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# THE UNDERGRADUATE JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY ISSUES & MEDIA

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## Letter from the Editor



This issue is a continuation of our last one, with issues of identity front and center. We received so many quality submissions that we decided to extend our coverage of them. The pieces included in this volume represent the stories of people who allow us into their lives for brief moments to share the obstacles and roadblocks they have encountered and point towards pushing through them. Awareness can bring change. We have seen that in countless ways in 2020. Our hope is that through reading about lived experience we can enact change by bringing attention to positionings often glossed over and celebrate their magnificence.

*Maureen Mathison*

# The Confines of Labels in the Art World

Alena DeV Vaughn / Stanford University

“Black Art” has been used as a term to classify all art created by artists of African descent. Take for example, Jacob Lawrence, a leading painter of the mid 20th century who is considered one of the most significant Black Artists of his time. He is an inspirational and vital character in the progression of Black Art. But does he qualify as such because of the color of his skin? Or because of the nature of the paintings? Or because of the implicit politically activated messages in some of his later work? The definition of Black art, the preconceptions about Black art, and the representation of Black art impact how his work has been perceived. Today, however, many artists under the label of Black Art do not want to have their work be representative of all Black people and experiences. Post-Black art may be a solution to some of the conflict that Black artists experience when they are forced to navigate an art world that is steeped in whiteness.

The Black Arts Movement has been beneficial in many ways to the Black artist community. It was a politically charged movement in the 1960s and early 1970s, influential of new literary, performance, and artistic progress for Black thinkers. The upcoming generation of Black artists and intellectuals at the time established a new intellectual framework to replace the existing structures (Baker, 3). Rising from the Black Power Movement in America, the Black Arts Movement represented new artistic growth and

change for Black Americans. “[The Black Arts Movement] was concerned with the articulation of experiences (and the satisfaction of audience demands) that found their essential character among the black urban masses” (Baker, 6). It was an inclusive reform to old societal norms and problems.

## The History of the Defining Black Art

The history of using the words “Black art”, or often “African American art” as a genre is one that is controversial. Many artists, historians, and scholars have different interpretations and descriptions of what “Black art” means, and since no one can seem to agree on one single definition, the issue is convoluted further. Examples of the competing interpretations involve key figures in the Black Arts Movement, specifically Larry Neal and Maulana Karenga.

In a 1968 New York University journal, Larry Neal first officially introduced the Black Arts Movement. He wrote that, “[Black Art] envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America,” and to do this requires a reordering of society that would separate whites and Blacks (Neal, 30). Neal’s proposition is that the existence of the idea of a “Black Aesthetic” presumes that there already is an all-encompassing style of art influenced by African elements (Hyman, 69). Similarly, Maulana Ron Karenga’s believes that Black art is for the people and from

the people—collectively supportive of the revolution and praising of Blackness. In her article, “A Definition of the Black Arts Movement,” Ramona Hyman (2006) suggests that while these two descriptions from two very different scholars can solidly define Black art, they both are solely celebratory of Blackness and ignore the need for an artistic acknowledgement of both the good *and* bad aspects of Black American life.

Others believe the label “Black Art” is more about the shared experiences of a people who exist together in a system of injustice. Pauline de Souza argues that Black art, as it relates to the Black community, must necessarily be a part of the revolution (367). de Souza directs her attention towards Eddie Chambers, a renowned contemporary artist, curator, and Professor of Art History at the University of Texas at Austin who defines Black art as art that is explicitly by and for Black people, specifically touching on the collective Black experience. As its effects touch all Black people from around the globe, de Souza sees Chambers’ definition of Black art as dealing with the history of Black oppression as seen through slavery, imperialism, and racism. Chambers argued in the 1980s that, “The function of Black art, as I saw it a few years ago was to confront the white establishment for its racism, as much as address the Black community in its struggle for human equality. I think Black art has still that role to play” (de Souza, 367). Raymond Saunders also reiterates this point in his pamphlet, *Black is a Color*, published in 1967. From Saunders’ perspective as a prominent African American artist during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, the importance of Blackness in this conversation surrounding art and media is

not its color or racial characteristics, but its shared social and cultural experience: the common fight against the prevailing system (Saunders).

Regardless of whether or not academics can agree on what qualifies as “Black art”, the term exists and is used regularly. Academics may never agree on one definition, but using the label “Black art” or “Black aesthetic” is widely seen as useful because of the lack of representation of Black artists in every single major art platform. By giving Black artists their own genre, the designation of Black Art provides an easier pathway to collectively enter into major art spaces.

### **A Brief Analysis of One Black American Artist and His Work**

In 1941, before his influential success during the Black Arts Movement of the ‘60s, Jacob Lawrence’s artwork was featured in the New York Museum of Modern Art, marking Lawrence as the first African-American artist to have his paintings displayed in a major New York art gallery. His piece “Construction,” from his larger collection entitled “The Builders,” was created in the 1940s but gained public attention and significance in the 1960s as the Black Arts Movement really made headway. Growing up in 1930s Harlem, he saw inspiration in mundane everyday happenings and painted what he witnessed vividly and boldly (Whitney, 2). “Construction” depicts four African-American men laboring at a construction site, each wearing blue outfits paralleling their blue-collar jobs. The color of their skin is all the same shade of brown, similar to the hue and texture of a brown paper grocery bag. Once the viewer’s eyes shift from

the bright subjects to the bold scenery, one might notice that the background of the canvas seems to reveal a layer of construction paper, perhaps playing on the title of the piece, “Construction”. The painting is horizontally structured—thin, and landscape. The widening stretch of the canvas is emphasized by the spread of the topmost man’s elegant and graceful arms. One step down from him is another man, also taking up space and working widely, and the trend of a hierarchy continues on below him. Each subject has been laboring on his own level, and as a result the viewer can see exhaustion in their half-closed and sunken eyes. Their eyes lack a surprising amount of

and the center of the painting. This focus is also reiterated in how the man on the bottom right is working with his hands facing upwards. Visually this creates a focal point in a painting that is otherwise somewhat abstract, saturated, and busy. Symbolically, by drawing the four men together to work with their body language towards each other, Lawrence provides a sense of unity and togetherness. Even though each man is working individually on separate tasks, they seem to be people with similar struggles and sacrifices. “Construction” is an example of one of the ways in which Jacob Lawrence is known for showing Black American life (figure 1). During the Civil Rights Movement,



Figure 1. Jacob Lawrence, *Construction*, 1952, tempera on board, Cantor Center of the Arts, Stanford University, CA.

detail within, void of irises, pupils, color, and life, but it is the lines of weariness around the perimeter of the lids that reveal the fatigue and strain and humanity.

Noticing that the man at the top has both of his hands splayed down and outward as he works on a project, sort of pointing downwards and framing the other men, brings the audience’s eyes toward them

Lawrence began focusing more on contemporary social issues and used the social protest of the time as a theme (Whitney Museum of American Art). His influence throughout the 20th century has marked Jacob Lawrence as one of the most prominent African American artists of his era. Lawrence remained a talented and respected figure as time marched on,



but the more prominent ideas circulating in the world around him began to transform.

## The Shifting Observations of Black Art

The Black Arts Movement has, in some ways, worked to encourage a divide. Robert S. Browne, a distinguished thinker and activist of the 1960s and 1970s, was a proponent of the idea of separatism as a process beneficial to both white people and Black Americans. The fruitless search for a comfortable niche in American society led some frustrated and tired Black Americans to desire a separation from white America (472). Browne wrote in his piece that, “the resolution is far from an expression of racism or hate. Rather, it is a straightforward effort to explore an obvious means of minimizing racial friction by suggesting some fair basis for the physical separation of the contending parties” (472). Contrary to these desires, however, the Black Arts Movement did not attempt to completely separate Black art from others, but instead worked to give Black artists an individualized space within the existing American world where they could create their art to be unapologetically Black.

Some say that the title of “Black Art” is necessary in today’s current society because it will be almost impossible to remove the unfair preconceptions about African American art and its worth until the problem of representation is fixed (Penhollow). Before the Black Arts Movement, art created by African Americans was not respected enough to be put into the most well-known and esteemed museums and magazines. At this pivotal shift, popularizing art by Black people

helped initiate gains in racial equality within the artistic field. By creating an entire genre, African-American artists could have an attainable way to get their art into the public eye. The title enabled Black art, now a newly tangible concrete concept, to be introduced into the white, and therefore mainstream, spaces of the art community.

However, having Black art as its own genre separates Blackness from “normal” art. It creates an unfair differentiation, leading to preconceptions and stereotypes that Black art is not as valuable. What are the implications for museum-goers who view a widespread collection of fine art, then turn a corner to see a separate specified exhibit where all of the Black Art resides? When art by Black people is segregated from the regularized and Eurocentric art, there is potential for its disparagement. For example, Walter O. Evans, one of the most prominent collectors of African American art today, originally scoffed at the idea of purchasing one of Jacob Lawrence’s series when he first started collecting pieces of fine art. Even Jacob Lawrence, arguably one of the most influential Black artists of his era, is often not immediately associated with priciness, affluence, or luxury, even though white artistic greats from the same time period regularly are. Thus, is his respect only relevant in the Black Art community, and nonexistent in the “real” art community? The categorization of Black artists’ work into one box, (“Black Art” or “African-American Art”), became the first step African American artists made in the effort to gain recognition for their artwork in the fine art community as valid and legitimate. The Black Arts Movement brought Black artists into museums.

Once complete infiltration and regularization occurs, then the differentiating label of “Black art” can be shed so that Black artists, both recognized and prominent in the fine art world, can naturally earn respect and prestige equal to that of their white counterparts.

However, an issue lies in the solution. The Black Arts Movement has inadvertently caused “Black Art” to be used as an exhaustive term to group together many different cultures and traditions into one genre as though they are interchangeable. Saunders wrote in 1967 about the sheer vastness of Black art, “...the scope of which far outreaches the limits imposed by the editorial requirements of an art magazine”. It is seen less and less through Karenga’s definition, and more by Chamber’s ideology, presented decades later. If artists put pieces of themselves into their work, as is a commonly held belief, then almost all Black-identifying artists inherently create what Chambers believes is “Black art” because even if the piece isn’t explicitly about Blackness, it was shaped by the artist’s experience of living a Black life. This description of Black art is inappropriately broad if it is indeed inclusive of almost all of the artwork created by an entire race. Placing Jacob Lawrence’s art, for example, in the same category as Irma Stern’s becomes questionable when you consider the vast differences both in visual style and historical influence. Jacob Lawrence’s style shows a modern portrayal of city life for Black Americans, depicting his subjects in an extremely bold, yet extremely regular, way. Irma Stern, an upscale South African artist of the early 20th century, paints her African subjects in a more classic, detailed, style, intentionally portraying them with regality and beauty

(figure 2). While both may be considered “Black art”, I would suggest that there are serious fundamental differences in the cultures and traditions that they represent. Lawrence’s depictions of African American city life and Stern’s portraits of South African and Arab figures are incredibly different in style, subject, meaning, inspiration, and historical context. Both pertain to Black people in general, but with no other clear connection, they would otherwise not be expected to be represented within the same category. If the only unifying thing about two drastically different pieces is the subjects’ or artists’ skin color, something may be fundamentally wrong with the prerequisites that put them in the same genre of art. One would never suppose that Leonardo da Vinci and Andy Warhol paint in the same genre simply because their respective portraits of Mona Lisa and Marilyn Monroe both depict women with fair skin. By grouping all art surrounding Blackness together as one genre, Black artists collectively are denied of their unique reputations and the creative freedom they deserve; they lose some individuality.

Individuality infers that artists have the ability to create according to their own views and styles. A label not only makes Black artists worry about their art being thrown into the same broad, all-encompassing group as all other Black artists, but sometimes makes them also feel as though they have to try to fit their art into what they believe Black art is supposed to be. This problem is not universal but it can hurt some Black artists if this causes them to feel that they must mold their art to fit it into the preexisting category of what Black art should mean. If Black artists were

not all put into the same category, more could feel the freedom to create, the way that white artists have always had. An artist's constant awareness of their Blackness leads to an intentional effort to try and fit their art and style into the "Black art" category, which strongly influences the artistic integrity of the final product. It could significantly change the structure, style, and nature of their piece. White artists do not have to worry that their art must fit into the already existing mold of what white art should be, because



Figure 2. Irma Stern, *Arab in Black*, 1939, oil on canvas.

white artists' art is never headlined by their race. White artists are not "white artists" creating "white art", they are seen simply as artists who *happen* to be white, creating an expression of themselves. Their

artwork is never inherently or automatically defined as a byproduct of their skin color; instead it is always a representation of them as individuals. Black artists on the other hand, may feel confined to keep their art within the box of Black Art's definition of Blackness if they struggle separating themselves from the Black Art genre. Therefore, the existence of the term "Black art" invokes some degree of suffocation, a lack of freedom, or even an inhibition of a Black artist's creativity. For instance, Saunders believed that, "Each artist has to do for himself what is necessary for his own development, fulfilling himself as an individual, not as one of a herd. He has to enter into the total experience of himself and his vision, which transcends the cramped boundaries of any stereotype--angry or otherwise." If Saunders is right, the Black artists' worry or focus on anything besides them and their creation, can detrimentally affect their overall well-being, because they are automatically placed into a box based on their skin tone.

### Being a Black Creator in a White World

The existence of the term "Black art" posed further problems. The unreasonable classification of all art by descendants of Africans as one genre means Black artists carry an obligation of representation. Black artists shoved into the label "Black Artist" can be burdened with the knowledge that some people will look and assume that their individual piece is an example of all "typical" Black people's style and values. It becomes incredibly hard to guiltlessly express what their personal truth is through their medium because it will always be viewed by some audiences as a univer-

sal truth for all of their race. White artists who have unoppressed identities, unlike racial minorities, the LGBT+ community, women, or disabled groups, have never had to worry that their creativity must be shown a certain way to avoid projecting stereotypes on everyone else of their group. In 1963, James Baldwin coined the idea of the burden of representation (Butler, 66). Black artists not only have to make sure their art fits into the category of “Black Art”, but they also have to work around the burden of dealing with having their work be seen as representative of their entire race. This thought process is limiting and stifling, and without the categorization “Black art” the obligation of representation for Black artists might only exist to a much lesser extent. Every little thing that a Black artist feels they must focus on when they know their art will be perceived by the audience as a representation of “Black”, can create a huge roadblock to the artistic process. It’s harder to focus on how their art is forming in relation to themselves when the artist must instead be worried about these other factors. If they were never unnecessarily worried about the ways their art is portraying their people, their culture, and their history, they could instead simply create art.

Placing *all* forms of Blackness into the box of the word “Black” also affects the audience’s expectations. Black art has come to be known widely as a genre to describe any and all art by Black people. Because of this I would imagine that society may start to believe that any work that falls within the broad spectrum of the common perception of Black Art has to necessarily look a certain type of way. This could be demonstrated positively or negatively. Art historian

Bridget Cooks talks about what she calls the “either/or paradigm” in her book *Exhibiting Blackness*. Black art is always examined in museums as either an anthropological study or an aesthetic value. Her point is that appreciation of Black art in museums today only exists as either representations of the perceived differences between Blackness and whiteness in art, or as a way to exclusively shine light on Black art that has been ignored, and this paradigm in itself marginalizes Black artists and their work (2). A truly free artist can openly create as an expression of who they are, because they have control over what they want the meaning of their work to be. They can therefore let their truth flow freely from mind to canvas, but this is difficult because the existence of a predominantly white audience looking in at Black art from an outside perspective can become oppressive and reminiscent of colonial and imperial times. The societal expectations about what Blackness in art should mean change the context of the piece and in turn affect the execution on the part of the artist.

Cornel West, an American philosopher, coined the term “normative gaze” which describes the way non-white races are viewed and created through a Eurocentric lens. This explains the “otherness” that Black artists feel when placed in a segregated exhibition in the most prominent museums. Once again, this idea that white equals “normal” means that some Black artists who want their art to be in these esteemed fine art museums may feel as though they have to cater to the predominantly white audience, and therefore not be true to themselves within their works. West writes, “It is not surprising that most intellectuals of color in the

past exerted much of their energies and efforts to gain acceptance and approval by ‘White normative gazes.’ The new cultural politics of difference advises critics and artists of color to put aside this mode of mental bondage, thereby freeing themselves both to interrogate the ways in which they are bound by certain conventions and to learn from and build on these very norms and models” (107).

All of this pressure is a barrier. Black artists don’t have the privilege of freely letting their creativity, thoughts, and feelings manifest untainted in their art. Toni Morrison, a major author who engaged with the Black Arts Movement and who focused on Blackness in literature, questioned in her book, *Playing in the Dark*, “What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one’s race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal’ or race-free?” (xii). Many agree with her in saying that overthinking in the art world, specifically caused by the burden of representation and the white normative gaze, waters down the final product. It is emotionally and creatively taxing to constantly be pandering to a culturally different (and sometimes insensitive) audience. To do so would go opposite of Saunders’ very important point made in the sixties that an artist must do what is necessary for him or herself, as an individual. When this focus is on the negative factors of perceived Blackness in art and not one’s own individual self, it is unhealthy. In fact, this is why there are people resisting the entire suppressive nature of the term “Black Art.” There are artists emerging today who are actively against being labelled as “Black

Artists” because of all of these reasons analyzed by art historians and scholars across time. In order to resist against the detrimental effects of the label, many artists are instead starting to identify as “post-Black.”

Thelma Golden first coined the term “post-Black” as a rebellion against the confines of the “Black Art” categorization (Jefferson). In an interview, Golden specified how her idea of post-Black is not its own artistic style or strategy but instead is a manifestation of the rejection of the label “Black artist,” while simultaneously using artwork to redefine Blackness (2009). Post-Blackness is described by writer and news anchor Touré as being freeing, lifting the burden off of Black artists’ shoulders so they do not have to feel as though everything they do or create must be representative for their entire race (29). It is an intentional shift of a person’s mindset away from the obligation of representation. Jennifer Jefferson writes about this continual effort to step away from the norm. As a journalist and Black artist herself, she shares how she personally relates to this new movement. “The new genre [post-Black] was given to artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘Black’ artists, though their work dealt with the idea of Blackness,” she writes. “The intention is for Black arts to be integrated into Western art history instead of treated as a special interest if the work is race-related”.

Bridget Cooks defends the idea of post-Blackness, writing that artists utilize it because their art deserves to be seen through multiple lenses (156). She talks about how limiting it is for museums to group all African-American art into one exhibition. Cooks writes

about the fact that the act of clumping them together marginalizes artists and their works and diminishes the meaning and significance of Black art both individually and altogether (2). The fact there is a documented intense effort put forth by Black artists to be severed from the restrictions of the comprehensive umbrella term “Black Art” shows just how negatively impactful this specificity is to many people. I believe that the term post-Blackness is helpful because now people finally have a word to vocalize and materialize this ongoing struggle. Because of this, it is easier to comprehend and actively work against the struggles of being a Black artist in a white space.

Post-Blackness fights for the option for Black artists to not have to feel obligated to show their art in a certain light because of their race or the audience’s preconceptions. Touré writes, “Throwing off the burden of representation can give an artist the space to discover who they really are apart from the dictates of the community and the past and the confining strictures of worrying about the white gaze” (30). That intentionality is freeing. The tangibility that

James Baldwin, Thelma Golden, Steve Penhollow, and Bridget Cooks give this huge issue makes it fightable and approachable, because without knowing how to effectively tackle this beast it is exponentially harder to fight against the problems that are internalized and reinforced in the art community.

At the end of the day, the Black Arts Movement was an essential and beautiful shift in America’s art and literary world. From it has arisen multitudes of magnificent works that have touched people of all backgrounds. The issues relating to the title of “Black Art” are not the fault of the Black Arts Movement’s amazing founders and contributors, but they instead grow from America’s long and deep institutionalized history of racism and prejudice. Some artists are empowered by creating art to display their Blackness, while some may feel limited by it. This is just a fact, and until there is widespread change in the fundamental deficiencies of America’s structures and America’s societal norms, it will be difficult for every marginalized artist to feel free and accepted in the way that they want to create and be seen.

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**ALENA DeVAUGHN** is a third-year undergraduate student at Stanford University. She is studying Psychology and Sociology, plans on pursuing a doctorate degree in psychology or social work, and hopes to soon after have a career helping people who are negatively impacted by mental illness and inequality. Alena’s first writings had to be dictated since she herself was too young to type, and her first published work was a creative short story in fourth grade which was included in *How to Cook with a Pencil: Youth Inkwell Anthology: Volume Two*. Her longest-lasting passion, however, is creating and listening to music, and additionally she is eager to continue her recent exploration of art as a mode of expression.

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## Just Like Your Dad

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Lizzy Santana / Southwestern College

At five years old

I often got told

“Wow, you’re just like your dad.”

I was happy to hear this,

I looked up to my Dad a lot.

There was a time we didn’t have a vehicle

So He and I would walk to places

Together.

Under the heat of the summer sun,

Or through the bitterness of winter cold,

I was always happy to be with Him.

Our house was near a creek

And as we passed we threw rocks into it.

I would watch His stones do flips across the water,

Until they disappeared under its surface.

He taught me how to skip the rocks,

But I wasn’t very good at it.

Growing up I would watch Him play video games.

Sitting on the floor, legs crossed, eyes glued to the screen,

Seeing my Dad shoot zombies, steal cars, be an assassin



All in one day.

Mom comes along and says,

“You’re just like your dad.”

That would make me smile.

Teachers at school would ask,

“Who is your role model?”

And I would say,

“My dad!

He kills the spiders,

Takes me places,

And loves me!”

Sitting on the couch of my grandma’s home

Gazing at the television,

Slumping on the couch,

Eating chips and drinking a Coke,

Grandma tells me

“You look just like your dad.”

My heart swells.

Dad’s really smart.

He knows “a little about a lot.”

That’s what He would always say.

He tries to help me with math homework,

And I’ve never been good at math.

Long division,

Too many numbers going too many places.

I don't understand what He's trying to teach me,  
It's all a jumble of nonsense in my head.  
He loses his temper.  
Yelling.

As I grow older  
Truths begin to unfold.  
They say ignorance is bliss, and they are right.  
I wish I would have remained ignorant  
So the image of my hero would never have been blurred.

Dad works a lot.  
Mechanic stuff.  
Haven't talked to him in days.  
I excitedly tell him about my choir concert,  
All the fun songs that we are singing,  
I lose my breath from how fast I'm talking.  
He doesn't come.  
"Too tired."

Beer cans flood the garbage bin,  
Spilling onto the floor,  
The stench now buried in the carpets.  
Can't even throw away papers,  
Papers that he has not seen like  
Graded tests  
Essays  
Event programs

College acceptance letter.

A night when he was so drunk

His foot got broken

He comes home, yelling

At me and my Mom,

The force in his voice shaking the house,

Making my sister cry.

This heats me up,

In this moment I feel nothing but a burning hatred,

And in a rage I scream at him to

Shut up.

He screams back, demanding I go to my room.

I do, taking my sister with me,

Keeping her protected in my embrace.

Sobbing.

When my mom talks to me

She can tell how little attention I'm paying sometimes.

I often just space out,

My mind runs like a hamster wheel,

Not really something I can control.

"God, you're just like your dad."

I frown.

Mom scolds me for little messes that I make,

For being too quiet,

For not wanting to eat a certain dish,

For having a negative attitude,  
For just being myself,  
“Dammit, you’re just like your dad.”

Who am I?

Who will I become?

Will I be someone with seemingly no sensitivity,

No appreciation,

An alcoholic,

Someone who leaves their family to go party at a friend’s house?

Will I try to pin my child on my spouse

So I can go have a drink,

Lie and deceive to get what I want?

Is that who I am?

I don’t take out the trash,

So I am compared to

That.

But

I remember,

After I performed in my very first play,

My dad came up to me, hugged me,

And said

“I am so proud of you.”

I recall,

Once I chose which college I wanted to go,

And received a scholarship for theatre,

My dad said to me,

“You’re going to do great things.”

Admitting to my family,

“I want to be a performer, and a writer.”

Everyone told me I was crazy,

That I would never get far.

My dad said,

“I believe in you. Do what you love. I got your back.”

When people ask about my dad,

I don’t really know what to say.

“Alcoholic” is all I can muster.

But there is the part of me,

My childhood love,

That says

“He kills the spiders,

Takes me places,

And loves me.”

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# A Kat Allred zine

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# QUEER IS QUEER

by Katherine Taylor Allred

## BACK THEN

“True union between a man and a woman, the masculine and the feminine, is the only way to reach the highest level of creation.”

“So gay people can’t reach the highest level of creation, of the celestial kingdom<sup>1</sup>? Even if they’re good people?”

“Well,” my mom replied, “they can never realize the full measure of their creation, so no, but they can still have fulfilling relationships with each other. They can still have partnerships, maybe even eternal ones of a sort, but it will never be a true union.

I was quiet for a few minutes before responding. “What about bisexual people?”

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<sup>1</sup> Mormons believe that in the afterlife, there’s a hierarchy of degrees of glory. The highest level is the Celestial Kingdom, reserved for the most worthy and righteous. To get there, you have to make and keep aaaaalllllll the Mormon covenants. It basically means you get to be with your family for eternity and you even get to make new spirits, like God did when he created the universe in the first place. It’s a pretty big deal to Mormons.

“Bisexuals are just confused. They want to sleep with everyone, probably because they don’t know how to have boundaries. They’re essentially victims of their own lust.”

“Okay,” I replied, considering this information. “That makes sense, I guess.”

I was fifteen years old, and I was talking to my mom while we ran errands together one summer afternoon. I was questioning her about theology – a frequent topic of conversation in our house – while she clarified for me her understanding of Mormonism<sup>2</sup>, the faith in which she was born and raised and in turn raised her own six children. She was a feminist and had raised us to be as well, but in ways that fit, however uneasily, within Mormon doctrine.

According to some Mormon feminists, this doctrine could be interpreted to say that women and men should have equal authority in the church because a handful of women had been given the priesthood by the church’s founding leader and prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr.<sup>3</sup>, though he was assassinated before he could make it official church policy. Others argue that women have access to the powers of the priesthood when they are sealed in the temple to their priesthood-endowed<sup>4</sup> husbands. Either way, what this doctrine lacks is an understanding or explanation of how queer people fit into things.

Here’s what the LDS church’s website, MormonAndGay.

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2 Recently, church leadership made a pronouncement that the term “Mormon” and/or “LDS” should no longer be used because they prefer it be called “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” or, if you’re into the whole brevity thing, “the Church of Jesus Christ.” But that is crazy-long and plus “Mormon” is what I grew up calling it as a member.

3 In mainstream Mormonism, the priesthood is understood to literally be God’s authority. It is reserved solely for men who meet certain criteria including age and worthiness. Twelve year old boys, for instance, receive the Aaronic priesthood, at which point they are understood to have more authority than their mothers, at least on a spiritual level. They’re still supposed to obey their moms about stuff like doing homework and chores.

4 “Endowed” means “conferred upon through ritual” in Mormon terms.

LDS.org, has to say, including an excerpt from a handbook for church leaders:

*Central to God's plan, the doctrine of marriage between a man and a woman is an integral teaching of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and will not change:*

*"As a doctrinal principle, based on the scriptures, the Church affirms that marriage between a man and a woman is essential to the Creator's plan for the eternal destiny of His children. [...] Any other sexual relations, including those between persons of the same gender, are sinful and undermine the divinely created institution of the family" (Handbook 2: Administering the Church, 21.4.10).*



*Me, age 15, at the beginning of sophomore year.*

According to LDS doctrine, realizing your full eternal potential – the entire point existence, really – means marriage with someone of the opposite sex and gender.

I struggled with the gospel<sup>5</sup>, particularly with the sometimes hypocritical ways it was practiced by the Mormons I grew up around. But I believed that the divine aspects of the gospel transcended all that, maybe even transcended Joseph Smith, Jr. himself<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The term “the gospel” is sort of a catch-all term for the Mormon church as well as the doctrine, beliefs, and practices.

<sup>6</sup> Smith claimed to have been visited by God the Father and his son, Jesus Christ, when Smith was a fourteen-year-old farmboy in upstate New York in 1820. The way the story goes, Smith was praying to know which church to join

I believed long after I stopped attending church in my late teens that Smith was merely a flawed, human vessel of sacred revelation whose weaknesses and early death kept the LDS church from receiving the fullness of the restored gospel<sup>7</sup>, including a more equitable relationship between men and women (not to mention races and ethnicities), as well as a more enlightened view of “same-sex attraction” (as church leaders call it). Surely such doctrinal amendments would be revealed to the Saints when the time was right and we were worthy enough to receive them. After all, we were blessed to live in these latter days, a time of living prophets and personal revelation. As the Ninth Article of Faith says (one of thirteen tenets revealed to Smith and published in a book of scripture called *The Pearl of Great Price*), “We believe all that God has revealed, all that He does now reveal, and we believe that He will yet reveal many great and important things pertaining to the Kingdom of God.” I grew up with the understanding that there was more doctrine to come – it’s the whole point of having a religion headed by a living prophet.

In 2017, the LDS church “clarified” their stance towards gay members and their children with a policy update outlining revisions to the handbook, which included disallowing the children of gay parents to be baptized until

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when God, aka Heavenly Father, and Jesus showed up and pretty much said, “Hey man, they’re ALL wrong, don’t join any of them.” Mormons call this The First Vision. Later, God sent an angel named Moroni to Joseph, who told him where to find a buried new scripture written on gold “plates” in the Americas by long-dead people who came to North America from Isreal in like 600 BC. If you want to know more about it, look it up online and a pair of nice boys in suits with black nametags will be at your door in a jiffy. Seriously, you’ll make their day.

<sup>7</sup> It’s called the “restored gospel” because the original gospel disappeared not long after Christ’s death, and the Christian churches after that were really apostate. God waited till Smith was born to restore the gospel to the earth, but apparently he didn’t give Smith the whole gospel enchilada on day one. He’s been revealing the rest to prophets and apostles in bits and pieces ever since. Once the gospel is entirely restored to earth, we’ll have the fullness of the gospel. One of the big selling of the gospel is that all faithful men and women can receive revelation for themselves. Let me tell you, hilarity ensues.

they're eighteen years old, further distancing them from their LDS peers who are expected to get baptized at the age of eight. The policy also stipulated that "entering a same-sex marriage is considered 'apostasy' and requires a church disciplinary council," church spokesman Elder D. Todd Christofferson explained in a video released on the church's website, continuing on to say that the church regards "same-sex marriage as a particularly grievous or significant, serious kind of sin [...]."



*Our wedding was a heck of a party.*

"This policy announcement was devastating to faithful gay men and women in the church and to their families<sup>8</sup>.

Though I wouldn't use the word to describe myself for several more years, I was (and am) queer. I also wanted to be the most righteous person I could be, however impossible that task felt. I just wanted to be good.

Being righteous meant basic things like following the Ten Commandments, of course, but it also meant following God's Plan of Happiness, which (for Mormon girls) means growing up, marrying a man, and having children (in that order). A big part of me couldn't wait to grow up and be a

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<sup>8</sup> In the spring of 2019, the church announced a reversal of this policy, though they didn't say why. Might have been because a *lot* of people left the church because of it, and a lot of queer teenagers are believed to have killed themselves in despair because of it. Not coincidentally, the rate of teen suicide in Utah is nearly three times the national average (Johnson).

mother myself, so that aspect of the plan wasn't a problem. Neither, really, was falling in love with a man – I'd had crushes on boys starting when I was eight years old. But I also started having crushes on girls at the same time, before I had the words to say that that was what I was feeling. Eventually I learned about gays and lesbians, so I knew what being gay meant, and I certainly knew what being straight meant. But I was neither – or was I both? I never considered anything besides those two sides of the binary; I existed in the gray area.

If I didn't have the words to name what I was, or if the words I eventually got painted a frightening picture of trashy, out-of-control promiscuity to which I did not relate, what was I to do? I made the one choice I believed would save me. Shortly after I turned twenty, I married<sup>9</sup> a funny, smart, empathetic man who could understand my personal trajectory of faithfulness to and disaffection from the LDS church, because he'd experienced something similar. At the same time, I worked to ignore new attractions I felt toward women and did my best to bury uncomfortable memories of the handful of times I'd made out with girls – girls with whom I'd been friends, then more than friends, and then with whom I immediately dropped any relationship by mutual agreement (sometimes verbalized, sometimes not).

Eventually, however, as I matured in my mid-twenties, I thought about what drove my desires, and eventually I had to admit to myself that I had always been attracted to both women and men. I was shocked, for instance, to find out that I had a type when it came to women as much as when it came to men, as obvious as that seems now. My marriage is happily monogamous so I didn't act on these attractions any more than I act on attractions I feel toward other men,

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9 We were engaged three weeks after we met and married three months after that. When you're Mormon, when you know, you know. It's called listening to the Holy Spirit. Maybe in this case the Holy Spirit knew we were damn horny.

but it was nonetheless a powerful shift toward self-affirmation and authenticity when I let myself more fully inhabit the whole range of my identity, including my attractions and sexual desires.

## THESE DAYS

I called my mom to talk to her about my struggle to write about this stuff, and she reminded me of something she'd begun hinting at four or five years ago: her own bisexuality, something she had always kept to herself for the same reasons I had. Then she shared with me an excerpt from her memoir she'd begun writing:



*My mom, Camille, at age 12.*

*I had recently discovered sexuality myself and was terrified by it. And to further challenge, frighten and confuse me, I had a secret crush on a girl at church.*

*Not conventionally pretty, she had wild, curly, bright-red hair. I found her enormously appealing. [...] I reveled in my feelings, and also felt deeply ashamed and fearful of them. It was as if I had hidden a great treasure which I had come by with dubious, even shameful, means, and would bring out in dark seclusion to caress and gloat over--but never willingly give up. [...] I knew my feelings were not pure, not virtuous, nor blameless--at least not according to the dictates of our religion and culture.*

*[...] Had my upbringing not been so repressive, I might have explored that side of myself. As it was, it only frightened me more than my feelings for boys-- feelings almost paralyzing, so overwhelmed did I feel. What I was experiencing did not fit the script I had been given. The simple Mormon view of human experience and its meaning had not prepared me for the enormity of love, lust and longing. I was unable to feel much besides guilt about my developing sexuality and personality.*

My mother's eloquent reflection complicates and deepens my understanding of her as a human and as my parent. Though I'd understood the conversation we'd had when I was fifteen through a basic lens of LDS doctrine, I can see



*Me and my mom. I think I was five and she was probably thirty-three here.*

now why she was so dogmatic about what an ideal relationship looked like.

There's no doubt that my mother's life would have been profoundly different if she'd had the space to admit, to think about, or to (god forbid) discuss her feelings of attraction to both boys and girls (or, hell, even

just to boys) instead of repressing any thought whatsoever of being a sexual being<sup>10</sup>. The choices she made could have been choices driven by happiness and self-respect instead of fear and obedience to cultural norms embodied and enforced by her elders. Born nearly thirty years apart,

<sup>10</sup> Mormons really don't like to talk about sex. You're not even supposed to think about sex unless you're thinking about someone to whom you're married. As my friends and I used to joke, sex is dirty and disgusting and shameful and you should save it for the person you love most in this world.



we had more in common than I'd guessed. Discussing it now, including how neither of us had had the words or space to think about experiences that didn't "fit the script [we'd] been given," I'm struck by how unnecessary but perhaps inevitable was the shame we both carried, given our circumstances. The pressure we both experienced to perform culturally-defined righteousness at any cost meant burying and even trying to kill parts of ourselves.

Just as my bisexual mother had a child who is bisexual, I have a child who is bisexual (perhaps because it's more common to human experience than I once assumed). But unlike my mother, I was able to comprehensively discuss human sexuality, including sexual orientation and what it means to be transgender, with my children from the time they were very young. My oldest son is now nineteen. He came out to us as bisexual when he was seventeen, after he fell for one of his best friends.

Though my son had long identified as cisgender and straight whenever I teasingly asked him if he had a crush on anyone, he was able to identify his evolving feelings of attraction toward his friend and pursue them as much or as little as he felt comfortable. Not only that, but he wanted to confide in his parents about it, something a vast majority of kids of my generation would never have dreamed of doing.

I asked him when he realized he was bi and he said, "I've sort of had a sneaking suspicion for a long time now, probably since the beginning of high school. I'd mostly been into girls before then, just because that was what I felt was expected by my friends I guess, but sometimes there were dudes who I thought looked real good. I sort of wrote that off as nothing, but at some point I realized I was attracted to [my boyfriend]. I only knew I was bi around the beginning of junior year.



*My son, at right, with his boyfriend, after attending Salt Lake Queer Prom 2017.*

“Was it hard to admit to yourself that you were bi?” I asked him.

“No, not really, it just felt like, oh that makes sense.”

“What’s your relationship with the fact that you’re bi?”

He wasn’t nervous to come out, he said, “but I don’t really define myself as bi, ‘cause that never really made sense to me – it’s not broad enough for me. It’s like I’m just attracted to certain people and not attracted to other people. If someone asked and I had to answer real quick, I’d say I’m bi, but I don’t think it does justice to people’s real feelings most of the time – it’s still just a shorthand.”

While I didn’t live my teen years with the freedom to publicly define myself as I wished, my son and I do share the experience of having people police what it means to be queer. He explained that “one of the larger conflicts within the queer community is between older queer and younger queer people, ‘cause some older queer people have this perspective that you’re just one thing, and they’re kind of resentful that there’s way more classifications now. I think some of them are irritated by that and feel like you’re either gay or straight and that’s how it is.”

Is it silly, to use my son’s descriptor, that some people still want to define identities based on older ways of thinking,

especially those who fought to define their own identities starkly against the perceived norm? Maybe it's because they had to fight so hard to carve out their own spaces of safety and self-definition that it seems like younger generations who've benefited from their sacrifices don't appreciate what it cost them to blaze those trails.

I spoke with a friend who is a lesbian and grew up in rural Utah without television or the internet, and she does mourn the loss of queer-only spaces and strict definitions of what it means to be queer. She was kicked out of first her parents' house for being gay and later her grandparents' house, and then she was homeless for awhile. That's a high price to pay for taking that label on and refusing to accept that there was anything wrong with it. Though she's only twenty-five, she said she used to be "straight up jealous of younger people who now have the luxury" of throwing out those stricter definitions in favor of new ones or no distinct definitions at all. When I said it was surprisingly honest of her to admit that those feelings were driven by jealousy, she said she had to be honest about it if she wanted to "really support the idea of actively queering every space in this country – 'cause that's the ultimate goal, right?"

Though I've publicly identified myself as queer on a limited basis, a few out gay acquaintances have told me I'm not really queer since I live such a hetero life. This is another way of saying I don't perform queerness properly. After I came out to myself and let myself cut off my hair and wear butch clothes, I felt like I was letting down the LGBTQ movement (or even my own "real" self) if I also styled myself more femininely when I felt the urge to. Was I betraying my newly-embraced masculine side if I wore make-up or a dress? It felt that way at first, but I've come to realize it's a presentation of self that is constantly evolving; I'm allowed to show up as myself however I feel most comfortable on any given day. Whatever I am now can peacefully coexist with

whatever I once was or will become. And anyway, fuck the haters: they don't live in my skin and nobody is the sheriff of queerness.

Some gay and straight people continue to regard bi people as just doing it for attention (look up Dan Savage, et al), but I'm older and wiser now and find my own self putting the lie to that assertion – if anything, I'm reluctant to come out as bi lest I be seen as attention-seeking. My question for myself now is about whether or not I'm helping anyone if I talk (or don't talk) about it. I usually expect to get the same reaction: whatever, cis-het lady, here's a medal for your dumb coming out story. However, a formerly-Mormon friend recently told me that her semi-active Mormon daughter just came out to her as bisexual and is freaked out about what she believes her life choices will be and whether or not she's normal. I shared my story with her, and my son's too, and I said I'd had similar questions and concerns as her daughter but was able to find my way to a happy, healthy, authentic life. I also asked her to tell her daughter not to make any decisions based on who she thinks she needs to be, and instead just give herself space and time to figure it out for herself. Who knows what will get through to her daughter; at least she's growing up in a time and place where those things are more possible than they used to be.

While the internet barely existed when I was a teenager in the nineties, today a quick Google search of the terms "Mormon bisexual" reveals all kinds of things, including whisp.r posts from LDS kids about being bi and scared to tell anyone. At the very least, bisexual LDS youth in Utah can talk about it now – they know it's a thing.



*Recent whisp.r post.*

My children, quite intentionally raised outside the LDS church, will hopefully never know feelings of shame or fear for their safety over who they are or whom they love. The trade-off is that they also won't understand the odd, life-defining experience of growing up believing there's a god-ordained order to the universe – but if it spares them a lifetime of guilt and self-loathing, it will be more than worth it.

Identity is constructed from a variety of sources, fertile grounds offered up by family and community, whether civic, educational, or faith-based. Stephen Greenblatt wrote in a *New Yorker* article that “cultural inheritance is not our ineluctable fate. Even in the brief span of our recorded history, some five thousand years, we can watch societies and individuals ceaselessly playing with, reshuffling, and on occasion tossing out the cards that both nature and culture have dealt, and introducing new ones.” So it is that we make innumerable decisions about whether or not to conform or obey or submit, or to strike out for new spaces and identities and cultures of our own making.

Does this read like a poor little rich girl story? I hope not. My life has been amazing. I have a spouse I love, four super cool kids, and many unexpected opportunities I couldn't imagine when I was fifteen. To be honest, I'm still not certain how much of the queer story I'm “allowed” to tell. In terms of my Mormon upbringing, I feel the weariness of the person who has realized they're not going to change the culture. Though others from that community may feel differently, for me there is only capitulation to or absence from the institution. I choose absence, and though I gave up a faith which was once profoundly meaningful to me, I am profoundly happy.

I used to worry that leaving Mormonism meant I'd have to give up ways of knowing and creating which had once been explicitly attached to my Mormon Pioneer heritage: baking bread, irrigation-gardening, knitting and sewing, preserving

food, appreciating the glories of nature, and glorying in the humans I have the privilege of parenting. I grew up believing this knowledge was given to me because of my Mormon heritage, and to give up any of Mormonism was to give up all of it, down to the casserole recipes. But because I decided to forge my own identity out of the things most meaningful to me, I have kept those old literacies and found new ones. I am living a life of purpose, and even queerness, outside organized religion, with a more questioning, analytic, inclusive heart.

To quote Popeye and paraphrase the Old Testament Jehovah, I yam what I yam.



*The writer's family in 2015.*

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# No One Needs to Know My War Stories

Jared Nistler / University of Utah

“She refuses to work,” Sergeant Wilson said as he walked into my office and placed a file on my desk. “What the hell are you talking about?” I asked. I hadn’t even started on my first cup of coffee for the day. “Dunn; she is useless. She just sits at her computer and stares at it. I don’t know what to do.” Wilson was a senior analyst from the 1st Infantry Division. His team, along with analysts from the 4th Infantry Division and my unit, the 82nd Airborne Division, made up a joint intelligence cell stationed in Kuwait; I was the NCOIC<sup>1</sup> of the whole operation. “Okay, I’ll take care of it. Get some rest.” I tried my best to sound confident. *God damn it. Her again. I can’t lose any more analysts. What’s her fuckin’ problem this time?*

My platoon sergeant and chief warrant officer had already been sent home early to deal with god-knows-what personal issues. My warrant officer was pretty useless, to begin with, but his rank came in handy from time to time. My platoon sergeant, on the other hand, took the bulk of the administrative tasks and had years of experience in the Intelligence Community. Once they both left, I had found myself filling the role of platoon sergeant, OIC<sup>2</sup>, NCOIC, and full-time analyst. I was only a Buck-Sergeant at the time, working multiple pay grades above my own and trying to

be a leader for a dozen soldiers of my same rank. I had to make up for the lack of rank with my work ethic and projecting an image of authority. It worked well for most of the soldiers in the cell, but others would challenge me on critical decisions. It was incredibly draining. Most nights, I only slept a couple hours in my office before I was interrupted by some “urgent” matter that demanded my attention. That day it was Sergeant Dunn.

Dunn was a small female analyst; not more than 115 pounds. She had her hair cut short and never really carried herself like a soldier. She was a damn good linguist, though. I often overlooked her blatant disregard for military bearing and courtesy because she was so good at her job. That day I guess she was no longer interested in doing it. *Fuckin’ useless.*

I grabbed her file, downed my coffee, and stepped out of my office. The night-shift was about to end, and all the analysts were finishing up their work as the day-shift shuffled in. “Dunn, can I see you in my office?” I said in a commanding voice. “Sure.” She said calmly. Her uniform was wrinkled and faded, and her name tape was falling off. She always toed the line on the dress and appearance standards, and it drove me up the wall. She turned back to shut her computer

1. Non-Commissioned Officer in Charge.  
2. Officer in Charge.



down, which had a webpage up displaying a photo of Noam Chomsky on it. *Oh god.*

We both sat down in my office and closed the door. Dunn sat with her legs crossed in front of me, ready to answer to her insubordination. “Sergeant Wilson tells me that you are refusing to work,” I said, hoping we could cut to the chase. Dunn nodded and remained silent. She always had to make everything as difficult as she could. *Fine, I guess we aren’t having a conversation.* “Tell me why I shouldn’t recommend you for UCMJ,”<sup>3</sup> I asked her. She had one job to do, a job that protected US forces outside of an insurgent-controlled territory. After all her training and all of the shit I had to put up with as her squad leader, she refused to do that one job. Now I was going to have to stretch my already overworked men even thinner to make up for her attitude. It was tantamount to giving up in the middle of a patrol and requiring your fellow soldiers to carry you, your ruck, and your weapon. Soldiers don’t give up, and NCOs lead from the front — *dead fuckin’ weight.*

Dunn paused for a second before responding. “I don’t want to hurt anyone anymore,” She said quietly. Her eyes left mine and met the floor, glossing over with tears. “Oh,” I muttered. The anger that was welling up inside me left immediately. I sat back in my chair and took a deep breath. As an NCO, my two basic responsibilities were the accomplishment of the mission and the welfare of my soldiers. I was so wrapped up in our mission that I had neglected to

think of the mental health of the soldier sitting across from me. I sat there as her words lingered in the air. It made sense, to a point. We worked directly with key decision-makers, and upon our recommendation, the boys in the sky would make it rain death and destruction. Since we had started our mission, we had probably killed hundreds of targets. We would even stream the feed on a big screen, and all watch it like it was the Super Bowl. Once the target was down, we would mark their name off on a whiteboard and joke about



“I don’t want to hurt anyone anymore,” she said quietly.

how it must have ended for them. It was just another day at work.

Dunn softly wept, sinking into her chair. Her refusal to do the job wasn’t out of laziness or spite. She wasn’t challenging my authority. Looking back now, military ranks and roles melt away, and all I remember is a fellow human in tremendous pain, sitting across from the only person to which she was willing to open up. She had taken part in the mass killing of hundreds of other humans and couldn’t take it anymore. I was

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3. Uniformed Code of Military Justice – formal disciplinary action that can range from extra duty to a loss of rank and pay.

ill-prepared to deal with it at the time. I remember the first thing that popped into my head was, *Jesus, I guess I'll add therapist to the list of my fucking jobs here. They don't pay me enough to do this.*

I didn't know how to deal with a crying soldier reaching out for help. I had a lot of experience with angry soldiers and soldiers with attitudes, but never a soldier wrestling with the implications of killing. "How about I put you on force protection?"<sup>4</sup> I said, trying my best to get her to stop crying. "I can give you a day off to call home and rest, and when you come back your only job here will be to protect life." I gave a somber smile. At the time, I knew deep down that somehow; she was in the right. I didn't agree with how she saw things, but I could acknowledge it. "Okay," Dunn said as she wiped her nose. She got up and left my office. I sat back feeling pretty good about how I handled the situation. *There we go. Shuffle around some analysts, and we are still at full strength. Everyone wins.*

Two years later, I found myself staring at re-enlistment paperwork, stacked neatly on my desk at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, next to an uncapped pen. A post-it note had been placed on the stack with an arrow pointing to a blank signature line. "I understand that many laws, regulations, and military customs will govern my conduct and require me to do things under this agreement that a civilian does not have to do," I read the opening sentence of the contract aloud. *Re-*

*quire me to do things. Things.* Seven years before, I was a young college dropout and had met the ambiguous word "things" with excitement and enthusiasm. It was shrouded in mystery then, but after multiple targeting missions, the veil had been lifted.

When you engage in modern warfare, far removed from the battlefield, the reality of the death and destruction you take part in is understood at different levels depending on the soldier. I have found that some are completely disassociated from it, some understand it in the mind, and others understand it in the heart. For those completely removed from it, war is like a video game. If you are good at the game, you can take out "targets" consistently and never think a thing of it. Death remains an abstraction, and the targets that are taken out are completely dehumanized. The more targets you take out, the better you look compared to your peers.

For those who understand it in the mind, they acknowledge the reality of their actions and know that they are killing hundreds of people over their career. But the targets are adversaries, and the reality of their death only extends to the red line that gets slashed through their target names on the whiteboard. These soldiers acknowledge the killing, but it is their profession, and death remains an abstraction.

For those who understand it in the heart, they acknowledge the humanity of their targets and the repercussions of their actions. They know that some-

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4. A defensive role primarily focusing on deterring and preventing attacks on US troops.

where overseas, they played a part in the mass murder of dozens of other human beings. Brave human beings that are fighting for their cause, even if a corrupt ideology misleads them. Moral and ethical lines are understood to have been crossed. The soldier can feel it in their bones, that they might as well have stood in front of another person and pulled the trigger themselves.

I often reflect on how I failed Dunn as a leader and a fellow human being. I was utterly blind to her genuine pain beyond the tears and refused to help her as she reached out for more than a reassignment. I might as well have said, “there, there” and patted her on the shoulder while pushing her out of my office. I think about the names we crossed off on the whiteboards; the people I took part in killing or maiming. I see their faces and hear their voices in the library, grocery store, and everywhere in between. I was not prepared to face Dunn’s realization that day, and two years later, I was facing my own.

I only understood our intelligence operation at the level of the mind when I encountered Dunn’s insubordination. She, however, was having her heart torn apart trying to make sense of it all as her understanding of our actions grew deeper. She did not want to hurt anyone anymore. As I looked down at my re-enlistment papers — a contract binding me to continue doing “things” a normal civilian would never have to do — my understanding started growing deeper too. I didn’t want to hurt anyone anymore, either. I capped

the pen, picked up the papers, and put them through the shredder.

I left the military in 2017 to pursue librarianship, far away from the killing. I wish I had a deeper understanding of my intelligence cell’s actions back then, so I could better help the soldiers under my watch. Now that I have gotten out, there is no way for my soldiers and me to have that conversation anymore.

In the Intelligence Community, you need to have the proper clearance to handle, work with, or discuss any classified material. There are some classifications and controls to protect and compartmentalize sensitive information. If you have a clearance, you have to then go to a specialized facility that is designed specifically for classified material. On top of that, you need to have what is called a “need-to-know” purpose for accessing the material. Just because I had a high-level security clearance, it didn’t mean I could hop on a special computer and look up what happens at Area 51.<sup>5</sup> The only information that I had access to was the information that specifically related to my current mission. When a member of the Intelligence Community leaves, they lose their security clearance and are bound by the law not to divulge anything that they know which is classified.

Now that I have left that community, I must remain silent about the details of the killing I took part in. No one; not family, therapists, priests or even the inside of a closet is cleared to know what I know. I am not even able to discuss my experiences with those who

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5. I was really disappointed when I found this out.

still have their clearances and a “need-to-know” because I lost my access. Soldiers tend to pack all of their horrors in a box to be unpacked when they are ready to deal with them. The cathartic experience of sharing the details of what a soldier experienced in war can be an important part of the healing process. For soldiers in the Intelligence Community, though, the United

States government slaps a lock on that box and throws away the key.

So, I hold on to my terrors. I must. I am a silent professional, from the day I took the oath to the grave. And when someone asks me about my experience with killing, I always lie to them. They don’t need to know my war stories.

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# Identity Struggles Growing Up Indian American: An Analysis of Immigrant Personal Narratives

Sahithi Pingali / Stanford University

“Frankly, I don’t know how you would expect us *not* to be confused. We drive from tennis practice to Bharatanatyam class, eat Panera bread for breakfast, and paneer and naan bread for dinner. Our Super-bowl party is followed by the ICC World Cup. We go from looking for the prettiest Garba lehengas to finding that perfect prom dress” (Chander, 2016).

This passage is from the opening of an article titled “Growing Up Indian American” published in 2016 by Ameya Chander on an online crowdsourced publication called *Odyssey*. In her blog-style article, Chander expresses the challenges that she faced growing up as a person of Asian Indian ethnicity in the United States (Chander, 2016). With her examples, she connects to her audience of other Indian Americans and establishes that there are some experiences that many Indian immigrants in the United States can relate to.

In reading several such articles, I have seen that second-generation Indian immigrants and people who have immigrated at a very young age describe a sequence of events towards finding their cultural identity mostly using similar rhetoric, themes, and concepts. The story often begins with alienation in school, sometimes manifested in the form of ‘lunch-box bullying;’ this is often followed by a period of the person trying hard to assimilate into the dominant

culture, while simultaneously being urged by their parents to take pride in their roots. They often feel torn between the two cultures that they are exposed to inside and outside the home. With age, they usually come to embrace a blend of the two cultures that they live in.

In her study of Mexican immigrant discourse, Anna De Fina argues, “a qualitative perspective, particularly one based on discourse and narrative, is much more insightful than quantitative methodologies because it helps bring to the surface and understand aspects of the representation of the self that are not apparent through statistics, questionnaires or sample interviews” (Fina 2003, 3). The pieces I have chosen – magazine articles or blog posts from the internet written by Indian Americans – can shed light onto under-explored parts of the process of forging identity and cultural belonging while living at the intersection of two cultures.

Learning about under-explored parts of forging identity could help immigrant parents and members of the dominant culture understand the complexities of the very different experience that second-generation immigrants go through. Such understanding could help fight stereotyping, reduce conflict and create smoother, happier lives and transitions for Indian

immigrants.

India is a vastly diverse country with a plethora of distinct traditions and cultures, so it is worth explaining the term “Indian culture”. It is impossible to define one, overarching common “Indian culture”. It varies by class, caste, rural/urban setting, religion, and family. However, the articles that I have chosen to analyze do make use of this term; sometimes very frequently. The authors are referring to the specific culture of their own Indian family and families similar to theirs in background, class, religion, and so on. For this paper, I have continued to use the term “Indian culture” to enable analyses that are consistent with the language used in the articles. Additionally, “Indian culture” in this context defines the family culture of the author being spoken about.

There has been a lot of work done on the identities and experiences of first-generation Indian immigrants to the United States. However, there is less work on the unique identity struggles of second-generation Indian immigrants – Indian Americans. This paper attempts to fill that gap by drawing on Indian American personal narratives published on the internet. These narratives provide examples of the ways that these Indian American youth “perform” their identities, and hence reveal important components of those identities. For the majority of these Indian Americans, their identity is a “hybrid,” cross-cultural one born from the dissatisfaction they express at being either purely “Indian” or “American.” By writing about their experiences on the internet, they powerfully create and establish the Indian American hybrid identity,

forge a connection with other Indian Americans, and fight against stereotyping. Though this identity is likely shared by both male and female second-generation Indian immigrants, most of the writing is done by females – possibly because they experience identity dilemmas more acutely than males.

## **Voices of the Past**

There has been a lot of previous work on memory and identity in the Indian diaspora. An article by Purnima Mankekar, a cultural anthropologist, studies the role that Indian grocery stores in the California Bay Area play in the lives and identity formation of Indian immigrants (Mankekar, 2002). The article talks about how ‘Culture’ is seen as something that needs to be consciously maintained (Mankekar 2002, 81) and Indian grocery stores provide a place where Indian immigrants can consciously engage with their culture (Mankekar 2002, 76). They mark the urban landscape with specific signifiers of ethnicity and ‘Indian’ culture. Beyond that, the stores create social spaces in which people of Indian origin can forge identity and community (Mankekar 2002, 88). The commodities, such as spices, that those stores display and sell are deeply enmeshed in the social lives and identities of Indians (Mankekar 2002, 92). Indian foods evoke nostalgia and a range of other emotions for adults in the diaspora, reminding them of their childhoods in India (Mankekar 2002, 85-86). Another paper published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* studied the favorite objects of Indians in the United States and found that “possessions play an important role in the reconstruction of immigrant identity” (Mehta and Belk 1991,

398) – clothing, furnishings, food, and other physical possessions help the immigrants feel tied to their Indian cultural identity (Mehta and Belk 1991, 408).

While there are many articles and essays like these, which study the identity and transitions of first-generation, adult Indian immigrants, there is less work studying the experience of young and second-generation Indian immigrants. This group, made up of people who have grown up in the United States while also experiencing the Indian environment created within the home by their ‘loss-fearing’ parents, face identity struggles that are entirely different. I believe that the same way looking at grocery store interactions and favorite possessions shed light on the identity journey that first-generation Indian immigrants go through, analyzing the stories posted by their children on the internet can tell us more about the distinct struggles of second-generation immigrants.

Shopping at certain grocery stores, displaying certain furnishings, eating certain foods, and writing on the internet using certain language and themes are all ways in which these immigrants are “performing” their identities. Famous work by Judith Butler, a philosopher and gender theorist, argued that your gender is constructed through your repetitive performance of gender – that is, gender identity is “real only to the extent that it is performed” (Butler, 2002). Drawing on this theory, we can think of Indian Americans’ personal and cultural identity as also being formed by how they perform it. So, since the articles that they write involve “performing” their identities, they are a way in which these people create and recognize their

identities. Thus, key themes and ideas that emerge from these articles reflect integral parts of how Indian Americans represent their identity to themselves.



“Indian foods evoke nostalgia...”

## Voices from Two Worlds

One common theme that appears across nearly all of the articles is the idea of a “dual life” (Patel, 2017), or a disparity between the life of an Indian American with the home, and outside the home in the larger American community. This often comes with a feeling of not belonging properly in either life. An article published in 2015 on the website of *Teen Vogue* is written by an Indian-American woman named Nikita. She reflects on the struggle she went through after moving to the US at a very young age by being stigmatized by her classmates for her Indian habits and accent. She tried very hard to assimilate into American culture before realizing it was not quite right, saying, “I love being Indian, but sometimes I don’t feel Indian enough, really. I am Indian. I am American. I am Indian-American. Neither there, nor there” (Nikita, 2015).

The repetition of the words “Indian” and “American” is present throughout the article, creating an effect of back-and-forth that echoes the author’s experience of moving between identities. It is notable how, despite the vast diversity present in both India and the United States, Nikita presents “Indian” and “American” as two concrete, opposing identities. This indicates that to Indian-Americans who are caught in the middle, the contrast between ‘heritage’ and ‘mainstream’ identities seems more exaggerated than it is. They may feel as if these extremes are their only options, which leads to greater conflict.

A psychology paper by Benjamin Giguère et al, which studied the “experience of normative conflicts by second-generation immigrant youth,” found that “bicultural individuals will often switch from one cultural identity to another” (Giguère et al, 2010) to avoid this conflict. In another blog-style article written in 2017 by an Indian-American woman named Jill Patel for *Brown Girl Magazine*, an online publication that provides a platform for South Asian women to share their stories, Patel talks about how growing up with two cultures has affected her perspective (Patel, 2017). She says that for a long time she felt like she was “split” and could not dedicate herself completely to any one side of her Indian or American identity. This can lead to a sense of alienation from both “Indian” and “American” communities. Patel laments that she neither fits the classic American “mold” but is also an “outsider” compared to her relatives in India. She uses the phrases “dual identity” and “dual life” (Patel, 2017). While switching between identities is sometimes successful, it is possible that the switching just

creates more stress and a sense that both identities are underdeveloped.

Another article, published in 2014 by an Indian-American woman named Suhani Patel on *Thought Catalog*, a website that publishes writing from diverse contributors, also generalizes such an experience to all Indian Americans. She says, “we constantly struggle to keep a balance between our roots while trying to keep pace with the American way of life” (Patel, 2014). Again, we see the treatment of “Indian” and “American” as two disparate extremes.

An interesting point about this rhetoric is that although many Indian-Americans write about these extremes as though they are desirable – Nikita writes that at one point she “desperately wanted one label or the other to fit in an absolutist fashion” (Nikita, 2015) – they are simultaneously ridiculed for seeking those absolutes. As written in 2016 by an author named Shruthi in a blog on the Temple University sub-site of the youth news site *The Tab*, “Indian-Americans are aware of the terms ‘FOB’ which means ‘fresh off the boat,’ or ‘whitewashed’” (Shruthi, 2016). Slang terms such as ‘fob’ and ‘curry scented’ deride Indian Americans who stick too closely to their family’s Indian tradition; ‘whitewashed,’ ‘ABCD,’ (American-Born Confused Desi) and ‘coconut’ (brown on the outside, white on the inside) mock those who assimilate too much into American culture (Chander, 2016).

While these writers see the established identities of ‘full American-ness’ and ‘full- Indian-ness’ as ones that they wish they had, they also find that they cannot choose either one as that would mean falling into the



ridiculed stereotypes of ‘fob’ or ‘whitewashed’. The existence of these slang terms indicates that these two extremes are something that many Indian Americans struggle with.

It is from here that a second common theme arises: the idea of the “best of both worlds” (Shruthi, 2016). The Indian Americans writing these articles find a middle ground between these extremes, forging a new, hybrid identity. The authors invariably shift from identifying differently and feeling out of place to finding great pride and fulfillment in this melded identity. This trend towards a blended identity is not a surprise. Scholarly works have recognized that for many youths with hybrid identity, “being involved and identifying with both mainstream and heritage cultures are central to their identity” (Giguère et al, 2010).

The writers often emphasize their bicultural nature explicitly. Jill Patel writes about growing up in “a beautiful mix of traditions and holidays and people,” and says that “this fusion of cultures has given me perspectives on life that you cannot learn” (Patel, 2017). There are also implicit ways that the authors “perform” their bicultural identities in the form of the references that they make, as demonstrated by the quote from Chander at the beginning of this article. Perhaps these hybrid identities are well suited to our increasingly globalized world.

### **Voices Creating Identity**

In writing about their hybrid identities and asserting that they are a “blessing” (Patel, 2017) and something to be “proud of” (Shruthi, 2016), these authors

are bringing Indian-American hybrid identities into the mainstream. They write these articles with purpose: to provide other Indian American readers with something to connect to, to strike out against those who have stigmatized them with terms such as ‘fob’ and ‘whitewashed,’ and to help non-Indian-Americans understand what these second-generation immigrants go through.

Giving Indian American readers something to relate to is the primary aim that these articles achieve. These blogs are written in a confessional style, divulging the feelings and conflicts that the author has gone through. This is a particularly effective way of connecting to the reader. The use of inclusive pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “you” imply that the reader is an Indian American and helps create the feeling that the writer is establishing a personal conversation with this Indian-American reader. Nikita writes “the truth is, it’s okay to feel like you’re neither here nor there — we are all shaped by the experiences..” (Nikita, 2017). Publications like *Brown Girl Magazine* are reaching out to other Indian Americans and offering them a community that they can identify with and feel understood in.

However, at times these articles are more aimed at those who have stigmatized Indian Americans. In this case, their language is defensive or even angry. This is apparent in the article in *The Tab*, written by Shruthi when she includes an indignant “Excuse me, what?” and “next time you think about using the terms ‘white-washed’ or ‘fobby’, just take a second and think if you really want to separate those terms when

you can damn well be both and be proud” (Shruthi, 2016). Shruthi takes agency, emphatically rejecting these slang terms and bullying and also calling out Indian Americans who themselves use those derogatory slang terms. By openly embracing hybrid identity and stating, “it is SO much fun being a part of two cultures” (Shruthi, 2016), she empowers other Indian Americans to do the same and establishes a confident identity.



Voices creating identity across the USA...

This idea of identity being established and brought into the mainstream through these personal narrative internet posts echoes previous work done on how “national and immigrant identities are discursively constructed through the use of oral histories” (Clary-Lemon, 2010). In today’s world, this discursive construction is moving to the larger conversation allowed by publication on the internet. In talking about and defending their identities, these Indian Americans are creating them. This ties back to the idea of identity

being a “performance”.

## Voices of Gender

The articles in the sample that I have presented were written by women. Articles written by men on this topic are difficult to find. There seems to be a lack of representation of Indian American men’s perspective on this issue. Not only are most of the articles and writing about growing up Indian American authored largely by women, but they are also mostly aimed at an audience of other Indian American women. This is sometimes apparent from the publications, such as *Brown Girl Magazine* and *Teen Vogue*, which are targeted towards female audiences. Some of the authors also directly address the audience as “Indian American girls” (Patel, 2014), or speak about things like “dresses” (Shruthi, 2016) that are more relatable to women than men.

Perhaps Indian American men are not writing as much about the identity struggles and cultural conflict that they faced while growing up because they experience them far less commonly and acutely than women do. According to a paper that studied the ideas of gender roles and equality held by several first- and second-generation Indian Americans, the daughters of immigrants are given a gender-specific role of being in charge of the preservation of Indian ethnic and cultural identity in the family. The maintenance of traditions and identity has historically been placed on South Asian women’s shoulders. As the keepers of South Asian culture and heritage in the U.S., the roles of second-generation daughters are therefore monitored more strictly than those of sons (Dasgupta 1998,

956-957). The emphasis on sticking rigidly to family traditions creates a greater discrepancy between the lives of Indian American females inside and outside the home. Males, by contrast, are less held to traditions and are hence able to assimilate into American culture with less conflict.

Also, power is gender-related in India (Mehta and Belk 1991, 401). Indian society is highly patriarchal. This could mean that it is easier for males to find their Indian identity empowering, while for females it takes time to justify the benefits of the Indian culture that can sometimes be stifling to them. We see this most clearly in the *Brown Girl Magazine* article, which speaks explicitly about feminism and gender equality. The author talks about how she faced conflict because Indian traditions went against the female-empowering rhetoric that she was exposed to outside her home in the US. She was able to resolve this conflict by focusing on aspects of Indian culture that showed value and empowerment for women: respect for female Hindu deities and the important role of women in Hindu rituals (Patel, 2017). By finding places where her family's Indian ideals aligned with American ideals, she was able to regain comfort with both 'sides' of her identity. We can imagine, however, that for a male this conflict never would have arisen in the first place, as they are already empowered by Indian patriarchal values. More evidence is found in the article written by Suhani Patel on *Thought Catalog*, where she talks about how it can be hard when Indian parents restrict their kids' freedom despite their living in a 'liberal' country (Patel, 2014). These restrictions on freedom may be

higher for females than males, making it harder for females to find a balance between cultures.

## Voice of the Author

This paper is personal to me in many ways. I am a second-generation Indian immigrant who was born in the United States and have spent about half my life in India and the other half in the U.S. For many years, I have used writing and journaling to reflect and make sense of the complex identity that comes from being a part of both these worlds. So, I resonate deeply with the authors of these articles, who are publishing their reflections and using them to foster dialogue and community. Reading such articles has always helped me feel less alone, and articulate my own identity better.

I find that values from both my cultures weigh constantly on my actions. Being raised in an Indian household, I deeply appreciate the richness and value of such an ancient culture. Rejecting anything from that culture is difficult, as I'm forced to ask myself – am I ready to become the point of death for a tradition that has been passed through generations upon generations of my family? However, my western education has taught me to prioritize progress, to accept new ideas, and know that we can always improve. As many of the authors in this paper have said – it is a constant balancing act. When done right, it's an advantage: I am open to innovation and ready to adapt, but always give careful consideration to the costs and benefits of change. In other words, I try my best to draw on the best of both worlds. My brand of the Indian-American identity is something I have grown to be incredibly proud of – it is hard-earned, it is unique, and most of

all it is mine. I have found a lot of joy expressing and exploring it: by wearing kurtis and jeans to class, by making pepper jack cheese dosas, by speaking ‘Tenglish’ (Telugu + English), by accepting my strange mix of accents.. and now, by writing a formal paper about Indian American identity.

### **Voices to Be Explored**

Further research could help confirm the suggested reasons for the difference in online identity expression between males and females. Some possibilities would be giving male Indian Americans questionnaires about the reasons for their lack of participation, or opportunities to write anonymously about their experiences to generate narratives to be compared with those of females.

Another set of narratives that would be useful to compare with my analysis above would be articles and blogs written by second-generation immigrants of other ethnicities. Many of the themes I have discussed above may be common to immigrants who are not of Indian heritage. Some ideas, such as pressure to suc-

ceed academically, appear across the stories of people with East and Southeast Asian backgrounds. It would be thought-provoking to see if broader themes carry over as well. There may also be interesting contrasts between immigrants with Western and Eastern backgrounds.

Doing further such analyses would help this work have an even more far-reaching impact. Identity conflicts in second-generation immigrants can lead to a lot of difficulty and stress for these youth. At home, they often face parents who are eager to consciously maintain their heritage culture and pressure their children to engage with Indian culture, language, food, and objects. Outside the home, they face stigma because of being different from their American peers and feel the need to assimilate to belong socially. By understanding the importance of these narratives and the way that they shape Indian American identity, we can promote the reading and writing of such stories that help Indian Americans overcome identity struggles and communicate their hybrid identity to those inside and outside their homes.

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# In the Eye of the Beholder: Perspectives on the American Thin Ideal

Lauren Ramlan / Stanford University

Advertisements defining ultra-thin as beautiful can be found everywhere in America, both online and in stores, with phrases such as “The Perfect Body” blatantly announcing that the quixotic glamazon body type is ideal, deeming other shapes unworthy. I, like many women, have felt pressured to emulate this impossible look. I thought of myself as ‘too fat’ with a 26” waist, and ‘too short’ at 5’6” in height. I constantly compared myself to the wafer-thin Victoria’s Secret angels, believing no one would think of me as beautiful, since I did not look like them. But instead of accepting the idea that I would be unwanted due to my figure, I decided to research whether or not the public truly found the model body type to be ideal.

Countless studies and articles have focused on the “dangerous and unrealistic messages being sent to young women via fashion journals” (Clemens). However, few have examined the effect these images have on men. It is known that idealization of ultra-thinness wreaks havoc on young women’s self-esteem, since many women internalize the idea that the “perfect body” is skinny. Some women presume that men will only desire their bodies if they fit this mold, leaving them feeling unwanted and unattractive. However, recent studies, including my own, have begun to reveal that not even men find the thin model body type ideal. And although women still seek out this body

type, research has shown that many men are already satisfied with the body types of average women.

In my research, I demystify the unachievable body type praised by the media in an effort to reveal that this body type should not symbolize the apotheosis of female beauty. I intend to reveal that all body types may be considered beautiful, and that no single figure should be considered optimal. The ultra-thin body type idealized by the media is not desirable to most men, despite its constant portrayal in advertisements and social media, and it is not the epitome of beauty as America it is often held to be.

## Defining the Thin Ideal

Many researchers and authors argue that there are perceptible, detrimental effects to the mental health of countless young women who are constantly exposed to a thin obsession. One aspect of thin-focused media has been dubbed “fitspiration” or “thinspiration”, which consists of images praising extremely toned, skinny body types. Numerous recent studies have concluded that “exposure to fitspiration images decreases body satisfaction and increases negative mood, highlighting the potential negative consequences of engaging with fitspiration media” (Prichard). Decreases in self-confidence have been increasingly linked to thin-idealizing media exposure.

Research compiled through the collaboration of established psychologists, professors, and researchers, has found that “Mainstream media’s promotion of dangerously thin female images likely lowers self-image satisfaction and contributes to pathological body concerns and disordered eating among women” (Moreno-Dominguez, Servian-Franco, Reyes del Paso, and Cepeda-Benito). There is a discernable and repeatedly concluded finding that the media’s portrayal of overly-thin women directly affects the psychological welfare of many women. Scientific studies consistently depict a clear correlation that the thin obsession has measurable psychological consequences on women.

While this thin obsession in the media harbors the potential to hurt women’s confidence, it can evoke detrimental physical effects as well. It is widely acknowledged by researchers that “internalization of the thin ideal has been repeatedly demonstrated to be a risk factor for the development of eating disorders” (Bozsik). With constant exposure to images idealizing thin women, increasing amounts of American women are accepting this standard of beauty as absolute. And as women today “face a growing discrepancy between their bodies and mediated role models” (Hogan and Strasburger), more and more young women are attempting to achieve their ideal body through unhealthy eating practices. Unfortunately, as feminist blogger Grace Watson points out in her article, *Victoria’s Secret Angels’ ‘Perfect Body’. The measurements, the expectations and the reality.*..“the majority of young people ..do not understand how to change their shape healthily and rely on extreme measures,

without thinking about the negative implications.”

This leads to harmful eating and exercising methods, which can have lasting consequences on the physical health of young women. A research study conducted by Scott Griffiths, who is backed by a National Health and Medical Research Council Early Career Fellowship, found that “More frequent use of image-centric social media was associated with more frequent exposures to both thinspiration and fitspiration. In turn, these exposures were associated with more frequent physical appearance comparisons, and through these comparisons, more severe eating disorder symptoms. Thus, [the] results support the assertions made by multiple groups of researchers that thinspiration and fitspiration are harmful” (Griffiths). It was discovered that increased viewing of these images led to a larger likelihood of internalization of this image, leading to deterioration of self-confidence, and increasing in the severity of the eating disorder, further confirming that the thin ideal has the potential to mentally and physically impact women.

### **Unveiling the Truth: What Most Men Seem to Think**

The apparent popularity of ultra-thin body types would appear to insinuate that men favor this thin body type for women. Advertisements and companies strive to cater to the desires of the target audience, which is assumed to favor the ultra-thin female figure. However, research has shown that the majority of men do not consider super skinny to be the ideal body. A study conducted by *Glamour* magazine of 1000 men found that only a miniscule two percent

of men reported that they found “Super Skinny, Like Zoe Saldana” to be the ideal body type. The highest ranked ideal body type in the survey was “Fit but Womanly, like Jennifer Lawrence”, which got a large 34% of votes. Lawrence weighs in at 135 lbs – 27 lbs above the average weight for a model (Body Measurements). Both “Very Curvy, like Christina Hendricks” and “I dig em all” received 18% of votes each, curvy Hendricks who is well beyond the size measurements required to be a supermodel, was ranked as a more desirable body type than the ultra-skinny model appearance. Super thin is not the optimal female figure to most men, at least according to this survey.

## My Research

To see if responses would be similar to those found by *Glamour*, I conducted a 7-question survey modeled after the ones asked in the *Glamour* survey. The survey was sent out on various email lists at colleges and universities across the nation, with a disclaimer noting that it was only open to male-identifying participants. I hoped to discover if the sentiments of young, undergraduate males would reflect the responses in the previous survey, further enhancing the findings of both studies. Forty-five male-identified persons responded to the survey, which [can be found here](#).

The first question posed on the survey asked the men to select their ideal body type from a multiple-choice list with the same options as the *Glamour* study, minus the celebrity references. Out of the 45 undergraduate men, not a single one reported “Super Skinny” to be their ideal body type, corresponding to

the tiny percentage found by *Glamour*. This further supports the argument that the ultra-skinny fixation in the modeling industry does not reflect the ideal body type. Furthermore, 42% of men reported “fit but womanly” as ideal, higher than the 34% found in the previous survey. A substantial 24% ranked “I like them all”, again mirroring the 18% vote from the *Glamour* survey. Additionally, I asked whether participants believed that the “supermodel body type is realistic.” A majority --51.1% --selected “no, most women don’t have that body type”, combined with a 37.8% vote for “no, I think it is unhealthy and unnatural.” Only a mere 4.4% reported that they found the body type to be realistic and achievable. It is clear that men understand that the model body type is far from typical, with many acknowledging the fact that it is often obtained through unhealthy and unnatural manners.

In the survey conducted by *Glamour*, the question “Do you compare women’s bodies to the ones you see in magazines?” 35% of the respondents said, “No, that’s just fantasy”, with 51% responding, “Probably subconsciously. But I try to remember that real women don’t have the benefit of good lighting and retouching.” In the survey that I conducted, a large 67.4% of the participants responded “no” to this question, with 28.3% selecting “probably subconsciously.” Both of these surveys reveal that the large majority of men are fully aware that the model body type does not represent the average female, and do not hold it as a standard of beauty. In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists the average American female



weight to be 168.5 lbs, 5'4" tall, with a 38.1-inch waist. Compared to the 5'9" glamazon supermodels, the average American woman looks nothing like supermodels or clothing models.

## Unhealthy is Unattractive

The unhealthy connotation is one of the most off-putting aspects of the thin body type for many men. "Knowing the things that models have to do to achieve that kind of body makes it almost disturbing"



Almost 25% of respondents said, "I like them all."

said California Polytechnic University Freshman D. O. in response to the survey, "Starvation is not attractive, it's unhealthy and dangerous." And it seems D. O.'s opinion does not stand alone. In my survey, which was anonymous, there was an option to leave comments at the end focused on the topic of the thin ideal in the modeling industry. Men reported sentiments

such as "girls starving to death to become ultra-thin models is a really unhealthy concept, which is being imitated by the general public, and is having an overall bad impact on both sides", with some going so far as to write that the standard is "Absolutely unhealthy, this obsession makes women insecure".

However, countering data has also been presented in a study conducted by British researchers at the Institute of Neuroscience at Newcastle University.

They asked 40 heterosexual, Caucasian, undergrad-

uate males to design their ideal female body type on a 3D computer model. The results showed an average of a 24.5-inch waist sandwiched in between a 35.5 inch bust and a 33.4-inch hip (Crossley, Cornelissen, and

Tovee). These results

depict the possibility that men may recognize that the thin body type is often unhealthy and unnatural, but still consider it attractive when it can be produced.

Despite the overwhelming response that the model body type is not ideal and is highly unachievable, a surprising 66.7% of men surveyed in my study checked yes to the question "Do you find the tradi-

tional model body type (thin and toned) to be beautiful?.” However, this could be due to the unclear nature of the question, which does not specify ultra-thin, as most models usually are. But it is important to acknowledge the difference between what is ‘ideal’ and what is ‘beautiful’, since something beautiful isn’t necessarily ideal. Many men may find the thin body type to be attractive, but not quintessential.

However, as one responder noted in his answer, the thin and toned model body type is primarily only considered attractive “provided it’s not so much that it appears unhealthy to maintain.” As seen earlier, the most selected ideal body type was “fit but womanly”, which is not the body type for the majority of fashion models, who almost always fall in the ‘underweight’ category for their height (Farnen). Many men do not find the model figure attractive when they are conscious of how it is achieved.

### **The Impact of the Thin Ideal in Media on Americans**

Of course, the most noticeable effect of the thin ideal is on young women. Researchers have consistently found that exposure to images of super skinny superstars decreases women’s confidence and self-satisfaction, pushing many women to diets, eating-disorders, and other harmful practices.

With 91% of American women dieting to achieve the ‘perfect’ body, it’s clear that many women feel the need to devote at least some time and effort into mimicking the ultra-thin body projected by so many media and fashion companies (Rawley). This American thin obsession has drawn millions of women to

unhealthy eating habits, with 86% of college women reporting the onset of an eating disorder before age 20 (College Parents of America). So, it is evident that the unrealistic and edited portrayal of ultra-thin, idealistic female models in media has a large negative impact on millions of young American women.

Additionally, some men’s standards for the ideal body have been altered by the idealization of thinness in the media, even if it is subconscious. Body image researchers at Cleveland University argue that “the thin ideal is believed to be central to attractiveness; however, with the advancement in technology, the models seen in the media have gone through modern airbrushing and camera-angle techniques so much that they are virtually unrecognizable” (Botta qt. in Brinder). In their studies, researchers have consistently found that thin body types are overrepresented in media, and overweight figures are underrepresented (Botta). The constant projection of thin as beautiful has led some men to believe that a partner must be thin to be beautiful. In my survey, I asked participants if they had ever been “disappointed in a female partner’s body.” While a majority 54.5% said no, a significant 18.2% responded with “yes, definitely”, and 22.7% with “maybe a little.” In the survey conducted by *Glamour*, a large 28% responded with “yes” to the same question. Although there are many factors that might go into a person’s expectations for a partner’s body, research has begun to show that men’s standards for women’s bodies have been affected by the projection of idealized women. This can create additional pressure on women, who are further compelled to emulate the unhealthy thin figure.

## What is Attractive, and How America Can Move Forward

Although it is possible that the thin ideal can influence the male perspective on female body types, it does not negate the fact most males do not find the ultra-thin figure appealing. If more young people were aware of this, women may no longer work towards trying to achieve a body type that men often don't find attractive.

However, it is essential to note that women should not feel pressured to appear a certain way simply to please men. Many women strive to be happy in their own bodies simply to think of themselves as beautiful, not to appeal to the male gaze. Other circumstances, such as health, sexual orientation, or nationality can all play a part in what a woman may consider ideal. Though attractiveness to a potential partner is a driving factor to many women, there are many components that shape a woman's desire to look a certain way. Even so, the modeling standards for female and masculine beauty do not reflect the averages or the ideals of American men and women. The fashion industry as a whole lacks diversity in body shapes, which has created an uproar from upset viewers who feel the industry neglects their beauty by not recognizing more diverse figures. Yet, the industry is slow to change its norms.

Consumer demands, though, have begun to make a small difference. Take "The Perfect Body" campaign ad shown at the beginning. Following a wave of backlash from both men and women, the campaign was soon renamed "The Body". Although not a huge

improvement, it was a step in the right direction, moving away from defining 'perfect' as skinny. Brands which have clung to the thin standard for their models are beginning to falter, as both men and women move away from idealizing ultra-thin, unhealthy body types. Through the openness of social media, and the shift of society to more accepting viewpoints, even men have begun to change their opinions on what is considered beautiful. The rising popularity of 'plus-sized' models, such as Ashley Graham or Tess Holliday, indicates that America is opening its standards of beauty to incorporate body types of all shapes and sizes. Society is beginning to move away from the homogeneous thin and toned model in skimpy lingerie and beginning to accept more forms of beauty. Magazines have begun featuring stars such as Serena Williams, Kim Kardashian, and Michelle Obama on their covers, all beautiful women with different body types. Both men and women are beginning to celebrate all images of beauty, with social media movements encouraging body positivity for all sizes.

Plus size model Tess Holliday, depicted above on the cover of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, which boasts millions of male and female viewers, has been a stark advocate for the representation of all body types in media. Holliday, who was listed as one of the most "Influential people on the internet" by *Time* magazine, stated in an interview with *Cosmopolitan* "I know that people like seeing bigger bodies and marginalized bodies because I represent women that you don't see a lot in media and in print." And Holliday's massive following of 1.7 million followers on Insta-

gram seems to support her claim. Holliday is one of the emerging faces who brings diversity and traditionally underrepresented body types into the spotlight on the modeling stage.

As criticisms from men and women about the thin ideal begin to rise to the surface, hopefully the fashion industry and advertising companies will begin to incorporate more diverse body types to meet the desires of target audiences. Instead of relying on old ideals, the thin standard will begin to disappear, and me-

dia will be able to celebrate body types of all shapes, heights, and weights. With traditionally underrepresented figures being demanded by both genders, the modeling industry will need to abandon the thin obsession, and incorporate more variety, leading to increased confidence for men and women. As society comes to realize the unrealistic nature of the current ideals, there is hope that the country will begin to shift towards the celebration of all forms of beauty, no matter what size.

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I was addicted to a crepuscular shade of light  
that I drank each evening before the sky blacked out.  
I would take shots of sun until the night would come,  
then watch the glow of my mind die out.  
I'd raise my glass to the streaks on my window  
where the last drops of day stumbled through,  
And crack it open to let the wind blow  
the smell of moonshine around my room.  
I'd hide myself under the influence,  
intoxicated by the sun's dizzying rays.  
I would drink until my vision was inebriated,  
then mistake my burning city for the break of day.  
  
Oblivion is addictive, and even now that I'm sober  
I often still wake up feeling hungover

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# The Rebellion of Black *Olympia*: Exploring the Relationship between Black Women, Sexuality, and Controlling Images

Samantha Thompson / Stanford University

In this article, I define the lasting effect of “controlling images” on Black women to illustrate how sex and sexuality have been at the center of their cultivation. “Controlling images,” a term coined by Patricia Hill Collins, a pioneer in Black Feminist theory, are narratives that are similar to stereotypes, and reflect “the dominant group’s interest in maintaining Black women’s subordination.” (p. 266). Throughout history, Black women’s sexuality has been stripped and manipulated to create stereotypical narratives that benefit a white patriarchal society. That same sense of sexuality, though, may be the key to Black women’s success in taking control over the narratives surrounding them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Going beyond much of the current academic literature that describe this hidden phenomenon, I explore just exactly how Black women can transcend these narratives using the very same sexuality that cast them down. Using the performances and lyrics of Black female performing artists with Beyoncé as a premier model, I argue that presenting one’s sexuality in one’s own vision is the beginning of the creation of a new script for the Black woman: one centered on *her* sense of agency.

## Abuse of the Black Female Body and Sexuality

Caught at the intersection of racism and sexism, the Black female body is the ultimate “other” in association with those in power, leading her to experience a particularly harsh cruelty throughout history. Other-ism is a concept that separates the superior from the inferior. The concept of other-ism aligns with the natural human inclination to think in terms of dichotomies. Dichotomies relate two bodies through their definitions as opposites. For every subject, there is an object that further defines the superior subject. In societal relations, one becomes an “other” if they cannot be categorized into the ideal Eurocentric definition of the powerful white male. He is the norm, and anyone else is in some way an oddity. Black women’s position in this dynamic has led them to become the object to the white man’s subject, a literal definition that clarified white male power, as well as white women’s beauty. The primary link between the white man and the Black woman is their oppositional difference. Objectification is crucial to this concept. The other is objectified, and integral to this definition is the Black woman’s perceived deviant and animal-like sexuality. When Europeans first arrived in Africa and saw the

limited clothing Africans wore, they viewed it “as a sign of lasciviousness or lack of modesty rather than a concession to the tropical climate. Linked to this impression was a perception that the sex drives of Africans were uncontrollable” (Battle and Barnes 104). With modesty a value, Europeans applied this ideology to conceptualize these interactions. They applied the relationships between lightness, darkness, good, and evil to their perceptions of Africans. They viewed Africans as the personification of evil as their dark skin was viewed as a representation of their sinful nature. To conquering Europeans, Africans’ revealing clothing equated to sexual deviance and desire, and their dark skin was visual proof of their evil animal-like savagery. The concepts melded seamlessly together to give Europeans the opportunity to assert their superiority and justify slavery.

In times of slavery, the Black woman’s ultimate otherness brought the Black female slave to the lowest point in terms of worth. Black feminist scholar, Hazel Carby, defined how Black women’s very existence was used as an antithesis to exemplify the purity of the white woman. Respected white women exemplified the dominant image of true womanhood: piety, submissiveness, domesticity, and purity (23). Thus, the Black woman is not only denied beauty, but dignity, and her “inherent” sexual nature justified her white owner using her body for sexual purposes.

As property, female slaves’ bodies were at the mercy of their master, allowing him to use her sexually as he pleased: typically for sexual release and power exertion. Catherine Clinton, an American historian,

explained that as a separate *and* sexual entity, female slaves were a vehicle for their masters to explore sexual desires without bringing the notion into the realm of whiteness for, “the racist sexual stereotype of the Black woman protected the planters’ self-image; they could cultivate a potent, virile stance while blaming all sexual sin on women” (204). Miscegenation was not an unthinkable crime to commit. However, it was unthinkable to *admit* it in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. A white planter was expected to conceal the fact that he used his female slaves for pleasure. Admitting to sexual relations with a Black woman indicated that she could possibly be an object of desire and worth. Worth signifies dignity, and above all else, this was to be denied to the Black woman (Clinton 215). She was to be used, not respected. So, the female slaves held all the shame of his sexual transgressions because it was part of her purpose as a Black woman; her sexuality was a tool in her own oppression. The planters’ autonomy over the Black woman was twofold: first by defining her as a whore by nature, and then by using that image to the planters’ advantage.

The practice of the white owner cultivating the Black woman’s image and using her sexually as he pleased has left a stain on her sense of worth, spanning centuries with its controlling images cultural narratives. The images appear in art, television, music, consistently defining who Black women can be and thus stripping away their ability to define their personhood. For example, the female nude is an appraised art form that was undeniably cultivated for the male gaze. The white female nude was created to be

beautiful and desirous, for she was securely contained in civilized nature and restricted sexually, similar to the constructs defining true womanhood. On the other hand, the Black woman's sexuality was within the realm of the sublime, or uncontrolled nature; "representations of the Black female body as beyond containment. . . resulted in deliberately exoticized, sexualized, and animalized images" (Nelson 111).

### Controlling Images and Their Effects

Controlling images, contrarily, are psychological narratives engraved into a society so that "though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated'. . . dominant symbolic activity. . . that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history. . . shows movement" (Worsley 16). Controlling images shape the idea of the Black woman, and they have successfully withstood the tests of time, adapting to new situations and always carrying out the same effect. Particular images that persist include the Jezebel, a sexually insatiable and dangerous light-skinned woman, and the Mammy, a conforming dark-skinned woman stripped of sexuality.

In 2002, Halle Berry became the first African American woman to win the Best Actress category for her role in *Monster's Ball*. The main character Hank, a white male, falls in love with Leticia, a woman who has suffered one tragedy after another. After the execution of her husband and the death of her son, Leticia tries to drunkenly seduce Hank, producing one of the most explicit sex scenes of early 21st-century film. Af-

ter his involvement with Leticia, Hank "sees the light" and Leticia's tragic act of sexual desperation serves as a catalyst for Hank's redemption.

Berry's role portrays the controlling image of the Jezebel. Normally depicted as light-skinned, the Jezebel typically plays the manipulative temptress who doesn't inhibit her sexual desires, and, in times of slavery, was often the one found lying with her master. She is defined by her sense of sexuality which overrides any sense of worth she might otherwise have. Leticia's lack of growth, flat character arc, and desperate need for sex is a simple statement to the Black woman's value in society.

While the Jezebel is hypersexualized, the Mammy, on the opposite side of the spectrum, is completely desexualized. She is the obedient and loyal servant of the white household, taking care of its children and keeping the home in order. The Mammy is often depicted as an older, overweight, dark-skinned woman. Most importantly, she is happily existing in her subordination. It is the only relatively benevolent image because she is "the dominant group's perception of the ideal Black female relationship to elite white male power." (Collins 266). She is viewed as the opposite of ideal white beauty. Her deviant sexuality is stripped, and she is an obedient servant: the sassy, loving, and, most importantly, controlled Black woman, she's a character well-loved in pop culture. One of the most beloved depictions of the Mammy was the titular character Mammy in Margaret Mitchell's classic *Gone with the Wind*. The character was such a success that Hattie McDaniel became the first African American

woman to receive an Oscar when she won the 1939 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal as Mammy in the movie (Worsley13). One of the great 20<sup>th</sup> Century landmarks for Black progress was achieved with a typecast portrayal of an image meant to control the Black woman. She received immense backlash from the Black community, to which she responded, “I’d rather play a maid than be a maid” (Abramovitch). These subtle media portrayals manifest into real life consequences Black women experience every day, experiences that drastically impact their lives and sense of selves.

### Black Female Performing Artists and Controlling Images

What some contemporary Black female music artists have captured in their performances has enabled them to create a new narrative of the Black woman: knowledgeable of their selves and their position in society, *they take agency over their sensuality and image along with it*. The controlling image thus becomes an honest narrative. Their sensuality is dignified and appreciated along with all the complexities of the Black woman because it is embraced. Artists like Beyoncé perplex controlling images, demonstrating through performances and albums such as *Lemonade* that though their sexuality is part of the equation, it is only one ingredient in the creation of the Black woman.

Beyoncé and her fellow Black female artists are controversial topics within Black feminism because their expression of sexuality is consumed by others,

argued to be exemplifying the Jezebel image. However, the fundamental difference between the performances of Black female artists like Beyoncé and the sexual images cast on their ancestors is who controls their sexuality. “You, the viewer, are consuming her as a commodity but you are consuming her in the exact manner that she wants you to worship her, buy her songs, and attend her concerts.” (Trier-Bieniek 58). A controlling image is a definition placed on an inferi-



Figure 6. Manet's *Olympia* c. 1863

or by a superior. However, Beyoncé embodies sexual empowerment because of her obvious agency over her sexuality and in turn, her narrative of how the world envisions her. Beyoncé represents the Black Olympia, a woman aware and in control, and thus, in power.

Eduardo Manet's painting, *Olympia* (1863), caused outrage within its time by displaying an unconventional white female nude in which the woman, a prostitute, has autonomy over herself as well as the viewer. A white woman was painted with the same sexual deviance that was normally associated with the Black servant standing next to her. With her hand

over her crotch, she acknowledges her sexuality, “controlling the economic value of her sexuality. Although her body is for sale, she would decide when and if the exchange took place” (Nelson 112). The painting received massive criticism during its time. Olympia’s unapologetic body language symbolizes her sexual autonomy, a forbidden concept within nude paintings. This combined with her unflinching gaze at the viewer, which transforms the watcher into the watched, strips power away from the heterosexual male gaze, placing it into the hands of the usually objectified.

Similar to Olympia but unique in her appropriation, Beyoncé undeniably commodifies her body, but she does so with the knowledge that it’s being portrayed in her own vision, not that of the white heterosexual male. At the beginning many of her performances, including her revolutionary 2016 Video Music Awards *Lemonade* medley, she pauses and stares directly at the audience for a period of time, watching them as she reverses the roles of the male gaze and commands attention. In that moment of cultural confrontation, she declares a call to action: for men to acknowledge her influence and for Black women to bask in it with her.

When Beyoncé commands appreciation from her audience, she does not fall short of the content she provides. In her performance, she is much more than a historical controlling image. Instead, she creates a narrative rooted in the complexification of Black women. In diversifying their previous image as symbols of sexuality, emotion and power are introduced to the conversation. Indeed, her songs emphasize her sexuality. But they also emphasize the fact that she ex-

periences emotions of anger, sadness, triumph, defeat, anything and everything that makes her and other Black women human beings. Through exposure of these emotions, artists like Beyoncé humanize Black women. However, they do not dismiss the status the Black female has had to endure throughout history.



Beyoncé is much more than a historical controlling image. Instead, she creates a narrative rooted in the complexification of Black women.

In fact, the embracing of their collective hardships is integral to the complex and celebratory portrayal of Black women in their performances. Beyoncé “is an intersectional icon. She has not transcended race, gender, or sexuality; she has purposefully made them an intrinsic element of her audience’s engagement with her” (Trier-Bieniek 36). In her music, she unapologetically acknowledges that she is Black; much of her target audience is Black women, and thus, there are cultural links they can bond over. In the song “Forma-

tion,” she acknowledges her origins with “My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana. I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros/ I like my negro with Jackson Five nostrils/ Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me.” She incorporates Black culture into this new narrative that she is cultivating. In doing so while expressing sexuality, she creates a proud connotation of Blackness, blending it with her glorious complexification of Black women’s existence in a white patriarchal world. It is okay to be Black, sexual, and female.

In her confrontational style, Beyoncé dismisses the notion of the white male gaze, similarly to *Olympia*. The audience has no choice but to accept *her* vision and view the work as *she* demands. Though she’s an entertainer, she paints the notion that we, the viewers are at her mercy. In this unapologetic celebration of all that she and Black female sexuality is, she serves as an example for Black women to follow.

Following this path, however, has proven to be a challenge. In the past, embracing sexuality has given men justification for abusing Black women. An early strategy to achieve the respect of their community was for Black women to embrace respectability politics: “to encourage assimilation of black women into the hegemonic discourse of femininity ascribed to white women while also discounting . notions of poor black women being innately inferior.” (Trier-Bieniek 29). Essentially, this strategy would erase the color lines of the true womanhood model and allow Black women to achieve the same respect as white women in Western society. It casts away the idea that Black women

are sexually promiscuous, and its practices include engaging in very sensitive self-presentation. Many remarkable women have walked the lines of political respectability and gained solid progress for Black women such as Rosa Parks and Ella Baker, so the label of Beyoncé as a feminist can be a controversial topic in the world of academic black feminism. bell hooks, acclaimed feminist author and scholar, has gone even as far to say Beyoncé is an anti-feminist and a “terrorist, especially in terms of the impact on young girls” because of her use of blatant sexuality (Trier-Bieniek 60).

This notion circles back to the question of – Who exactly defines the sexuality of Beyoncé and her fellow black female performing artists? One of Beyoncé’s most explicit depictions in her career was “Partition” and its coinciding music video. She sexually displays herself for her husband, dancing in a burlesque parlor for him, and describing her sexual fantasies as she sings, “Driver, roll up the partition, please/I don’t need you seeing ‘Yoncé on her knees. .He bucked all my buttons, he ripped my blouse/He Monica Lewinski’d all on my gown.” The meaning behind Beyoncé’s words and actions reveal that she is the one in control—it is a celebration of *her* body, and this is *her* fantasy.

Using the burlesque dancing style is a strategy and is a nod to great performers like Gertrude “Ma” Rainey and Janet Jackson. T Its sultry nature glorifies the dancer’s sexuality, and they find liberation within “a sense of possession. and unpredictability, controlled with her own bodily intelligence” (Trier-Bieniek 57).

These performances highlight that what was once Black women's weaknesses in times of slavery are now strengths to be celebrated and respected.

Black female performing artists have found a new and revolutionary medium to enable Black women to take agency in their body and their image. We have seen that using the same sexuality that was initially used to berate, dehumanize, and abuse Black women is now creating a new definition of empowerment.

Being in control of sensuality can lead to an authentic image of beauty. An image that is worthy and dignified, and something that Black women can cultivate for themselves. Black women are much more complex than the identities that have been laid before them by the white male gaze. Their sexuality is very much their own, and as Black feminism grows louder in music, the scars from centuries of abusing Black female sexuality just might slowly mute to silence.

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# The Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Issues and Media

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