’s “4:44” (2017) record stating,

“The theme that particularly stands out is Jay-Z’s remorse for mistreating and cheating on ‘the *baddest* girl in the world,’ Beyoncé. Indeed, much of Jay-Z’s album is a response to his wife’s hit visual album *Lemonade* (2016), lauded as a ‘revolutionary work of black



feminism.’ But let’s be real here: the romantic melodrama played out in these two albums is neither revolutionary nor feminist, but instead rather old and tired.”

These contradictions and inconsistencies in Beyoncé’s persona and brand spark debates about whether or not her choices are simply business decisions—formulated to create the most buzz and publicity. What remains of particular concern within the academic community is that most scholars find Beyoncé’s brand of feminism problematic. Some feminists assume the position of singer-songwriter Annie Lennox, who openly shunned the superstar, referring to her as a “feminist-lite,” insisting that Beyoncé’s 2014 VMA performance was “tokenist” and that she relies on sex to sell albums (Carley, 2014). The VMA presentation wasn’t particularly controversial or different from Beyoncé’s other performances. The attention and fanfare surrounding her 15 minutes mini-concert (which is unprecedented for shows of this caliber) and reception of the Michael Jackson Vanguard Award is what prompted widespread media attention.

After the release of *Lemonade*, which became the highest-selling record worldwide that year (Billboard, 2017), critics began firing shots and taking sides both in support of and against Beyoncé’s new political tone. *Lemonade* was a departure from her previous solo projects, but not because she addressed topics like women’s liberation or encouraged females to seek financial independence and wealth. Instead, this time around Beyoncé joined the very public and hot topic of racialized movements (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackGirlMagic, #ICantBreathe, and so forth) that are prevalent in today’s media, political, and cultural discussions. The Bey-Hive, the name given to a group of Beyoncé’s most loyal and extreme fans, rallied up, *clapping back at*, or responding vigorously to, anyone who was willing to challenge her talents and legitimacy as a world-class artist.

On the other end of the spectrum, womanist scholar bell hooks (2016) reprimanded the performer. She wrote in an essay called “Moving Beyond the Pain”:

My first response to *Lemonade* was WOW—this is the business of capitalist money making at its best...And when violence is made to look sexy and eroticized, as in the *Lemonade* sexy-dress street scene, it does not serve to undercut the prevailing cultural sentiment that it is acceptable to use violence to reinforce domination, especially in relations between men and women.

hooks closed her evaluation with even stronger sentiments, adding to her argument that we cannot accept Beyoncé's feminism as truth. In a less critical evaluation, Li (2018) asked, "Is her more pointed embrace of black cultural forms politically expedient in the age of Black Lives Matter or a reflection of the contemporary blueswoman she has always been?" (p.106). These types of interpretations about Beyoncé are indeed relevant, especially when considering U.S. culture is inundated by celebrity images. Entertainers and other famous people impact our understanding of each other and reflect the social positions certain groups occupy. Artistic materials produced for mass consumption and generated for widespread display are evaluated and assessed communicatively because these actions help us to make sense of the world we live in.

Chapter Four seeks to examine the identity of Beyoncé in new and unexplored ways via a self-definitive framework. Like those of Michelle Obama and Viola Davis, this case study abandons the temptation to evaluate the subject from a position of a male patriarchal gaze or even from a place of classifying Black women solely by their ability to negate controlling images. When we use a self-definitive concept, we are better equipped to understand Black women's authentic identities. A self-definitive analysis forces the researcher to examine Black women from the inside out, and offers an intrinsic view of the subject. In the case of Michelle Obama, the analysis focused on Black women's politicized identities—in relationship to the role of being the global and symbolic figure of a First Lady. Chapter Three, covering Viola Davis, examined self-defining through character representation, investigating how Black women challenge stereotypes by

disrupting and taking on resemblances to controlling images in artistic representations. Similar to Davis, Beyoncé also self-defines through character play with her stage persona.

Corresponding with Obama and Davis, Beyoncé's self-definitive performances are considered respectively from the vantage point of interrogating these individuals' public identities. This study's approach is distinguished from examinations that exclusively examine the exteriors of Black women celebrities. The difference in self-definitive analyses lies within how the research attends to these women's personalities as they are in the spotlight, while also acknowledging how these women define themselves in their own words and in resistance to stereotypes. The representation is public, but the sentiments expressed within their dialogue are recognizably personal, intimate, and individualistic. Because these three women possess fame, I must acknowledge while my belief is that who we see on display is in part real and authentic, we cannot omit the actuality of the fact that there are elements to each one of their personas that is reserved for those who know them intimately and behind closed doors. Therefore, this chapter focuses on Beyoncé Knowles's self-definitive activity as an entertainer.

## TEXTS

### *Physicality, Colorism, and Beauty Standards*

"Formation's" (Knowles, 2016, track 12) wording speaks a specific womanist language by disrupting notions of European classical beauty. In the first verse, Beyoncé sings:

*My daddy Alabama, mamma Louisiana  
You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma  
I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros  
I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils  
Earned all this money but they never take the country out me  
I got a hot sauce in my bag, swag*

In these lyrics, Beyoncé acknowledges the attractiveness of women with Afrocentric qualities, and yet this description does not necessarily fit how Beyoncé actually looks. Dozier

(2016) wrote in her *Huffington Post* column “The Inconsistent Acceptance of Black Beauty,” “We live in a world in which black features are only beautiful on the face and body of a white woman.” Similarly, Black women with White-like features are also considered to be more attractive by a European aesthetic. Thus, light-skinned Black women, like Beyoncé, fall in between a matrix of variants of Whiteness and non-fully inhabited Blackness.

As noted in the discussion about colorism, historically speaking, darker-skinned African American women are often held to the beauty standard of being compared to the appearance of Black women with lighter skin tone complexions and less-kinky hair. As alluded to by her father, subsequently, media critics have argued Beyoncé uses her complexion to her advantage and that she has adopted a “Whiter” image to acquire greater fame and crossover appeal. One widely known instance in which Beyoncé was accused of playing up to notions of White beauty was a L’Oréal advertising campaign. Sweeney (2008) reported there was a backlash in the United States over the images. The *New York Post* argued the “digital lightening” made her “virtually unrecognizable,” although she and the company denied that her skin tone was altered for the ads. In another critique of the singer-songwriter, Robinson (2012) referred to Beyoncé’s light skin complexion and lace front wigs of blonde tresses as an “ambiguity...creating a space for slippage that the audience uses to imagine the artist’s deep intentions, or, simply as fodder to talk about them badly.” The indication of the ideal of “slippage” directly correlates to the notion of agency, and the Black woman’s ability to represent what it means to be an authentic Black woman.

The tragic mulatto controlling image wrestles between these spaces of acceptance, as do real Black women who resemble this trope. The tragedy, as implied by the term, is then understood as the person’s inability to be accepted by either group. Self-defining proposes a solution for Black women who are challenged when having to clarify their Blackness due to the possible

misrepresentation of their skin color or other physical traits. Beyoncé is unable to change her physical makeup any more than any other Black woman. The power of the verse from “Formation” (2016) lies in its acceptance and acknowledgment of her Blackness. The video of the song shows viewers that although Beyoncé does not physically embody full African commonly identified features, she is no less Black than darker-skinned African American women, and she can showcase her beauty without apology or without insinuating superiority to Black women who may look different than her. As the chorus progresses she sings,

*I see it, I want it  
I stunt, yellow bone it  
I dream it, I work hard  
I grind 'til I own it  
I twirl on them haters*

Beyoncé references her light complexion with pride, insisting, “I stunt, yellow bone it.” Employing a self-definitive analysis helps to explain how the artist sees herself. Additionally, the gist of the song urges Black women to position themselves for empowerment; the lyrics repeat the statement, “Okay, ladies now let’s get in formation” throughout the song. Knowles’s unapologetic stance on recognizing her beauty, even within a place of slippage, disrupts the controlling image of the tragic mulatto. Because she is able to celebrate her physical attributes and also recognize the beauty of other Black women who look different than her, she is no longer tragic. Beyoncé’s push for expanding beauty perceptions about Black women was especially noticeable at the 2016 Video Music Awards, where *Lemonade* received 11 nominations. To accompany the star she brought an array of Black women from different walks of life. The notable women pictured beside her on the red carpet included 13-year-old *Annie* actress Quvenzhané Wallis, Canadian model Winnie Harlow, child model Ava Clark, and Lezley McSpadden (the mother of Michael Brown, a Black teenager shot and killed by a White police officer). *Time* magazine (2016) explained,

“Harlow and Clark, who have vitiligo and albinism respectively, are known for redefining beauty standards, while Wallis, the youngest Oscar nominee in history, withstood an ugly backlash for portraying the lovable orphan, originally a fair-skinned redhead, while black.”

### **BEYONCÉ KNOWLES SELF-DEFINITIVE PERFORMANCES**

#### **Lyrical Expression: “Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000), “If I Were a Boy” (2011), & “Formation” (2016)**

Beyoncé is recognized as a pop star and has a large crossover audience fan base at home and abroad. Thus, her music reflects a young and fresh approach. She is a trendsetter, and she is changing the music industry in terms of how artists use marketing and technology, and distribute their music. Although Beyoncé is responsible for giving us some of the catchiest slogans and party dance tunes released over the past 18 years with hits like “Get Me Bodied” and “Bootylicious,” what remains consistent is that her style and musicality are identified within Black music forms and mostly infused with R&B and hip-hop. Beyoncé keeps in the tradition of Black female blues artists in sharing her heartache and ability to triumph in the face of adversity. Whether she is singing a ballad or rapping a line as her alter ego, Sasha Fierce, Beyoncé identifies as a Black artist who appeals to the Black community. And having released at least 50 songs as a solo performer, Beyoncé has a large number of lyrical materials to evaluate.

This case study explicitly decodes the lyrical content of three songs: “Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000), “If I Were a Boy” (2011), and “Formation” (2016), as well as Beyoncé’s 2016 Super Bowl halftime performance of “Formation” (2016). Notably, “Formation” is a featured track from *Lemonade*, and even though the entire album is classified as a Black feminist work, “Formation” specifically addresses self-defining and rejects the tragic mulatto and Jezebel controlling images. Each of these examples was selected due to its specific relation to Black women’s identity as a

resistive force. These texts were also chosen because of their inventiveness in creating a certain element of surprise. In all of these illustrations, we are able to witness the superstar directly confront the previously mentioned stereotypes. Additionally, these texts reveal instances when Beyoncé openly identifies as a Black woman activist and as a feminist.

***“Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000)***

When television producer extraordinaire Aaron Spelling created *Charlie’s Angels* (1975), a weekly hour-long television series featuring three highly attractive White women detectives, the show did as much to promote mainstream feminism as it did to reinforce stereotypical portrayals of women as sexual objects. Notwithstanding, the series was groundbreaking and made stars of its original lead actresses, Farrah Fawcett, Jaclyn Smith, and Cheryl Ladd. Once a reboot was announced and set to hit the big screen, promotion and marketing for the film began. Flower Film’s advertisement campaign was considerable and the production house needed a soundtrack to accompany its anticipated release in 2000. It selected the R&B girl group Destiny’s Child. Shaky image problems had developed for the group after two of its original members disbanded, but the altered group, whose members now comprised Beyoncé, Kelly Rowland, and newly added, Michelle Williams, climbed the charts and became an even larger musical success than previously. The gossip about what actually caused Destiny’s Child to break up was further intensified after the release of *Survivor* (2000), which took place almost concurrently with the announcement of the movie.

Beyoncé is credited as the head songwriter for “Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000). Around this time, Beyoncé began to emerge as a powerful and influential female figure. She also started to display some forms of a feminist identity, even though she did not quite identify as feminist, at least not openly. Previous hit songs like “Bills, Bills, Bills” (1999), which discussed

how these ladies would break-up with their male love interests if he could not provide financially caused the group to endure disapproval. The lyrics in the song caused the media to refer to the young women as “gold-diggers.” “Independent Women Pt. 1” gave Beyoncé a chance to clear things up, and this time around the singer-songwriter made certain that audiences and adoring fans would understand that Destiny’s Child’s members could take care of their own financial responsibilities. Beyoncé’s pride in being financially independent was apparent then and is even more now, as a solo artist. This shift in creative direction and branding of the group stems from Beyoncé’s lyrical expressions. Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams both went on to release solo music projects after the group decided not to release any new music, but neither woman’s music includes a strong presence of feminist concepts. Most of Rowland’s music fits into a traditional R&B sound, and her lyrics are heavily saturated with sexualized content. Williams’s solo projects have all been gospel LPs. After taking the brunt of the heat for Destiny’s Child breakup, Beyoncé’s new identity and image changed from that of a young teeny-bop girl to a woman in control of her business as an authoritative boss. When “Independent Women Pt. 1” was released, it was undeniable that she was the group’s lead singer, positioned in the center with long blonde tresses and curves. Beyoncé embodied the brand of *Charlie’s Angels*—mainstream, sexy, and in charge, but nonthreatening to men.

“Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000) was set to an up-tempo dance beat, but its lyrics are highly braggadocio and similar to the type of money-talk present in many rap songs. To establish Beyoncé’s progression as a feminist, the following question was used as a guide to analyze this particular song:

- *Why does a song that Beyoncé sang while in a group 18 years ago matter within a womanist case study concerned with contemporary Black feminist activity?*



“Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000) signaled a definite turn in Beyoncé’s acknowledgment of herself as a feminist, and it was distinctively clear that she identified as a mainstream feminist. The singer’s recent interests suggest a more racialized connection to her activist activity. As determined by the dialogue presented within the previous case studies, it is more likely that Michelle Obama and Viola Davis achieved their understanding of themselves as women of color much earlier in their lives. Beyoncé was born during a different time period; at the height of her early career, racial tensions in America were not as intensified as they were immediately after the Civil Rights movement or as they are now in the Obama-Trump era. If research pertaining to self-defining is to be insightful and relevant, womanist examinations have to include varied Black women’s experiences. Meaning, scholars should be comfortable noting that some Black women do not determine race as a potential barrier until much later in life. According to the Pew Research Center, “Since 2009, the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency, the share of those who consider racism a big problem has grown among all racial groups. This is especially true for black Americans. In 2017, about eight-in-ten blacks (81%) said racism is a big problem in society today, up from 44% eight years prior” (Bialick, 2018).

This factor is critical to these studies in the way that it implies self-defining is a longer process for some Black women, and it reveals self-defining is encouraged by or prompted due to one’s environmental or external factors. Beyoncé’s success as a blonde bombshell almost 20 years ago indicated she was seeking to embrace a universal feminist identity. Today’s Beyoncé poses in music videos beside Sybrina Fulton and Lezley McSpadden; both women’s Black sons were killed as unarmed teenagers. Treyvon Martin, 17, was pursued, attacked, and gunned down by a “wannabe cop”; the case sparked outrage when Martin’s killer was not originally charged due to Florida’s

controversial “stand your ground” law. Michael Brown, 18, was shot by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri for causing a disturbance in a local gas station.

***“Independent Women Pt. 1” Speaks Feminism & Womanism***

The lyrical content in “Independent Women Pt. 1” (2000) makes women feel good about rallying together and celebrating life. The chorus reads:

*All the women, who are independent  
Throw your hands up at me  
All the honeys, who making money  
Throw your hands up at me  
All the mommas, who profit dollars  
Throw your hands up at me  
All the ladies, who truly feel me  
Throw your hands up at me*

The core of the song’s content is stating women are more than capable to provide financially for themselves, and the overarching message signifies women should lavish themselves with the finer things in life (i.e., diamonds, rings, shoes, clothes). Materialism has been identified as a method that has been tacitly used to keep the Black community from investing in wealth building, but in this instance Beyoncé’s message is not about encouraging women to be wasteful. “Independent Women Pt. 1” is to inspire women to seek opportunities to earn their own money, so they do not have to wait on men to provide for them. Black women’s fight for economic advancement is longstanding and is still a major concern today. According to the National Organization for Women (2018), White women earn 77 cents to the dollar in comparison to White men. These numbers are considerably lower for Black women, coming in at 64 cents per dollar earned by White men.

Destiny’s Child’s group members were between the ages of 19 and 20 years old at the time of the release of this song. Seeing three young Black women sing with such a confident and

boastful tone, while instantaneously being able to exemplify their images as synonymous to iconic White women figures, was progressive in terms of the image representation of African American women in mainstream media. The lyrical content and imagery used in the music video display Black women who are interested in promoting the idea that I am not only a successful Black woman, but it also indicates that Destiny's Child members were successful women of any right. Beyoncé continued to use this theme as she entered into her solo career, and it became a signature leitmotif that she continues to promote within her music today. This particular text established how the singer uses lyrics to encourage Black women to obtain financial independence.

***“If I Were a Boy” (2011): Beyoncé Disrupts Femininity and Embodies Masculinity***

Beyoncé routinely communicates her belief that female gender is not a boundary. “If I Were a Boy” was released in 2011 and it is the prelude to the kinds of strategies she would eventually implement to deconstruct oppressive masculine imagery. When displaying male characters as misogynistic, Beyoncé confronts these representations using a satirical approach. The irony and humor of an ultra-feminine woman occupying masculine traits is one way she demonstrates an emboldened self-defined identity. It is revelatory in demonstrating how proud she seems to be to identify as a woman, but she is able to see herself and present her identity as sing with or comparable to those of men. In the video accompanying “If I Were a Boy” (2011), Beyoncé switches roles with her male love-interest. Essentially, she becomes the “guy” in the relationship and he becomes the “girl.”

Women entertainers from various artistic industries have attempted to disrupt the “alpha male” trope by stepping into a manly persona. Fellow entertainer, singer, and songwriter Mariah Carey played multiple male character parts in her 2009 “Obsessed” video and displayed a similar storyline. Beyoncé’s video is surprising in the way that she presents racialized and gender images.

The character of the police officer with whom she is working side-by-side is a White male. Beyoncé and her partner ride around arresting people, shoving the bad guys into a car, while celebrating a job well done. As the storyline progresses, Beyoncé develops a romantic relationship with her White male coworker and ends up cheating on the Black man with whom she first had a relationship. In the end, however, she leaves her coworker for the man she initially had a relationship with. Overall, the storyline seems to be suggesting the male influence is especially powerful –it supersedes race and in this scenario masculinity equates to authority. Beyoncé’s womanist identity does as well.

### ***The Power of “Formation”: Aesthetic Identity***

The *Lemonade* (2016) visual album was highly anticipated by the singer’s fans, who had not heard newly released material since her self-titled album, *Beyoncé* (2013). There were no interviews or other publicly released statements to accompany “Formation” (2016), which was the first LP off the record. Beyoncé’s camp simply released a YouTube link of the video and it went viral shortly after it was leaked. The audiovisual featured the songstress with a large troupe of female dancers, moving in synch to beat-popping choreography. “Formation” (2016) is the most racially and culturally inspired, profound work by Beyoncé to date. Aesthetically and lyrically, this song straightforwardly presents Beyoncé as a Black woman feminist and is a departure from the types of mainstream feminist ideas that she once intertwined in her music.

Durham (2018) classifies Beyoncé’s public persona into three specific categories: the singular self, the hybrid self, and the integrated self. As the singular self, she represents a mainstream identity unrelated to her connection with other Black women, and this self is universal in its presentation. Durham describes Beyoncé’s hybrid personality as “replacing the flat identities that appeared to preserve her all-American image with a dual debut as a grownup good-bad girl

refashioned as the lady-freak” (p. 199). Beyoncé’s integrated self has a womanist sensibility in connection to its concern for and relatability to Black women.

Durham claims,

“‘Formation’ fused complementary sides of the singer to present a seamless, integrated self in music videos rooted in the black south, the regional birthplace of Beyoncé and the sonic bedrock of all American music from jazz to country to rock. The integrated self is a collective one in which her Texas-Alabama-Louisiana origin story is woven into the fabric of black America. (p. 201)

In various snippets of the video, Beyoncé is dressed in all-black or all-cream Victorian-antebellum styled avant-garde dresses, posing with other Black women throughout signature French Quarter styled homes, which is reminiscent of traditional, affluent Black-Creole families from the American South. Everyday Black women from the area images are also scattered throughout the video. At other points she and her troupe of dancers are shown wearing Gucci-logo attire and denim; this is an ode to her Black female hip-hop and “hood-rich” persona. “Formation” (2016) undoubtedly represents a multidimensional and layered presentation of Black women. This demonstration is not one that is usually seen in mainstream music performances. These variations of Black women’s imageries bring together a collective community of women from different spaces and times. More significantly, this text represents Beyoncé’s direct transition into womanism. In the two first mentioned texts and lyrics, Knowles’s feminist identity develops and takes complete form. However, Beyoncé seems to be influenced by current events, and she appears also to be responding to misrepresentations of her as a Jezebel or tragic mulatto image.

### ***Formation: Super Bowl Style***

While the Super Bowl determines the National Football League's (NFL) championship team of the year, the television commercials aired during the game and the halftime performances are just as much a part of its appeal. Since 1967, Super Bowls have been coveted as America's most popular sporting event. The NFL's ability to attract tens of thousands of fans from all over the country to a host city is impressive. The nationally televised event has a greater reach via mass media outlets. During the 2016 Super Bowl, an estimated 111.9 million viewers watched the show, headlined by the musical group, Coldplay, with guest acts Bruno Mars and Beyoncé Knowles. These numbers were down from the previous year, which recorded 118.5 million spectators (Lawrence, 2014). Despite the viewership decline, Beyoncé's performance was in perfect timing to kick off her highly anticipated On The Run tour, with her husband. "Formation" debuted the night before the NFL's Super Bowl L, and at the close of her performance, she quickly announced the upcoming tour with an ad.

Because of the Super Bowl's vast audience demographic, its headliner performances are typically given to artists with a large cross-over or universal appeal; and the Super Bowl is also considered to be a family event. After pop-star, Janet Jackson's wardrobe malfunction in 2004, which sparked major controversy as to whether or not she and Justin Timberlake had planned a hoax to expose Jackson's right breast, the NFL's selection of musical acts has become a focal point to market the show. Before having performed at the Super Bowl, Beyoncé fit the criteria of a typical halftime artist performer. She had wide mass appeal, was known for big productions, and was a relevant music act. Unbeknownst to the public, Beyoncé had to opt to alter her safe and non-controversial image for a more political and racialized identity.

Amidst a group of all Black female dancers, sporting afros and berets, Beyoncé's appearance clearly showed her solidarity to the newly emerged #BlackLivesMatter movement. She and her troupe of dancers dressed in black leather outfitting, as an ode to the civil rights activism of the Black Panthers, surprised the crowd, as people were expecting to see a Beyoncé whose style had typically been known to exude a fun and sexy mainstream presentation. During their routine, Beyoncé and her dancers formed in the shape of an "X" on the field, in remembrance of the outspoken and revolutionary activist, Malcolm X. Using this venue and space to express such a stark contrast to her brand was extremely risky, and could have damaged her career considerably. Conservative political voices chimed in to disapprove of the artist's show. Former New York mayor, Rudy Giuliani announced on Fox News that Beyoncé's act was "outrageous" and "terrible." Giuliani tried to sensationalize the performance and spoke untruthfully about its message when he stated, "She used it as a platform to attack police officers" (ET News, 2016).

Beyoncé's 2016 halftime performance of "Formation" was just as compelling as the song's video and lyrics. However, it should be acknowledged as its own text. The artist chose to self-define and occupy a non-safe space to reflect elements about her identity. In this way, audiences could appreciate her more newly emerged Black feminist position. Because she was willing to take such a huge risk, the performance was not as easily misunderstood for being a gimmick or as a fad. "Formation" at the Super Bowl clearly introduced to the world a Beyoncé Knowles who was seemingly more interested in being who she wanted to be, and not who others expected her to be.

## **THEORY**

### ***Managing Self-Defined Identities in a Crooked Room Musical Industry***

"Music historically has been a medium for human social expression," and in the Black community, music provides an avenue for highlighting social injustice as well as cultural pride

(Adams & Fuller, 2006, p. 938). African American women use music as a location to voice their concerns and music is also identified as a safe space for self-defining (Collins, 1991, p. 104). Black women's expressions can be identified in Negro spirituals, jazz, gospel, the blues, and other older forms considered to be Black music genres. Newer categories of Black music include rhythm and blues, hip-hop, and rap. No matter what specific category, Black women have been able to showcase great musical talent and to be well received by diverse audiences. Though, the tradition of the blues is most notably recognized as the original source of musicality chosen to address Black women's issues because of its ability to tell stories about struggle, anguish, and pain. Concerning resistance, early blues recordings are recognized as some of the first permanent documents communicating Black women's standpoints within diverse communities (Collins, 1991, p. 100.)

Rap and hip-hop, which also seek to express the struggles of inner-city, urban, Black American hoods and ghettos, are often seen as controversial because lyrics to these songs usually involve misogynistic and violent messages. Until recently, pop music artists were largely considered "clean" and appealed cross-culturally to racially diverse groups. As trends in the industry are occurring, recent studies indicate that in the last decade pop has become more politicized due to artists' ability to reach massive and global audiences. Frank and Schultz (2012) argued that despite the musical genre, African American musicianship development in the United States is closely linked to "black cultural (as opposed to territorial) nationalism" (Frank & Schultz, 2012, p. 43). Pop, which is not classified as being generated solely from the Black community, has been greatly impacted by Black female artists like Whitney Houston, Janet Jackson, and the greatest American selling girl group of all time, TLC.



### *Crooked Room Musical Spaces*

Similar to mainstream pop content, Black pop music remains largely free of tackling problems within the African American community, but recently artists like Beyoncé—have become more vocal in addressing critical issues. With the public’s increased attention on race and gender relations, the entertainment industry is fairly versatile when it comes to providing women of color safe spaces to express themselves when they speak out against oppression. But, the music industry is *crooked* in the way that it attempts to restrain and restrict Black women from showcasing empowered racialized identities. For example, many companies rely on celebrity brand endorsements to market their products, as long as the celebrity maintains a neutral or controversy-free political tone that aligns with what that corporation defines as its image.

In fact, endorsement deals are often offered to Black women who do not challenge ideologies tackling racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. For example, Cardi B, a former cast member of the *Love and Hip-Hop* reality television show, embodies “Sapphire” type qualities. In 2018, the rapper was shunned by the Black community and activist Bernice King for playing in a parody skit called “The Real Housewives of Civil Rights.” The segment involved, Cardi B in a ill-mannered and tacky portrayal of King’s mother and wife to the legendary Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King. During the scene, Cardi B is heard referring to other Black women civil rights activists and wives of prominent Black male leaders as “hoes” (Suggs, 2018). Yet, Pepsi signed Cardi B to a major endorsement deal, which aired during the 2019 Super Bowl. From Josephine Baker’s days as a superstar when she was expected to keep quiet about segregation, to endorsement drops like that of Whoopi Goldberg’s from SlimFast, after she criticized former president George W. Bush in 2004 (Stice, 2017), to the backlash Beyoncé received after her Black Panther inspired 2016 “Formation” performance, the crooked room effect

of the music industry limits Black female artists' ability to present their truths without infringing upon their financial success. Thus, when Beyoncé utilizes her womanist political tone, she is taking a major risk, and that further demonstrates the complexities of her actions. The tensions she experiences as she attempts to entertain and also move into the role of an activist cause her to contort in ways that do not always seem to outright denounce certain characteristics.

## **THE HYBRID SELF**

### ***Beyoncé Knowles on Femininity & Masculinity***

Jenkins (2016) asks, "Could it be that the banana skirt paved the way for 'Lemonade' in 2016?" There are certainly several elements in Josephine Baker's stage persona that are also identifiable in Beyoncé's, particularly as global African American women sex symbols. Reminiscent of when Baker performed in Paris as a bare-skinned, gyrating, flirtatious Jezebel-like character, initially audiences could not see past Beyoncé's sensual display. Within self-definitive studies, there lies another kind of evaluation and interpretation of Black women's sexualized representation. Some critical mass media and feminist researchers have argued whether or not Beyoncé's sexualized performances are damaging to Black women and young adoring female fans. Utley's (2017) study of the impact of Beyoncé on young girls indicated that she can adversely affect female adolescents' self-esteem.

This research revealed some fans have become vulnerable to the singer's beauty standards and class representation after watching her perform or seeing her appear in music videos (Utley, 2017, p. 6). Beyoncé's display of her body is also scrutinized and often interpreted as a form of self-objectification. Videos like "Partition" (2013) and "Blow" (2013) feature the artist singing about explicit sexual activity and also show the singer's body nearly naked. Utley claimed that "throughout her career, Beyoncé has been (in)famous for courting the male gaze—especially the

‘backward gaze’” which focuses on the curvature of her buttocks, calling upon stereotypes developed from photographic images of the Venus Hottentot. Black men also weighed in on the debate, and the negative backlash continued. Activist and minister, the Honorable Elijah Louis Farrakhan made a public plea to Beyoncé’s husband, to “keep her covered up,” arguing that Beyoncé was turning men into dogs (BET Online, 2015). Regardless, statistics revealed Beyoncé ranks number three among female fans, but she ranks at number 24 with male audiences. Feminist scholar Shannon Marcus suggested Beyoncé projects “through the historical lens of a feminist performance art, which is not staged for the male gaze, but rather attempts to explore the relationship between that gaze, female bodies and female fantasies.” (Berlatsky, 2014).

Lavoulle and Ellison (2017) provided a womanist interpretation of Beyoncé’s sexualized identity as aligning to a “Bad Bitch Barbie” representation. These researchers combined mainstream feminist ideas about sexuality with Black feminist thought conceptions of Black women’s sensual displays. According to Lavoulle and Ellison:

“The Bad Bitch Barbie” is a contradiction in terms, because it represents both a western/European beauty ideal of long straight hair and keen features as well as black standards of beauty: voluptuous hips, a small waist, and a large derriere. In the same way, the Bad Bitch Barbie represents direct objectification of the black female body while simultaneously representing a performance in feminism. A Bad Bitch Barbie is an image of a woman who rises against opposition and stands her ground. She is both a black feminist and someone who acknowledges that intersectionality and racism exist. (p. 67)

Beyoncé as a Bad Bitch Barbie identity correlates with Harris-Perry’s (2013) crooked room theoretical concept, and it addresses the surface of Beyoncé’s appearance and display. This self-definitive analysis offers a more in-depth interpretation of what occurs through Beyoncé’s sexualized performances. After taking Beyoncé’s personal life into consideration, or at least what she has chosen to display about her romantic involvements over the course of the last 20 years, Beyoncé appears to be conservative. She did not openly date men other than her current husband,

and she did not have kids out of wedlock. Her music is indicative of an individual who firmly believes in fidelity, and these traits are not associated with Jezebels. If she feels confident to show sexual expression through performance, as a wife, a mother, and an activist in order to display the pleasure and power in Black women's sensuality then Beyoncé is defying and deconstructing sexualized stereotypical images of African American women.

Additionally, Beyoncé's brand of feminism is concerned with disrupting notions of dominance and power that are typically related to men and racialized Black images. This concept is identified throughout the lyrics of many of her songs and is noticeable when viewing several of her stage and video performances. For example, during Beyoncé's 2018 Coachella concert, she exuded the characteristics of a Jezebel-Sapphire type in one of the skits presented on stage. She too found herself in the predicament of trying to stand up straight in a crooked room entertainment space. Coachella is notably a predominantly White musical festival, and Beyoncé was the first Black woman to ever headline the venue (Grady, 2018). Fans and music lovers were dazzled by her HBCU-themed performance, signifying the artist's way of paying homage to the nation's unique higher-learning institutes that were developed for and still promote pride in people of color being taught at colleges and universities, by people of color. Nonetheless, in a skit between singing her songs, she addresses a group of Black men pledges, similarly to what occurs during the process of joining a sorority or fraternity. Standing before the male fraternity members, she gaps her legs and lifted them one by one and stated, "Suck on.... my... balls!" repeatedly as if in a chant.

The utterance symbolizes Beyoncé feels as if she possesses the potency of a man. This phrase aligns most closely with a widely-used expletive statement, "Suck my...." Beyoncé's omission of the phallic symbol suggests that she does not have an interest in replacing her female genitalia, but she desires or feels equal to having the strength of a man's vigor. In "Feeling Myself"

(2014), written and performed with rapper and Black women's supporter Nicki Minaj, a verse from the song spoken by Beyoncé reads:

*Changed the game with that digital drop  
Know where you was when that digital popped  
I stopped the world  
Male or female, it make no difference  
I stop the world, world stop... Carry on*

This is another example of Beyoncé showing audiences that neither gender nor race prohibit her ability to influence people. The singer appeals to diverse groups of fans around the world. She is accepted by people of varied sexual orientations, and she attracts female and male fans from distinct socioeconomic backgrounds. Within these moments, we witness Beyoncé's identity conflate between demonstrating an extremely sexualized feminine persona and a desexualized masculine performance.

## BEYONCE' KNOWLES'S SELF-DEFINITIVE THEMES

At least five prominent themes were identified in Beyoncé Knowles's self-definitive presentations: 1) authentic in an authoritative/leadership role; 2) financial success and financial independence; 3) connecting with like-minded women; 4) be bold in display; 5) unpredictability.

### **Resists Controlling Images**

#### *Authentically Authoritative, Leadership Roles*

Beyoncé's brand is synonymous with power and she frequently uses authority as a tool. Her lyrical content is inundated with catchphrases that speak about her as a woman who dominates. "I'm a grown woman, I can do whatever I want" and "This [music] my shit, respect that, bow down bitches" are strong statements from songs she has written and produced in the name of being recognized as elite within the music industry. Beyoncé's manipulations of iconic and historical figures are not cheap imitations or an attempt to appropriate cultural identities. From a womanist lens, Beyoncé is showing herself as relatable to the images that she embodies and she infuses new meanings into our understanding of the characters, along with displaying additional sides to her personality.

When watching these performances, viewers don't feel as if they are witnessing or experiencing Beyoncé as an individual who is trying to imitate someone else. There is an authenticity to her approach to personifying different characters or characteristics. For the 2016 Super Bowl "Formation" performance, her dance attire is equally all things Beyoncé and a carefully crafted rendition of Black Panther Party regalia. The singer's black uniform is a leotard, fully exposing her legs in fishnet stockings and wearing combat-boot heeled shoes. Her dance movements are sexual and military-style. Beyoncé combines facets of women's and racialized identities to build her own. Nevertheless, Beyoncé's public identity is consistent, and hardly a

departure from the identity of what viewers have witnessed from Beyoncé since her days as a member in Destiny's Child.

### **Invokes Action/Prompts Power**

#### ***Financial Success and Financial Independence***

Beyoncé's final line in "Formation" (2016) states, "You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation/Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper." Financial independence and wealth are the most routinely identified themes present in Beyoncé's mainstream and womanist feminist articulations. Monetary security is also a commonly identified theme found in Beyoncé's songs, and it is present when she sings about infidelity. The singer-songwriter has a large catalog of hits that acknowledge the great amount of wealth she has been able to accumulate. "Upgrade You" (2006) and "Formation" (2016) speak about Beyoncé's financial status, insisting that she is able to make her man more successful because of her independently earned fame and accomplishments. The bridge in "Formation's" lyrics reads:

*When he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, 'cause I slay  
If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper, 'cause I slay  
Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J's, let him shop up, 'cause I slay  
I might get your song played on the radio station, 'cause I slay  
I might get your song played on the radio station, 'cause I slay  
You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, 'cause I slay  
I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making*

These lyrics insist her man's ability to perform sexually and to acquire wealth or notoriety hinge upon how established Beyoncé is. The informal definition of "slay," according to Dictionary.com (2018), is to greatly impress or amuse someone, and she acknowledges the extent to which her knack to garner attention supersedes that of most individuals. "Formation" (2016), a hip-hop tune, is jovial and edgy; it includes a satirical element also identified in some of her other songs. In her rock-inspired melodies that address a place of betrayal and hurt like, "Ring the

Alarm” (2006) she sings, “She gone profit everything I own, if I let you go.” During another tune, Beyoncé angrily sings “Keep your money, I got my own. I can keep a better smile on my face being alone” in “Don’t Hurt Yourself” (2016), —still noting and confirming she does not need a man to provide financially for her. Clearly Beyoncé focuses on financial stability as a way for Black women to thrive independently of men and despite socioeconomic barriers faced by the group. She has incorporated her financial beliefs into a system that is apparent in her business moves. In 2006 Beyoncé released a call to audition for an all-female band to tour with her. The 10-piece band ensemble, which tours with her to this day, also includes plus-size backup vocalists and is called Suga Mama. When asked about why she elected to have an all-female cast, Beyoncé told a fan, “I had an idea to have a lot of women on stage playing instruments, so hopefully young girls can see that, and it inspires them to play instruments” (Musoni, 2017). In addition to employing women to use their artistic skills and talents, Beyoncé has a reputation as a shrewd businesswoman, and in 2017 Forbes ranked her as the highest-paid woman in the music industry, earning at least \$105 million the previous year alone (Greenberg, 2017).

### **Assumes a Womanist Standpoint**

#### ***Flawless & Connected***

Black feminist studies focus on promoting African American women to move from a place of being victims to one of being survivors (Collins, 1991). As survivors, self-defining encourages Black women to thrive beyond abuse, pain, and misrecognition. When Black women thrive, they are no longer bound to the shame associated with their mistaken identities as controlling images. Once this has occurred, a woman can reflect upon all that she has experienced and acknowledge her strengths. “Formation” (2016), like Beyoncé’s song “Flawless” (2013), gives women around the world confidence to reject feelings of inferiority.



Beyoncé's feminism represents a shift from mainstream ideology to a womanist standpoint, and sometimes her Black feminist stance is infused by both. For example, in "Formation" (2016), Beyoncé included an excerpt from Malcom X's 1962 speech given in Los Angeles, California where he emphatically claimed, "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman" (Rodriguez, 2016). Beyoncé's music customarily speaks against commonly identified negative and sexist language from the dominant group against women from all ethnic backgrounds, because various women identify objectification as a major concern. Regardless, when considering the substantial amount of media coverage that Beyoncé receives, an intersectional approach is required to make sense of all that she faces. The Internet, social media sites, and other mainstream media outlets provide unlimited posts, videos, blogs, and articles questioning or attacking Beyoncé's weight, hair color, and even whether or not she bore her oldest daughter. *Elle* magazine's (2017) editorial "8 Of The Best and Worst Beyoncé Conspiracies and Rumors of All Time: From fake pregnancies to secret codes, we look at them all" summarizes some people's unhealthy obsession with the superstar. The media's interest in Beyoncé is racial and sexist. Consequently, it reveals the nature of American society to discredit Black women's success and to rename Black women's characteristics.

The practice of diminishing the value and accomplishments of Black people may occur in the form of associating African American women with controlling images and it can transpire indirectly through other types of criticism. Addressing either, requires Black women to use an oppositional or outsider-within gaze. There are poignant instances identified within the texts examining Beyoncé when she demonstrates that she uses this position. For example, in the song "Formation" (2016), Beyoncé attacks the credibility of people who believe that her success comes

from her allegiance to a faith or religious organization that she does not claim, stating, “Y’all haters corny with that Illuminati mess.” The insinuation that Beyoncé must be practicing unconventional forms of spiritual ideology basically suggests that Black women are not able to acquire this level of success without the assistance of some type of mystical manipulations. From the outsider-within position Beyoncé occupies, she responds to crass and critical commentaries made by others who seek to delegitimize her abilities to showcase exceptional skills or excellence as an artist. In her most exclusive project, HBO’s documentary *Beyoncé: Life Is But a Dream* (2013), she stated, I always battle with: How much do I reveal about myself? How do I keep my humility? How do I keep my spirit and the reality? She went on asking, “And how do I continue to be generous to—to my fans and to my craft? And how do I stay current? But how do I stay soulful? And it is the battle of my life. When I walk into a stage I’m able to come out of my shell and be as fabulous and over the top and strong and powerful as I want to be.”

## **Womanist Performance**

### ***Be Bold in Display***

It takes a great deal of courage for Black women to speak out against racism. In many instances, they outright put their bodies on the line of attack when they resist oppression. Baker’s *Danse Sauvage* toys with the vulnerability of displaying the Black woman’s body. More importantly, from Baker’s influence on the numerous Black women who followed in her footsteps, we can conclude it is liberating for some Black women to witness other African American females feel comfortable and reassured enough to display their sensuality. Beyoncé does not participate in many interviews, nor does she release many personal statements, but she makes many political declarations through her performances, activism, and social media accounts. In all of these instances, Beyoncé constantly exudes boldness in her showmanship style. Through her elaborate

costumes, racy lyrics, and over-the-top concert stage designs, she speaks more loudly than she could verbally. Her stage persona is encompassing to the point that sometimes audiences miss Beyoncé's incorporation of and connection to her Blackness.

Blay (2016) explained, "Through her music and performance, Beyoncé has always given nods to her blackness and the black performers who have come before—from the banana skirt she wore in homage to Josephine Baker in a 2006 performance of "Deja Vu" to the leather jacket inspired by Michael Jackson that she rocked during Sunday's Halftime Show." Since self-defining should make a statement of rejecting controlling images, Black women must be clear in distinguishing their actions from those who willingly accept the identities thrust upon them by society. There is a boldness associated with rejecting normalized social racial and gender confounds. Beyoncé is continually pushing boundaries, doing the unexpected and without asking for permission to articulate herself as creatively as she desires. As a non-conformist, Beyoncé's brand of feminism represents similar effects as Josephine Baker's performances from the 1920s.

### ***Unpredictability***

The technological age makes it especially difficult for today's entertainers to preserve their personal lives from the media and it is equally challenging for them to keep projects they are working on under wraps until it is the most effective time to release the information. Beyoncé's track record for surprising fans with her next move has been impressive considering how popular she is in the media; she has 118 million followers on the Instagram social media website alone. Doing things on her own time without giving her audience much of a preview or refraining from speaking about what she has in the works is synonymous with her MO as a performer. Beyoncé managed to keep her wedding private and concealed her pregnancy with her oldest daughter, Blue Ivy—until showcasing her belly bump on stage while singing "Love on Top" (2011) at MTV's

2013 Video Music Awards ceremony—and the artist’s decision to release her latest album via Tidal shows that Beyoncé’s strategy to allure fans keeps them interested. Monteiro (2016) explained, “After a decade of Bey surprises, the one and only Queen Bee still manages to throw us off our game frequently with her unpredictable escapades,” and ranked a list of 11 top moments when Beyoncé was able to pull off public surprises.

Among those moments were Beyoncé’s release of the music video for “Formation” (2016) and Beyoncé’s Super Bowl Halftime performance to the song. While not as notable, the narrative presented in the “If I Were a Boy” video is unexpected because it is a complete departure from the artist’s typical video presentations. This video is filmed in black and white, and it does not showcase the singer’s body or elaborate costumes. There is no choreography involved; she is simply showing how she would present herself in a relationship as a man. These three instances attest to Beyoncé’s ability to fly under the radar and her possession of a sort of *je ne sais quoi* attribute necessary for public figures to remain interesting. Whether or not Beyoncé will continue to remain as vocal about Black women’s issues is unforeseeable. For Beyoncé, the future seems to be related to the relevancy of what is happening around her during a specific time. As an entertainer with a feminist brand, the presumption is that Beyoncé will remain on the cutting edge of articulating herself as a woman. Because she is a privileged Black woman in the spotlight, Beyoncé’s image will still influence how Black women are identified and viewed for as long as she remains in the public eye. The benefit of self-definitive performances is that they allow Black women space and opportunity to self-define beyond racialized stipulations, even within spaces that do not seek to accommodate them.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSIONS, & NEWLY SELF-DEFINED IDENTITIES**

“Abandoning the idea of Sisterhood as an expression of political solidarity weakens and diminishes feminist movements. Solidarity strengthens resistance struggles.” bell hooks (1994)

The pervasive nature of mass media platforms continues to ensure that controlling images will remain prevalent in American culture. Therefore, Black women will have to demonstrate persistence in carrying out efforts of resistance. Self-defining allows women of color an opportunity to carefully craft and communicate to themselves and others how they identify as individuals. Since one of the primary goals for Black women’s activism is to move from victimization to empowerment, researchers should aim to discover and evaluate methods for improving these women’s lived experiences and quality of life. Through extensive examinations on race and gender, Black feminist scholars have recognized that self-defining is necessary for African American women’s ability to survive and thrive within spaces that routinely diminish their value (Collins, 1991). When Black women from this particular community do not stand up against the warped characterizations they are associated with, Black women risk taking on a racist, White, male patriarchal view of themselves. As suggested by womanists and other Black feminists such as hooks, West, and Boylorn, the oppositional gaze is vital to negate these perceptions.

Although Black feminist researchers have primarily focused on critiquing and assessing stereotypes associated with the group, these studies lack prevalent examples of analysis on how Black women define themselves. There are plausibly many explanations for the absence, but I have identified two primary reasons. The first is that first and second wave Black feminist studies were aimed at identifying how and in what ways Black women are linked to controlling images, and these studies often addressed mass media representations. Secondly, former scholars were highly interested in uncovering the psychological impact of stereotypes on women of color. In

addition to this, earlier African American feminist movements were focused on increasing the visibility of Black women characters found in mass media. However, lack of diversity in media ownership coupled with not enough Blacks holding other positions responsible for content creation resulted in a continuation of African Americans being cast as characters with stereotypical traits. Eventually, changes in media representation slowly became noticeable as more Black entertainers broke into the industry and other public political arenas.

During prominent artistic and social movements from the 1920s to the 1970s, like the Harlem Renaissance, the New Negro Movement, and the Black Arts Movement, African American musicians, actresses, and politicians from affluent and privileged social circles used the media as a platform. These individuals chose to speak out and fight against racial injustice while they challenged Whites about their need to disseminate twisted and inauthentic misrepresentations of people of color. Now that media depictions of Black people and characters are becoming more varied and authentic, Black feminist researchers have a greater pool of media texts to examine—which is becoming apparent in studies like this and others that address self-definitive concepts. Plus, given the platforms newer technology has made available with social media and other digital content, we are witnessing an increase in social and political movements across the country via various mass media outlets. Consequently, some celebrities rely on their social media presence and fame to influence public perceptions and build alliances with supporters to raise awareness and foster assistance for worthy causes. Black women celebrities are showing a significant interest in using their mass media presence to revive race and gender-related activism.

Identifying moments when Black women are applying an oppositional gaze to deconstruct commonly found stereotypes helps to push image-themed conversations in a direction that will emphasize the voice of marginalized community members, as opposed to repeating the cycle of

validating the voice of the dominant group. This examination into self-definitive discourse centers on publicized self-definitive articulations from privileged Black women in America. This study specifically analyzed rhetorical statements from Michelle Obama, Viola Davis, and Beyoncé Knowles, who are three of the most prominent and influential Black women in the public eye in America, and who have openly acknowledged the media's association of themselves and other Black women with the mammie, Jezebel, Sapphire, and tragic mulatto stereotypes. The analysis also incorporates a womanist interpretation of their verbiage by deciphering themes from what these women had to say about and concerning African American women to negate the distorted descriptions stemming from such inauthentic representations.

Collins's (1991) conceptualization of self-defining was used as the basis to determine and establish how the selected texts were classified as self-definitive performances. In her work, purposes for self-defining and the means to self-define are explained; now a concise delineation of the term exists along with concrete illustrations. Resistance and self-affirmation are critical to the self-definitive process. For how can viable change occur or matter if Black women aren't able to appreciate their own self-worth enough to resist such mistreatment? Collaborations assist African Americans women to self-define and are said to occur in three safe spaces: between Black women writers, in Black women's relationships with each other, and in Black women's musical performances. Before Collins's self-definitive framework, Black feminist studies lacked comprehensive examinations that specifically attended to the uniqueness of Black women's lived experiences. *Black Feminist Thought* (1991) tackles intersectional concerns, feminist identity development, and Black feminist standpoints.

Therefore, Collins's work is foundational. Nevertheless, Black feminist scholars should recognize it as a starting point to generate more discussions about Black women's



communications. In addition to self-defined concepts, Harris-Perry's (2011) crooked room theory necessitated the study in its ability to underline the complexities and nuances involved when Black women define themselves and/or describe their own characteristics. Examining Obama, Davis, and Knowles assisted in being able to identify the agency of privileged Black women's activism, which varies from case to case. Overall, it was determined that Black women celebrities possess degrees of influence and, if nothing else, influence forces others to see varied aspects of Black women. Because controlling images are in part similar to how some African American women may look or portray themselves, this theoretical conceptualization helps to explain that although it may seem as if Black women embody the nature of a particular stereotype, in actuality, no Black woman is fully and authentically an embodiment of any controlling image (Collins, 1991; Harris-Perry 2011; hooks, 1981). These stereotypes are at best merely incomplete variations of just some African American women.

Case studies of Obama, Davis, and Knowles were used to identify specific characteristics of self-definitive activity as well as to recognize prominent themes that arose from the performances. To decipher such traits, a textual analysis was employed for each case study. The power of rhetoric, especially Afrocentric rhetorical analysis, lies in its ability to transform racial consciousness by producing sustenance in knowledge and giving inspiration to African Americans in moments of despair (Hamlet, 2000, p. 420). As pointed out by Fürsich (2009), textual analysis is a viable option for media studies. He argued that "media texts present a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that justifies special scholarly engagement," and it takes into account the audience's reaction. In this instance, the response that I am concerned with refers to how these women's activities impact other Black women with less prominent social placement.

Within the textual analysis, multiple rounds of coding were used to deem the presentations as womanist, which eventually assisted with determining emergent themes from each subject. All three women are privileged and influential members of the African American community. Nonetheless, these three women were selected based upon their specific retorts and responses resisting and or deconstructing the particular controlling images they are typically associated with by the media. Their acts were carried out in public and occurred within the last decade; they also created an element of surprise or unexpectedness. Additionally, Obama, Davis, and Knowles are considered to be at the apex of their respective industries, and so they have the attention of both Black and crossover audiences. The rationale behind selecting ultra-successful Black women is meant to demonstrate intersectional aspects of gender, race, and class within a self-definitive scope.

Inferring to three Black women with high status and varied affiliations allowed for a comprehensive and substantive examination of self-defining from a privileged Black woman's perspective. Identity development research often involves studies on or about African American women, but too often these kinds of analyses lack attention to Black women's articulations about themselves. In addition to continuing to call out the wrongdoing involved in stereotyping, this project is meant to concretely recognize Black women who self-define. This research assists to fill in gaps in African American identity development studies about privileged Black women who not only speak for themselves, but who use their high profiles to also speak for other women of color who are less privileged.

My interest in the study initially began after Nancy Lee Grahm released a series of racially insensitive tweets about Viola Davis's historical Emmy-winning acceptance speech. I was especially disheartened by the mainstream media's susceptibility to affirm Grahm's opinion and

not hold her accountable for her distasteful commentary. The incident between Grahn and Davis occurred during a period when movements of Black women openly celebrating their unique qualities and historical accomplishments were sparking up around the country. Unfortunately, Davis's moment was mirrored in other inappropriate instances involving Michelle Obama and Beyoncé Knowles, who were also being attacked for affirming their ideas about Black womanhood. The reactions from mainstream media outlets and Black-owned media conglomerates differed extensively, thus revealing the ever-present persistence of the color line existing in America. These stories are reminiscent of second wave Black feminist movements from the 1970s that were also said to be overshadowed and disrupted by the agenda of White women (Okolosie, 2013). Subsequently, in feminist movements to follow, Black women researchers made it a point to recognize the systems and practices involved in the continuation of oppression geared towards people of color and named controlling images.

As Black women persisted through the challenges of racism, sexism, and classism here in America, emphasizing the value of self became a noticeable theme within research from established scholars like Collins, hooks, Davis, Lorde, and Morison and extending to newcomers like Morgan and Harris-Perry. Understanding the need for African American women to be heard is the cornerstone of Black feminist studies, and the approach to this project was developed around incorporating womanist concepts into an examination regarding Black women's resistive communications concerning their identities. It was imperative to identify challenges that wealthy Black women face because some of those same issues trickle down to other Black women with less social visibility. Although socioeconomic status and education are essential to women's advancements in society, Black women's racialized identities create additional barriers that potentially hold them back from truly obtaining equality.

### ***Today's Self-Defined Identities & Actions***

The road to equality is paved with sacrifice and endurance. Self-definitive performances reflect the difficulty and promise in Black women's sociopolitical efforts. This investigation sought to acknowledge significant moments when three privileged African American women were forced to confront controlling images while they sought to be their authentic selves. Furthermore, their actions were carried out for the purposes of empowering and inspiring other Black women. In public display, Obama represents a politicized Black woman's identity. Davis and Knowles epitomize a mainstream-entertainment image of Black women in Hollywood and the music industry. Each woman possesses her own level of fame, and has access to certain racialized and gender-specific platforms. Also present within those spaces are inner cultural communities (i.e. political parties, artistic groups, etc.).

To examine the self-defining experience from a modern perspective, the research questions were designed to uncover details and nuances involved in this kind of resistive activity. These women are connected to very niche and unique industries. Looking at their roles from those respective places is how I was able to determine the particular ways that Obama, Davis, and Knowles self-define. Once I was able to establish their specific actions, the examination could look at how their demonstrations changed and/or altered preexisting representations of Black women. In short, the research concluded that Obama's self-defining moments encouraged Black women to embrace traditional positions in addition to adopting a "working woman" image if they so desire, because the roles of wife and mother are culturally and distinctively different for African Americans. Davis's self-defining moments changed how Black women characters are portrayed on the screen, and she was able to alter how Black women actors are seen politically within Hollywood. Davis's self-defining reveals African American women have an authoritative

characteristic and are not interested in just taking roles. Knowles's self-defined performances assisted in shifting how Black women can express their sexual identities. What is uniquely different about Beyoncé's influence on this subject matter is that she embraces a strong masculinized identity in addition to being ultra-feminine. Secondly, Beyoncé's acts influence how we see Black women who resemble the tragic mulatto trope. Typically, this stereotype represents a divide amongst Black women with light skin tones in comparison to those with dark skin complexions. Knowles reveals that Black women with certain characteristics can celebrate their own beauty and also the beauty of Black women who look different.

Lastly, one of the subsequent goals established during the developing stages of this project was to identify what kinds of themes or self-defined images emerged from these three case studies. Many themes matched correspondingly from the different chapters; however, authenticity and power-in-sisterhood were concretely identified across all three. The component of authenticity is key to theorizing crooked room effects, because when Black women are comfortable and confident enough to be their true selves, we discover complexities within their natures. When Black women live as their authentic selves, they are free to be what they choose to be. Obama prefers motherhood over a lucrative career, Davis selects roles that emphasize her Blackness, and Knowles's feminism exudes sexiness and desire for men. When resisting controlling images, the most significant concern is to negate the stereotype, but we must be careful to acknowledge negation is not merely about Black women denying they are stereotypes, for what are stereotypes but simply incomplete and one-dimensional portrayals? Focusing on Black women's ability to select what characteristics she believes most closely align with the kind of woman she identifies as, is at the core of self-defining. Lastly, authenticity is fundamental to the self-definitive process; it emphasizes Black

women's articulations over the communication with and expectations placed on the community by outsiders.

Michelle Obama's politically incorrect predisposition reveals she is characteristically unconcerned with other people's thoughts about what kind of First Lady she should have been. Obama focused on her own interpretation of the role. Viola Davis is openly unapologetic in an industry where people who look like her have had a difficult time trying to obtain acceptance and respect. She does not hide behind her looks, age, or former socioeconomic background. In its place, Davis embraces what makes her unique and real by playing diverse roles and by exposing each character's pathology. Knowles's authenticity comes through equally convincing as that of the other two women, but in another form. She has carefully crafted and created an image over the past twenty-plus years that portrays her as sexy and in financial control. The qualities present in Knowles's stage persona and performances are consistent and part of her brand. Knowles's image does not resemble the personas of other female music artists. Therefore it is unique, and that is a solid indication of an authentic representation.

hooks (1984) suggested women are enriched through a sisterhood of political solidarity, but she maintains that Black women cannot develop sustained unification by relying on a model of sisterhood created by bourgeois White women, which is based upon commonality through victimization (p. 45). Coming to a place of being able to self-value through self-defining moves Black women from being victims to becoming vocalized and empowered. Once Black women have acquired an appreciation for who they are as individuals, and have the resources needed to impact the lives of other Black women, they still need the support of their own community members—which is evident in the cases of these three highly successful and privileged persons. As such, Obama, Davis, and Knowles have all formed sisterhood alliances with other African

American women and also with identified allies while in positions of power. Michelle Obama's interactions with Oprah Winfrey were used to assist her husband with his win of the presidential office and to help Obama maintain a place of continued prominence in the minds of Americans by the media platforms these two women use to share their political and social agendas. According to McClerking, Naird, and Block (2019), Winfrey's relationship with Michelle Obama was actually more influential in gaining support from other Black women than it was able to influence individuals from any other racial or gender group (that is—White men, White women, or Black men).

Additionally, Beyoncé's efforts to employ and surround herself with women of color support the womanist belief that Black women identify other Black women as safe spaces for sharing their intimate thoughts and concerns, and that Black women believe self-defining is safe to do amongst other Black women (Collins, 1991, p.). Viola Davis openly shows that she also finds it inspiring to link up with African American women in the entertainment industry. Her connection to Shonda Rhimes is ultimately responsible for her being able to play the part of Annalise Keating. Davis told a group of journalists, "No one has taken my look in that way [as a sexy leading actress] and put it on the screen. Shonda's been the first" (Deggans, 2014).

Having a professional work relationship with Rhimes subsequently provided Davis the platform she needed to show diverse audiences a non-stereotypical and powerful image of a Black woman. Equally valuable to note about distinguishing facets of Black women's relationships with one another involves the idea of intergenerational activity, or needing to pass down beliefs about sisterhood to future generations. Considering the relationship that has transpired between Viola Davis and Cicely Tyson, as discussed in Chapter Three, illustrates how this works for the benefit of the community. Davis's acknowledgment of the doors opened by former Black women actresses

is important in creating historical narratives about Black women, and it assists in tackling women's issues involving age discrimination. Lastly, Beyoncé Knowles's association with other African American females, including Michelle Obama, symbolize how much Black women can accomplish in collaboration with each other. Hip-Hop feminist Brittany Cooper (2017) explained, "The mutual girl crush that Michelle Obama and Beyoncé share is a serendipitous study of twenty-first century black girlhood, womanhood and ladyhood" (p. 57).

Although these women represent two very different worlds, even within their positions of immense privilege, they encounter a great deal of criticism, and that tends to overlap with racist and sexist commentary. It appears to be highly important to them both to support each other so the entire world can witness their bond. Beyoncé's and Obama's involvement with one another dates back nearly a decade and is even present between their husbands, rapper and entrepreneur Jay-Z (Sean Carter) and former president Barack Obama. Beyoncé was able to be a part of history when she sang Etta James's all-time classic song "At Last" for Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration ball. It may have been no surprise for one of the world's greatest superstars to perform at such a historic and auspicious event, but these two women would continue to work together and be recognized for exchanging compliments on television shows. Michelle Obama told *People* magazine (2012) "if [I] could be someone else, it would be Beyoncé!" (Coder, 2015). Beyoncé showed up as a celebrity endorser for Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" (2011) video campaign aimed at tackling childhood obesity. Recently, Michelle Obama was spotted in multiple cities, including Paris, France and Washington, D.C., front and center, singing and dancing to Beyoncé performing in the "On the Run II" world tour with Jay-Z.



### *Hybridity*

Employing Harris-Perry's crooked room theoretical concept to the case studies resulted in the actualization of a dual type of characteristic from Obama, Davis, and Knowles, which I refer to as the hybrid-self. The hybridity of these women's identities reveals some similarities with the trope, but also point to inherent oppositional characteristics. For instance, Michelle Obama, is equally a career woman as she is a stay-at-home mother. Viola Davis is a highly gifted thespian, and she yet she is comfortable with being recognized as a common woman. Beyoncé Knowles embodies a provocative feminine sexuality, but exudes a masculine bravado in her performance style. Knowles's hybrid-self also involves a dichotomy between an authoritative figure and a woman who reveals raw emotions and vulnerability to her husband. The hybrid-self is fundamental to reveal the tension and struggle that occurs for Black women who seek to negate controlling images when in crooked room environments.

The emergence of hybrid personalities forces us to recognize the restraints proposed on Black women when they occupy non-safe spaces. Even though these personalities are a part of each woman, they were more noticeable depending upon what space the subjects decided to self-define in. As indicated throughout these case studies, Black women cannot always wait for the easiest opportunities. In fact, the research supports the notion that self-defining in non-safe spaces may be equally or more effective when Black women are willing to take risks. In conclusion, the two-pronged personality is significant in helping us to understand the layers and dimensions present within Black women who are looking for ways to express who they truly are. In essence, the dichotomies prevalently acknowledged in a hybrid identity indicate these differences can be broad and oppositional.

***Newly Self-Defined Identities: The Black Beautiful Boss-Lady, Triple Threat Representation***

Just as nuanced variations of Black women's controlling continue to emerge, feminist scholars are recognizing alternative identities or characteristics. One such identity includes the Bad Bitch Barbie representation. LaVoulle and Ellison (2019) argued the "*Bad Bitch Barbie* represents direct objectification of the Black female body while simultaneously representing a performance in feminism. A *Bad Bitch Barbie* is an image of a woman who rises against opposition and stands her ground. She is both a Black feminist and someone who acknowledges that intersectionality and racism exist" (p. 67). Although similar to the Bad Bitch Barbie identity in some regards, another identity materialized from evaluating these case studies. After assessing the characteristics emphasized by each woman and after examining their overall presentations, a newly defined Black Beautiful Boss-Lady (BBB) representation emerged.

The Black Beautiful Boss-Lady is a triple threat and she embodies Blackness, beauty, and success. This identity is distinct from that of the Bad Bitch Barbie because she is exclusively concerned with physicality in the realm of objectification. Rather, the BBB symbolizes a modern conceptualization of the Black woman who has it all, but not to the degree of promoting unhealthy or unrealistically perfectionistic ideas of Black women. The BBB identity is more about revealing all that Black women can do and accomplish in the face of being identified as controlling image representations. She, like Obama, Davis, and Knowles, is attractive because she embraces her own unique physical qualities without apology. This kind of Black woman's beauty is not only a reflection of her outward appearance, but she can also be proud of and celebrate whatever physical makeup she may possess. Recognizing multiple facets of Black women's beauty is necessary to disrupt European idealizations about acceptance. When Black women are in welcoming spaces that allow them to express what makes them feel beautiful in their own skin, it gives them

confidence.

Another central characteristic of the Black Beautiful Boss-Lady is that she is ultra-successful or is working towards fulfilling her dreams. This image is not suggesting that all Black women should strive to be highly famous or extremely wealthy, but rather that Black women are “bosses” when they go after their goals with passion and endurance despite not having the social environment to make their ambitions easier to obtain. The women discussed in these case studies are the first to have realized certain achievements in their careers. Being the first Black woman to open a local business or earn a degree in your family are just as important firsts as those accomplished by Obama, Davis, and Knowles. Black women’s ability to choose and seek financial independence or access educational avenues, along with other modes of self-empowerment, allows them to thrive in society, and this makes Black women powerful.

Finally, the Black Beautiful Boss-Lady is not threatened or restricted by her involvements with men. She can be married and a mother, and still maintain control over her feminist or womanist identity. However, the Black Beautiful Boss-Lady is not limited to association with heterosexual Black women or mothers. Nurturing and traditional characteristics are embraced. The BBB celebrates ideas about African American women in maternal and spousal roles, because through the representation of a controlling image, these traits are not customarily looked upon as feminist or politically powerful. Black Beautiful Boss-Ladies do not have to abandon traditional women’s positions for fear of being classified as conformists. They have the ability to hold on to traditional ideas of women, and to disrupt them. In conclusion, there are many lessons to be learned from these specific case studies. The most significant takeaway, however, is that feminist identity studies should continue to make room for intersectional research, especially those that attempt to explore uncommon facets of Black womanhood. The continued development of Black feminist

thought depends on an appreciation for diverse Black women's standpoints.

### ***Limitations***

Self-definitive analysis is relevant to today's Black women's activism, as well as to resistance movements in the future; thus, current illustrations and models are needed to keep the discourse robust. To properly assess mass media misrepresentations of Black women, self-defining reemphasizes the need to be critical of mainstream's framing of such images. Nevertheless, there are some obvious limitations apparent within this study. Firstly, the texts selected for this project were examined through a rhetorical and womanist lens, and therefore the findings are not absolute or complete. Without actually asking each woman to directly identify or determine her own self-definitive moments the research findings are limited. This factor does not delegitimize the self-definitive analysis made available, nor does it devalue the theoretical concepts identified to make claims about these women's actions. According to Collins (1990), "When African American women define themselves, they clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret their reality are entitled to do so." She went on to conclude, "Regardless of the actual content of African American women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on African American female self-definition validates African American women's power as human subjects" (pp. 106-107). Nevertheless, this study does not take into account the extent and degree to which each woman is directed by others to display herself in the public eye. At these women's level of fame and success, they have large public relations teams and other outside influences (e.g., managers, record labels, producers, etc.) who play a role in how they choose to present themselves.

## **FUTURE WORKS**

This study examines self-defining from a rhetorical aspect and focuses primarily on the words, articulations, and other outward displays of Black women resisting controlling images. Self-defining is not limited to what Black women are saying, which is alluded to throughout the analysis. Non-verbal communicative messages are equally compelling and should be considered, as we are finding that more and more Black women feel it is their responsibility to participate in activism and to engage in better self-care (Nichols, 2015). Not all Black women are comfortable or desire to self-define through language, and thus additional examples will help to continue the conversation and emphasize its necessity. Moreover, as mass media images continue to saturate the airwaves, an examination of the Black female body as a site of resistance seems to be the next natural potential place for self-definitive analysis. Recent examples alluding to self-definitive demonstrations include Misty Copeland's title of principal dancer for the American Ballet Theater and Serena Williams's athletic wear choices during her latest tennis tournaments.

Future self-definitive studies should explore how and if the BBB image influences Black women who have an unprivileged social status to self-define. As Black women continue to occupy uncharted spaces, it will be useful to determine what variations, if any, occur interjectionally. Identity studies will continue to evolve as our country changes demographically and politically. Focusing on Black women's unique standpoints helps to ensure that communication-themed discourses are giving proper attention to oppressed and marginalized communities. Above all, self-definitive studies ensure a balanced approach to Black women's feminist studies. These types of examinations aim to foster change in the ways that Black women view themselves and how they are able to participate in activism.

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**ABSTRACT****SELF-DEFINED: A WOMANIST EXPLORATION OF MICHELLE OBAMA, VIOLA DAVIS, AND BEYONCE KNOWLES**

by

**IDRISSA N. SNIDER****August 2019****Advisor:** Dr. Donyale Padgett**Major:** Communication**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Intersectional research focusing on the experiences and representations of Black women should emphasize examining the communication of resistance. This dissertation builds upon the work of Womanist (Walker, 1983) and Black Feminist scholars (Collins, 1991; Harris-Perry, 2011) to interrogate the harmful and systemic nature of controlling images of Black women. These controlling images historically include representations such as the Mammie, Sapphire, Jezebel, tragic mulatto, and even newer typecasts like the angry black woman. Through a close reading of Josephine Baker's "Danse Sauvage" performance, the research points to modern day examples of when privileged Black women utilize their platforms in the name of activism. To be specific, the analysis codes self-definitive demonstrations by Michelle Obama, Viola Davis, and Beyoncé Knowles.

This project stresses that Black women must respond to such mis/representations through what Patricia Hill Collins (2004) identifies as a process of "self-defining." By self-defining, we center Black womanhood as an epistemological site, advancing Black women's social movements. We also create a stronger body of knowledge about Black women's experiences in a system that often generates knowledge from a European patriarchal perspective. From the analysis at least two



themes were identified congruently from all women; they include authenticity and power in sisterhood. Lastly, the newly identified image of the Beautiful Black Boss Lady emerged. Ultimately, this reflexive research approach of centering ourselves and our experiences as Black women further strengthens and (re)establishes the importance of Black Feminist Thought as a valid epistemological approach to communication studies research.

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Idrissa N. Snider, a doctoral candidate at Wayne State University in the Department of Communication, began her program in 2016. Snider's primary focus areas include rhetoric and womanism, with an interdisciplinary interest in mass media, culture, and identity. Utilizing her knowledge in these discourses, Snider produced multiple papers and presentations, emphasizing analyses aimed at exploring self-defining and other forms of Black women's resistance. While at Wayne State, she taught as a graduate teaching assistant.

Snider received her Master's in Communication Management from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) in 2012. She received her Bachelors of Arts from Georgia State University in Film and Journalism in 2004. Before graduate school, Snider worked a variety of media jobs in public relations, video production, and as a writing from 2001-2013. Snider is a journalist at heart and writes frequently for *The Birmingham Times* amongst other editorial outlets.

Mrs. Snider currently teaches in the Communication Department at Samford University.