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From Venus to "Black Venus": Beyoncé's *I Have Three Hearts*, Fashion, and the Limits of Visual Culture

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Abstract

In 2016, *Lemonade* was lauded as "Black girl magic" for the ways the hour-long HBO special (and subsequent album) celebrated Black women and the Southern gothic tradition. It also was the first hint of Beyoncé paying homage to West African Yoruba traditions. At the 2017 Grammys, her performance was both an invocation of the sacred in Western art history and further homage to Yoruba. The performance opened with poetry by Warsan Shire, and snapshots of her daughter, Blue Ivy, but the highlight was Beyoncé's gold gown, and crown, and gold accessories, all of which symbolized the African goddess Osun. Released just before her Grammys performance, the *I Have Three Hearts* photo-series circulated as pregnancy images (she was pregnant with twins), but it also functioned as a repository of Beyoncé's invocation of the sacred in Western culture, as embodied in *Venus*, and the African goddess, often labelled as "Black Venus." This article is an examination of three images in the *I Have Three Hearts* series, taken by Awol Erizku, and the series' accompanying poetry by Shire. I argue that it raises important questions about the role of visual culture in fashion and popular culture. Is Beyoncé the *Venus* of the twenty-first century? Does this photographic series remap Western visual culture to reimagine Black womanhood in the discourse on sexuality? Or, it is an example of pastiche in postmodern culture wherein truncated information is authorized, making everyone an expert without the demand for historical context?

FASHION STUDIES

INTRODUCTION

#I-Have-Three-Hearts #My-Life

I Have Three Hearts

In 2016, Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, released the day before her performance of "Formation" during the halftime show at the Super Bowl, played homage to the aesthetics of the Black Panther movement — with its Afro hair, faux-bullet bandoliers and berets. "I thank Beyoncé for her courage to make a statement on National TV… on behalf of The National Alumni Association of the Black Panther Party we thank you & salute you," said William Johnson, an original member of the Panthers.[1] The African American news site *The Grio* also declared, "Lemonade is the love letter black women have been silently waiting for. It is … an incredibly nuanced celebration of everything about US — specifically."[2] Was the performance a *real* tribute to Black social justice or was it sensationalizing highly publicized police shootings of African Americans?[3] A few years prior, Black feminist icon bell hooks questioned the sincerity of Beyoncé's image work. After declaring that she was "anti-feminist," hooks described the singer as a "terrorist" in terms of her impact on young girls, and more broadly, in the image-making business in general.[4] In a blog post a response to *Lemonade,* hooks elaborated:

> *Lemonade* offers viewers a visual extravaganza — a display of black female bodies that transgresses all boundaries. It's all about the body, and the body as commodity. This is certainly not radical or revolutionary. From slavery to the present day, black female bodies, clothed and unclothed, have been bought and sold. What makes this commodification different in *Lemonade* is intent; its purpose is to seduce, celebrate, and delight — to challenge the ongoing present day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body. Throughout *Lemonade* the black female body is utterly-aestheticized — its beauty a powerful in your face confrontation. This is no new offering.[5]

While the hooks/Beyoncé controversy garnered a lot of debate and attention, such as Melissa Harris-Perry and journalist Lori Adelman who assembled an eleven-person "Black feminist roundtable" to respond to it all on the blog *Feministing*, Beyoncé's pregnancy photo-series, *I Have Three Hearts*, released one year later, received much less critical attention.

Announced on February 2, 2017 in an Instagram post, ten days before The Grammys, the photo-series, which also appeared on the singer's website (https://www.beyonce.com/tag/i-have-three-hearts/), was not just a fashion photospread. It also functioned as the singer's public announcement about a second pregnancy — twins.

When visitors enter the *I Have Three Hearts* Web page, there are sixty-four still images of Beyoncé that capture the various stages of her intimate relationships with her family — her marriage to rapper Jay-Z, her pregnancy to nursing and raising daughter, Blue Ivy, and stills of her as a mother, wife, and daughter.

The images, taken by Ethiopian-American artist Awol Erizku, almost "broke the Internet," becoming the most liked Instagram photographs of all time.[6] By clicking on an image, visitors are taken to a new Web page with additional photographs of the singer. There is also an interspersed text that frames the series of images written by Somali-British writer and poet, Warsan Shire. The poem, which acts as clues for how to "read" the images, is hyperlinked to a separate page where visitors can once again engage with the text and a few collated images. The term "three hearts" is meant to refer to Beyoncé as woman and mother but also to the transformation of her body that symbolizes the lives growing inside of her.

This article examines three iconic images from Erizku/Beyoncé's *I Have Three Hearts* that circulated on the Internet, functioning as representative stand-ins for the entire series. All three images are of Beyoncé as mother. The first became the featured image in an editorial in the fashion magazine *Come Trend* the day after the series dropped. In a homage to motherhood, Beyoncé crouches in front of a wall of vibrant flowers in a green veil, exposing her pregnancy but also a plum-coloured bra and baby blue-coloured undergarment (Figure 1A). The image is in reference to the Virgin Mary, immortalized in Italian painter Raffaello's *The Small Cowper Madonna* (Figure 1B) and Joos van Cleve's Virgin and Child (Figure 1C), two sixteenth-century paintings that helped to establish the mother and child motif. Both portraits also created specific cultural values of white femininity and motherhood, establishing a narrative for the role women played in Europe during the period.

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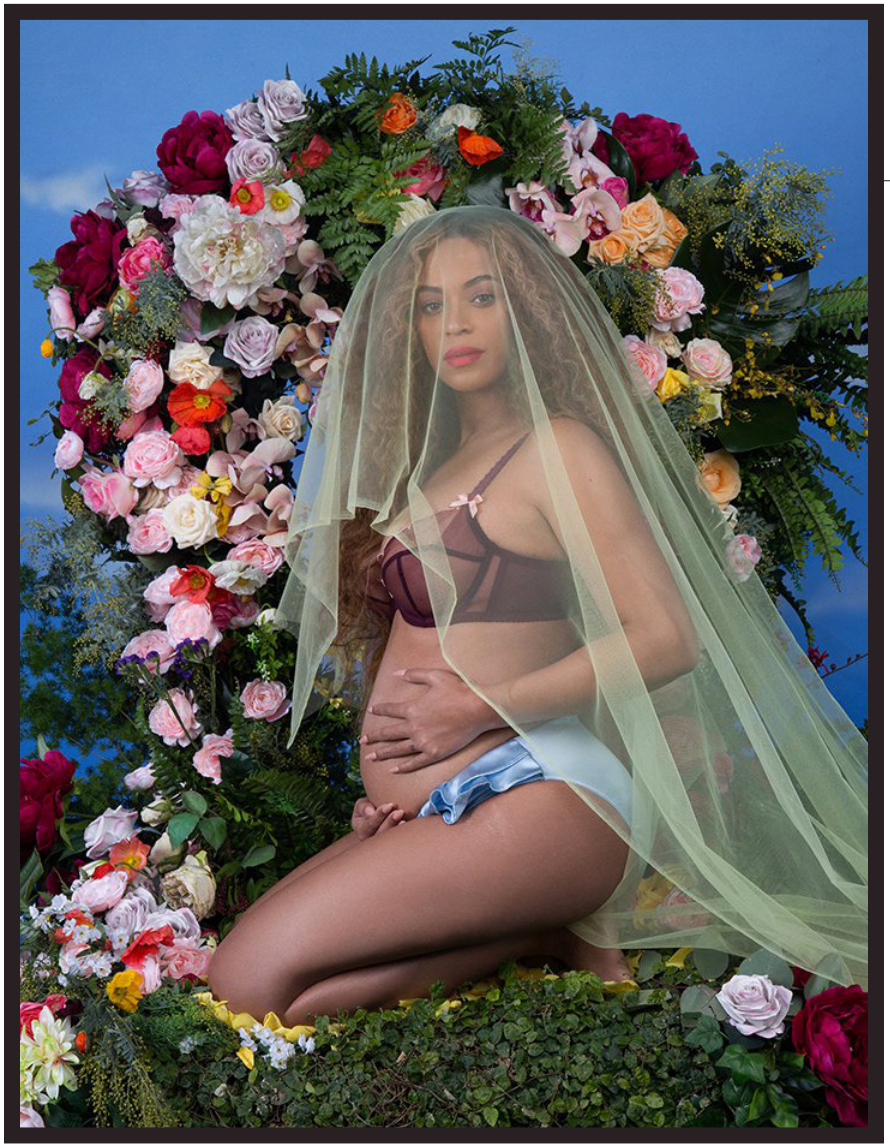

FIGURE 1A Awol Erizku/Beyoncé, *I Have Three Hearts*, 2017.

FIGURE 1B Raffaello, The Small Cowper Madonna, c. 1505, oil on wood, Widener Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

FIGURE 1C Joos van Cleve, Virgin and Child, oil on panel, c. 1525, The Jack and Belle Linsky Collection, The MET.

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In the second image, Beyoncé is in a recumbent position on a sleigh bed covered with flowers and wearing a white bra, her genitals covered by a loin cloth (Figure 2A). Her pose not only emulates Antonio Canova's sculpture of Paolina Borghese as Venus Victrix (or Venus Victorious) (1808) (Figure 2B), which depicts an Ancient Roman nude on lecti (beds for dining and entertaining), it also borrows stylistic elements from Edouard Manet's Olympia (1863) (Figure 2C), which depicts a white prostitute and her Black maid, who presents a bouquet of flowers to her mistress. In the

FIGURE 2A Awol Erizku/Beyoncé, *I Have Three Hearts*, 2017.

FIGURE 2B Antonio Canova sculpture, Paolina Borghese as Venus Victrix (or Venus Victorious), 1808, Italy.

FIGURE 2C Édouard Manet, Olympia, 1863, oil on canvas, The Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

third image, Beyoncé (Figure 3A) stands nude with her hair flowing down to her waist in front of a mustard-yellow background. Flowers are painted onto her tights and she rises from a display of greenery. She is also posed next to a bust of Egyptian Queen Nefertiti. This image gestures back to Sandro Botticelli's The Birth of Venus (c. 1485) (Figure 3B), one of the most treasured artworks of the Renaissance, that depicts the god Zephyr blowing Venus to shore and the woman — dressed in a flowered gown — who waits to cover the goddess' body with a floral-printed blanket, the titular figure representing the coming of spring. It also symbolizes African spirituality, "Black Venus," and Black woman goddesses.

FIGURE 3A Awol Erizku/ Beyoncé, *I Have Three Hearts*, 2017.

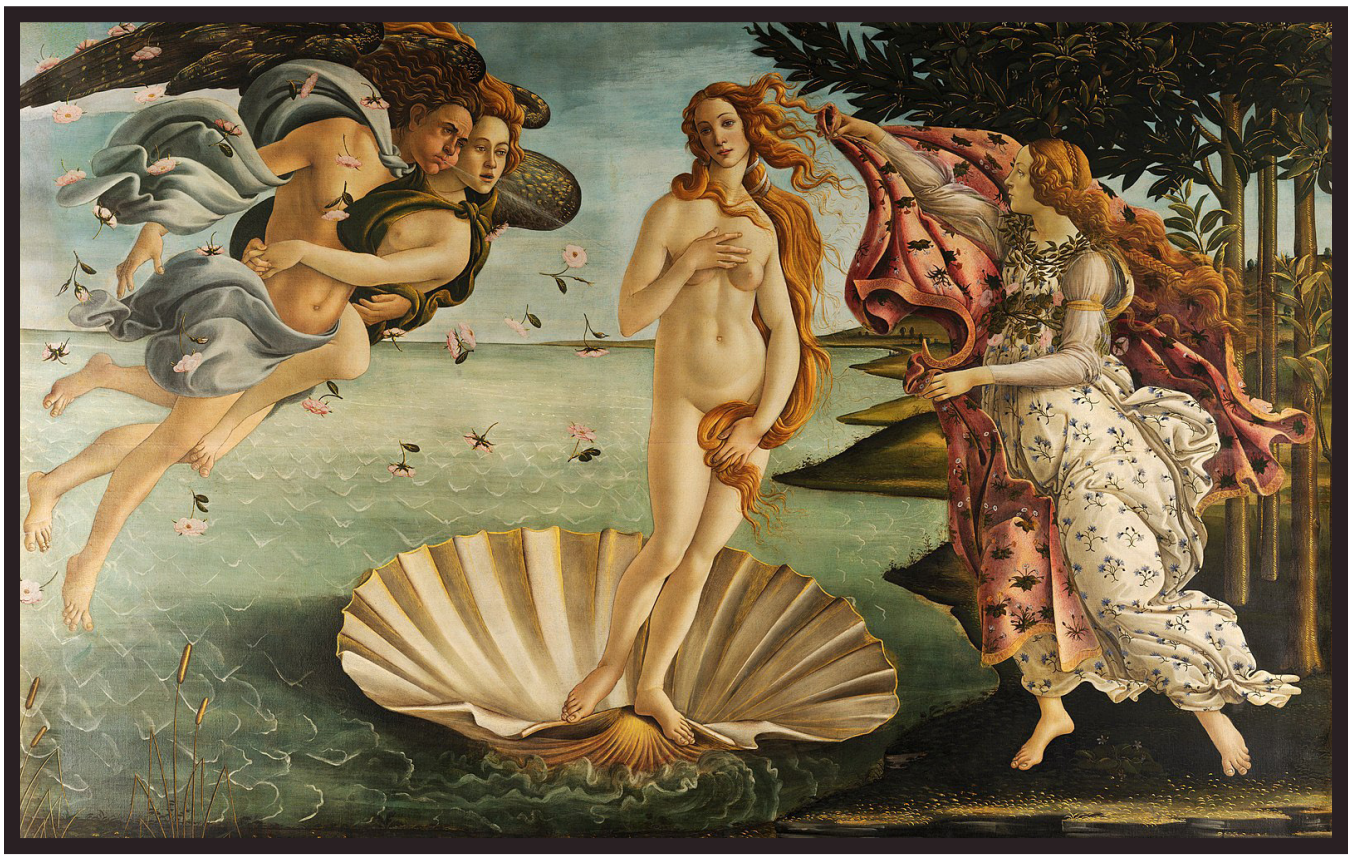

FIGURE 3B Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus*, painting, c. 1485, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

Online bloggers positioned the series as engaging in a thoughtful conversation with art history. Andrianna Campbell, in an editorial for Pitchfork, described Beyoncé in her veiled image as, "no shrinking violet, nor a come-hither courtesan. She stares directly at you. She is in charge."[7] However, hooks' comments about the singer's intentions linger. Is Beyoncé's "radical repositioning of black female images" truly overshadowing or changing "conventional sexist constructions of black female identity?"[8] Since representation is a process through which we construct the world around us, with each image we learn the rules and conventions of the systems of representation within a given culture. How is Beyoncé both celebrating Black representation while also erasing histories of Black womanhood? As popular culture erodes public history, dislodging historical facts and narratives from their contexts and circulating them via social media at ever increasing speeds, where does that leave actual historical facts? Is Beyoncé a visual culture genius, or a culprit in the erasure of history?

My argument is that we need to probe the visuality of *I Have Three Hearts*, asking questions about where it does and does not challenge the hypervisibility and erasure of Black female bodies in the dominant visual culture.

Additionally, how does the series function as a form of postmodern pastiche image-making? As Frederic Jameson describes, pastiche is "the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, … a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared with which what is being imitated is rather comic."[9] "We are now … in 'intertextuality' as a deliberate, built-in feature of the aesthetic effect and as the operator of a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudo-historical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history,"[10] he writes further. Instead of challenging dominant ideological frameworks, how do the visual aesthetics in the photo-series leave us with nothing but "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm?"[11] As the boundaries between social media, celebrity, and images intersect and overlap it is sometimes impossible to locate where the Black female body starts and ends, especially

as it is rarely given the right to exist as separate to, and separable from, the white female body in Western visual culture. If artists like Beyoncé takes us back into history using visuals from centuries past, is the Black female body being re-exoticized, and how will the limits of the image be rearticulated and, if necessary, defended? *I Have Three Hearts* aims to moves people to know history — an amalgamated history of both the artist and a collective Black womanhood — but does it challenge the aesthetics that underpin that history? If racial icons, as Nicole Fleetwood argues, "make us want to do something. These images can impact us with such emotional force that we are compelled: to do, to feel, to see,"[12] what does the photo-series make us feel about motherhood, sexuality, race, and the social/cultural value of images?

BEYONCÉ'S CONSTRUCTED NARRATIVES OF MOTHERHOOD

venus falls in love,
flowers grow wherever
love touches her, this
is how she is reborm
girl turning into woman
woman turning into mother
mother turning into venus

Warsan Shire

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Black feminist scholarship has interrogated the construction of motherhood, probing how race, gender, and class function as intersecting systems of power.

Most notably, Patricia Hill Collins' work pinpoints the differing ways that women are evaluated based on their perceived value to give birth to "the right kind of children, pass on appropriate American family values, and become worthy symbols of the nation."[13] Black women have, historically, encountered differential treatment based on perceived value as women and mothers: "This treatment is based, in part, on ideologies that view U.S. Black women as the Other, the mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, and jezebels who mark the boundaries of normality for American women overall," Collins writes further.[14] Black womanhood, as visual narrative and historical discourse, circulates as visual signs in opposition to idealized white femininity.

As Fleetwood explains, it is through various renderings in visual culture that "the black female body and the sexual imaginary associated with that body not only set the boundaries around which idealized white femininity is understood and visualized" but the Black woman "as excess establishes the boundaries for normative codes of the white female body and femininity."[15] Jennifer Nash's theorizing on racial iconography is also useful to think about when interrogating the cultural import of *I Have Three Hearts*. How can we move beyond the celebration of self-representation, or calls for "positive images in identification and redress in protest" to asking "how black female protagonists negotiate the minefield of representation, and … how representation can be a site where spectators and protagonists exercise freedom, even within the confines of a visual field structured by race and gender?"[16]

There are two interrelated discourses that surround the photo-series. The first circulated online via media discourse, which transformed *I Have Three Hearts* into more than just artistic self-expression to becoming a meaningful commentary on art historical portraiture. The second revolves around the historical portraits themselves as visual and cultural artefacts of a specific time, period, and aesthetic in Western visual culture. By examining these two discourses in relation to the photo-series we can begin to think about how Beyoncé's image as artist, performer, and celebrity as icon is "imbued with significant social and symbolic meaning, so much so that it needs little explication for the cultural reader to decode it."[17] There remains, in the contemporary icon, a degree of worship that gestures toward the sacred, and it is this worshipping that Chris Rojek argues transforms celebrity icons into "living artworks in that they are designed to vividly portray and often, through their dress and mannerisms, deliberately exaggerate, wider social, political and religious values of specific human groups."[18]

Beyoncé's flower motif image was described in numerous articles as a living artwork itself. "A clear reference to the Roman Catholic Patroness of Mexico and the Americas, the Virgin of Guadalupe," said *Come Trend* of the image, adding:

> according to the Catholic Church, the Virgin Mary appeared as an apparition four times to Saint Juan Diego at the Hill of Tepeyac (now a part of Villa de Guadalupe, a suburb of Mexico City). She instructed Diego to bring her flowers, which he gathered in his cloak. When he presented the flowers (roses, to be exact) to the archbishop of Mexico City, the Virgin's image was imprinted on the cloak.[19]

Jim Nikas, the Director of the Posada Art Foundation, explained further that in Mexican art, female saints are often depicted surrounded by vibrant flowers; and in many images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, she has a delicate bow around her waist — much like the pink bows on Beyoncé's bra.[20] "Flowers symbolize fertility; they're the sexual organ of the flowering plant. They're symbolic of virginity and the Virgin. The little bow around her waist is symbolic of her virginity as well," Nikas said, arguing, "The colors are clearly symbolic of royalty and some of the Aztec gods. It seems as though Beyoncé created a lot of this imagery to appeal to a Latin American market."[21] These images situate the figure of the mother within particular cultural landscapes — Raffaello's Madonna before an Italian landscape, and van Cleve's surrounded by symbols of Dutch culture. Beyoncé's motherhood images gained symbolic and cultural meaning through the discourse of art historians linking it to the visual tradition of Madonna, virgin, and child paintings.

Many scholars have argued that Beyoncé has done important work to reframe Black motherhood, challenging not only "controlling images" of Black mothers, but also, as Sonita R. Moss asserts, "Her social media campaigns … challenge her fans and critics to reinterpret articulations of beauty and femininity."[22] Others describe Beyoncé's brand of feminism being separate and distinct from Black feminism, specifically Elizabeth Whittington and Mackenzie Jordan, who argue that unlike Black

feminism that can be removed from "the everyday Black woman because it appears as if women in the academy have taken ownership of what it means to be a Black feminist," Bey feminism is able to reach the everyday Black woman "giving them a voice that is far too often silenced by every level of society."[23] Elevating Beyoncé's consumer-based feminism to a level that is equal to or more valuable to Black women than the critically engaged work of Black feminists is a difficult proposition to fully agree with, but what's more troubling about the discourse that surrounds *I Have Three Hearts* (and her subsequent 2017 Grammy's performance, which relied heavily on visual references to the Yoruba river/love goddess Osun) is the hyperbolic discourse not about the historical meaning in Beyoncé's work but the artist's intentions. Why is Beyoncé's image-work aggrandized to the level of being culturally significant not singularly to the contemporary moment but to Western art history?

How should we read Beyoncé's depiction of idealized motherhood?

Is it meant to rebuke the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire and the devaluation of Black motherhood that has predominated Western visual culture for centuries or does it reify and valorize images of idealized white womanhood?

In the 1990s, Lorraine O'Grady penned one of the most enduring commentaries on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality that culminate in Manet's *Olympia*: "A kaleidoscope of not-white females, Asian, Native American, Latina, and African, have played distinct parts in the West's theater of sexual hierarchy. But it is the African female who, by virtue of color and feature and the extreme metaphors of enslavement, is at the outermost reaches of 'otherness.' Thus she subsumes all the roles of the not-white body."[24] In her mimetic *Olympia*, rather than cast her gaze forward — with the Black maid foreground into the shadows of the painting — Beyoncé looks upwards to Blue Ivy, who gazes

downward into her mother's eyes. Blue Ivy's hair is braided with coloured beads at the ends, and she wears a nude one-piece garment. Unlike Olympia's maid, who holds a bouquet of flowers, both mother (Beyoncé) and daughter (Blue Ivy) hold a single flower positioned in the middle of the frame between them.

In her reading of Manet's work, Jennifer DeVere Brody asserts that "The two figures function as projections of each other, perhaps representing a Western white fantasy that always reads these figures in relation to each other. Rather than seeing the black woman as the literal re-presentation of the white woman with a black heart (interior) — that is, with a white veneer and dark interior — we might read these figures as inversions of each other."[25] The Black woman belongs to the white woman; at the same time, the Black woman's presence and assumed hypersexuality possesses the white woman, stains her Black in nearly every reading.[26] In other words, nineteenth-century audiences who viewed Manet's *Olympia* did not desire the Black woman in the background; rather, they would have displaced her presumed lasciviousness onto the "obvious" object of the gaze — namely, Olympia herself.[27] While the figure of the Black servant in European art is ubiquitous, Manet's *Olympia* is different in that "the central female figure is associated with a black female in such a way as to imply their sexual similarity."[28] Thus, in interrogating historical images of the Black female body, the question of their myth-making role is important to think about. "Myths gain strength when linked to visual representations," writes Lisa Gail Collins, "likewise, since myths work by creating compelling and desired stories, they frequently cannot be displaced by evidence that directly contradicts them."[29] This means that pastiche representation can become just as *real* as the real in the absence of description or explanation. As Roland Barthes reminds us, "the structure of the photograph is not an isolated structure; it is in communication with at least one other structure, namely the text — title, caption or article — accompanying every … photograph."[30] If the relational pose in Beyoncé's image, that is, Blu Ivy standing in the same position as Olympia's maid, is meant to remap the image's original meaning, then saying so would help to challenge the dominant narrative that surrounds *Olympia*.

On the one hand, the image challenges the notion that African American mothers are not affectionate and loving toward their own children. On the other hand, because the image is so engulfed in historical visual tropes of white womanhood and motherhood, the pastiche does more to reproduce those meanings than critique them. It can be argued that Beyoncé's Grammys performance (she wore a flowered crown and a yellow/golden robe) represented Black motherhood in terms of the sensual, bodily, and religious, which as Christiana Baade writes, "was risky considering North American society's tendency to objectify women-identified performers while denying their artistic agency; to treat motherhood as an obstacle to public participation, which women must solve on an individual basis; and to dehumanize, pathologize, and sexualize representations of black women, especially black mothers."[31] However, since the meaning-making in *I Have Three Hearts* asks fans to reconsider Western art historical motherhood, the question of where Black womanhood is in the photo-series remains.

BEYONCÉ AS "BLACK VENUS"

**mother is a cocoon where
cells spark, limbs form, mother
swells and stretches to protect her
child, mother has one foot in this world
and one toof in the next,
mother, black venus
in the dream I am crowning
osun,
nefertiti
and yemoja
pray around my bed…**

Warsan Shire

Osun, Nefertiti, and Yemoja harken to West Africa as the original site of Black womanhood. Yemoja, a deity in Yoruba-based Afro-Atlantic religious cultures, associated with women, motherhood, family, and the arts, as well as her ability to dominate natural phenomena, especially trade, oceans, rivers, and lagoons, has a relationship to the river deity Oshun.[32] Oshun (also referred to as Osun) is a Yoruba riverine goddess associated with sweet water, the color yellow, love, sensuality, sexuality, abundance, and beauty. In *Oshun's Daughters,* Vanessa Kimberly Valdes writes that Oshun is associated with orishas, and that "Yemoja is the mother of all the orishas. She is identified with the Ogun River in West Africa, and represents reproduction as well as conception and growth."[33] Finally, Queen Nefertiti, whose name translates to "The Beautiful One is Come," the queen of Egypt and wife of Pharaoh Akhenaten during the fourteenth century B.C., is known to be one of the most powerful

women ever to have ruled with a husband who went to great lengths to display her as an equal.[34] The image, as embodied through Shire's poems, symbolizes Beyoncé's transformation into motherhood, but "Black Venus" is embodied in her references to Osun, Nefertiti, and Yemoja. Who is Black Venus? What is the connection to Yoruba/Oshun goddesses?

In *The Birth of Venus*, the goddess Venus stands naked inside a scallop shell, gliding along the waters, riding the shell like a vessel; it is her birth, but instead of arriving as an infant she comes to us as an adult woman, fully formed, skin whiter than marble, golden tresses gathered together in one hand like endless blades of curling sea grass, and instead of pointing to her breast, she places her other white hand delicately over her heart, a swath of her hair covering her genitalia. In Beyoncé's "Black Venus" she is standing in a similar post to Venus, one hand covering one breast, a swath of her hair covering her other breast, while the other cusps her pregnancy bump. Beside her is a bust of Queen Nefertiti, whose head protrudes a display of flowers. The background is a flat golden colour, which engulfs Beyoncé's body just enough to not overshadow the motif.

The entire image is not meant to be read as an authentic replication of *Birth of Venus*, as signaled by the artificiality of the flowers and a fake-looking Nefertiti bust, but instead it is more profoundly in conversation with the works of contemporary Black artists who borrow the aesthetics of European portraiture in their work.

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For example, *Vanity Fair* noted that "before the Beyoncé picture projected [photographer Awol Erizku] to instantaneous Insta-fame, he had been steadily producing a highly regarded body of work for years, primarily focused on challenging the white aesthetic that dominates art."[35] In an interview with Vulture in 2015, Erizku described his art as not being about Black culture singularly. "If we label everything as black or white or yellow or whatever, then it becomes this thing of, this belongs here, this belong there. There's an aspect in my work that I want to be universal," he said.[36] Beyoncé has similarly strived to move within both the dominant culture and Black culture. There are aspects of *I Have Three Hearts* that are also mimetic of the work of Kehinde Wiley, a New York-based painter who his known for putting a contemporary spin on Western portraiture by recasting Black subjects into historical motifs, and who is also known for using saturated tones and flat colour planes. For example, he places Black subjects on horses, among flying cherubs or as Byzantine stain glassed diptychs. Inspired by European paintings of noblemen, royalty and aristocrats, Wiley describes the reaction viewers have to his art: "If you look at my paintings, there's something about lips, eyes, and mucous membranes. Is it only about that? No.… They're assuming the poses of colonial masters, the former bosses of the Old World. Whenever I do photo shoots for paintings, I pull out a stack of books, whether it be something from the High Renaissance or the late French Rococo or the 19th century, it's all thrown together in one big jumble."[37] What if *I Have Three Hearts* is just one big jumble not meant to represent or signify anything but rather meant to give art historians something to talk about?

There are other images in the photo-series that capture Beyoncé submerged in water like a mermaid, draped in a yellow cloth surrounded by red roses, an image that also pays homage to Oshun, as the color yellow and water are commonly associated with the Yoruba goddess, and in some narratives she is said to be a mermaid, with a fish's tail (Figure 4).[38] However, Robert Farris Thompson says that while Oshun's beauty and wealth make the Black goddess subject to comparisons with the Greek goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite, as well as Venus, she also has other characteristics: "her masculine prowess in war; her skill in the art of mixing deadly potions, of using knives as she flies through the night.… But Oshun's darker side is ultimately protective of her people."[39] This is significant, as Valdes explains further, because the primary female images offered by Christianity such the Virgin Mary "focus on sexuality and betrayal or the converse of self-sacrifice and obedience … they offer simple one-dimensional images of femininity, whereas the traditional religious system of the Yoruba is composed of rich and complex images of entities that are beautiful, wealthy, fierce, sexual, and all warriors."[40] While *I Have Three Hearts* was discursively framed as invoking both Christian and Yoruba goddess symbolism through its images and poetry in reality, the complexities of how Africanness and Black womanhood have been framed in Western visual culture were rendered invisible.

FIGURE 4
Awol Erizku/ Beyoncé, *I Have Three Hearts*, 2017.

During the Middle Ages, the religious scholar Peter Abelard wrote to his wife Hélöise on the Song of Songs and the Ethiopian, the Queen of Sheba, "besides, it so happens that the skin of black women, less agreeable to the gaze, is softer to touch and the pleasures one derives from their love are more delicious and delightful."[41] In her theorizing on the Black Venus narrative, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting explains:

> The Roman deity of beauty, Venus, was also revered as the protectress of Roman prostitutes, who in her honor erected Venus temples of worship. Within these temples, instruction in the arts of love was given to aspiring courtesans. It is in the latter image of prostitution, sexuality, and danger that reproduced itself in narrative and was projected onto black female bodies.[42]

The projection of the image "of prostitute proclivities, onto black female bodies, allowed French writers to maintain a position of moral, sexual and racial superiority."[43]

Black Venus makes an appearance in the English-speaking world in The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies, in Bryan Edwards's The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies (London: John Stockdale, 1794), an allegorical depiction inspired by Botticelli's fifteenth-century painting.

The original etching, which was later painted as a plate by Thomas Stothard in 1801, presents an African woman (the "Sable-Saffron Venus") standing on a half-shell, attended by cherubs, being towed by dolphins to the Americas. To the left is Triton, carrying the British flag and guiding the procession across the ocean, as he looks at the woman. From here, Saat-Jee/Saartje/Saartjie, Sarah Baartman "The Hottentot Venus" exhibited in Europe, first in London and then Paris, from 1810 to 1815, as a curiosity because of her breasts, buttocks, and hypertrophied labia, became the most famous human ethnological, scientific exhibit but also sexual object. In her examination of Baartman, Sadiah Qureshi found that the museological context is crucial in her political significance, "as it highlights that every display needs to be situated because of the role of artefactual context in creating meaning and thus shaping reception."[44] The juxtaposition of the words "Hottentot" and "Venus" also conjures up images of the ivory-skinned Roman goddess of love and beauty, asserts Collins, adding "only to draw attention to the irreconcilable gap between the mythic muse and the African woman, for Baartman was thought by many to represent 'the antithesis of European sexual mores and beauty.'"[45]

Both the Sable-Saffron Venus and the Hottentot Venus complicate Beyoncé's invocation of Black Venus as being representative of an empowered Black womanhood/motherhood.

These histories are complicated and challenging not only to dominant narratives of race and gender but also to how Black women see ourselves.

As Barbara Bush asserts, "although the 'Sable-Saffron Venus' of the slave era disappeared, the attractive, sexualised, younger African-Caribbean women retained an erotic appeal for white men and remained prominent in travellers' accounts of the 'tropics', contrasted favourably with the 'old negress' who was 'always hideous' and fit only for labour and racist derision."[46] Similarly, Qureshi writes further that "Baartman's iconic status depends upon her perceived value as emblematic of both nineteenth-century black experiences and of European debates on physical differences as markers of racial difference. However, this cultural status has been supported by a failure to recognize the heterogeneity of black experience on the part of Europeans and blacks."[47] For instance, mimicry has a big role to play in the continued legacy of these icons of Black womanhood, not just the Sable-Saffron Venus and the Hottentot Venus but also icons of the twentieth century, like Josephine Baker, the African American dancer who, after migrating to Paris in the 1920s, achieved international fame with performances that played with notions of racial primitivism and sexuality.

For Jacque Lacan, "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage…. It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled — exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare."[48] Additionally, Bhabha reminds us that "in mimicry, the representation of identity and meaning is rearticulated along the axis of metonymy."[49] Stated otherwise, mimicry is meant to be a stand-in for, and in some cases can have the effect of denying the existence of difference and the power embedded within cultural discourses on identity.

In a 2006 interview with ABC's Diane Sawyer, after a performance where she replicated the banana skirt costume of Baker, Beyoncé stated: "I wanted to be more like Josephine Baker, because she didn't, she seemed like she just was possessed and it seemed like she just danced from her, her heart, and everything was so free,"[50] Baker, however, was hardly "free." As Petrine Archer Straw explains, "Baker's willingness to adopt certain poses … did little to dispel … racial prejudices. Her preferred stance — body in profile, breasts out, buttocks protruding — simply reinforced age-old notions of black female erotica."[51] This blurring of the line between representation and reality means that the image is not only an illusion of presence, but it is also a sign of absence and loss. *I Have Three Hearts*, with its dispersed text juxtaposed to images that draw from both dominant visual culture and the mimetic Black female body, is not a productive and disruptive challenge to stereotypes of Black womanhood, motherhood, and iconographic Black Venus imagery. Because the photo-series positions the image as a discontinuous message without treatment (i.e., the absence of captions, descriptions of the aesthetics, and/or choice of pose), the totality of the information does not permit viewers to truly understand the meaning embedded in Black Venus imagery.

While Beyoncé's visual representations are often framed within media discourse as her own, Beyoncé does not work alone. In a press release for the 2013 release of the Beyoncé album, for instance, the singer credited "a genius team of artists, songwriters, producers and video directors."[52] Beyoncé has been celebrated for her auteurial vision — a version of creativity that is celebrated in the mostly male role of director in the collaborative world of filmmaking — and also for her authorial contributions as a singer and dancer,[53] but there has been less attention paid to the contemporary Black art for which her visual representations are drawn from. As Wiley says on his website about his work: it is "[the] juxtaposition of the 'old' inherited by the 'new' — who often have no visual inheritance of which to speak — … a discourse that is at once visceral and cerebral in scope."[54] *I Have Three Hearts* speaks more to the duality of Wiley's work, than that of historical Venus or Black Venus, and when it goes unacknowledged, it acts as a form of erasure.

Thus, Beyoncé's photo-series might, on the surface, appear to challenge dominant visual culture tenets; however, Black feminist criticism has recognized the importance of locating discussions of Black women's bodies not singularly in historical narratives, but also in contemporary ones, as well.

Specifically, Fleetwood uses the conceptual framework of "excess flesh" to understand how the Black female body has been reconfigured through hypervisibility over the last thirty years through Black art, music, and dance expressions. "Excess flesh is an enactment of visibility," she writes, "that seizes upon the scopic desires to discipline the black female body through a normative gaze

that anticipates its rehearsed performance of abjection."[55] Stated otherwise, Black women's nakedness, as excess flesh, does not necessarily disrupt the dominant gaze or ways of seeing the Black female body, but instead is has the power to challenge representational Blackness itself — who decides what Black female body, under which circumstances, and where the Black female body can be seen? In this sense, *I Have Three Hearts* does ask viewers to rethink bodily difference, resisting the notion that there is one totalizing gaze and unitary interpretation of the Black female body, but Beyoncé could also say this in her own words so that the meaning attached to the photo-series moves from the realm of symbolism into reality.

CONCLUSION

This article asks that we think about how the work of Beyoncé often becomes the work of sociocultural agents, like the media, who tell the public how it should think, feel, and know about her representations in the absence of her authorial account.

The problem with this form of representation is that it serves to *represent* Black womanhood (collective) while ignoring the fact that it might just be representative of how one Black woman (Beyoncé) sees her life.

This conflicted representation, as Imani Perry writes, "marks an interest convergence between the self-congratulatory posture of the neoliberal state, spectacle-driven late capitalist consumer culture, and a bureaucratized feminist (and civil rights) movement."[56] In other words, while Beyoncé's photo-series can be used to educate the masses on visual culture and complicated histories of race and Black womanhood, it does not necessarily challenge structures of domination or remap legacies of Black women's subjugation.

The circulation of her image, however, speaks to the power of "cultural intermediaries," described by Rojek as those individuals "located between the star and the public … charged with the task of forging the chains that unite the two."[57] Those responsible for maintaining Beyoncé's social media function as her cultural intermediaries, building a public image of her celebrity through image aggregation (the total number of produced and distributed images) and image accumulation (images that reveal the "backstory"). *I Have Three Hearts,* as a highly produced and distributed image project, was carefully curated by intermediaries as not all the images circulated the Internet. And yet, the series became a media sensation that, for a brief moment online, shifted the meaning of historical images from mythology to reality, and in the process, reframed the images' place in history. As Beyoncé matures — as woman and artist — one has to wonder if other photo-series' will remain decorative — and denotative — or if they will become intellectually provocative, engaging with the complex issues of race, photography and Black womanhood.

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