

Beyond Say: Water, Spirituality, and the Womanist Autoethnography in Beyoncé's Lemonade

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Abstract

The imagery and story-telling in Beyoncé's *Lemonade* builds upon a narrative of Black womanhood that is uniquely southern. Through scenes exploring plantations, rural areas, swamps, antebellum porches, Beyoncé participates in a framework of story-telling that has been pioneered by southern Black women such as Alice Walker's *Womanism* and Robin M. Boylorn's autoethnographic work in *Sweetwater*. When both concepts are put into conversation with one another, a womanist autoethnography emerges, which is a focus that supports the space of Black female life as she navigates family, relationships, Self, the spiritual, struggle, and freedom. Using the womanist framework by Alice Walker and the ethnographic framework of Robin M. Boylorn's *Sweetwater*, the significance of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* in the tradition of southern Black women's story-telling can be explored within a semiotic relationship between the two approaches, rendering a distinctive vision into Black womanhood. For example, the presence of Water is woven throughout the journey that Beyoncé takes the viewer on. Water reflects the womanist autoethnography by acting as a medium through which Beyoncé expresses spirituality, the tides of her emotions, the act of cleansing, her connection to the African Diaspora, the pain of loss, questioning, the reconciliation and revelation she gains within herself and between her loved ones as a southern Black woman. How water maps out the emotional and spiritual journey in the film humanizes Beyoncé even as she enjoys the status of a cultural icon and allows her story to be accessible, because she, like her fans and her audience, expresses resilience and vulnerability. Walker's womanist insight into Black families, healing, spirituality, and interconnectivity between Black women in conjunction with Boylorn's autoethnographic process of speaking oneself into being can unravel themes of how water undergirds powerful scenes in the film and acts as a guide through Beyoncé's experience of southern Black womanhood.

Keywords: Beyoncé, Womanism, Black women and girls

1. Introduction

The trailer for the *Lemonade* visual album (dir. Beyoncé Knowles, Kalil Joseph, Jonas Åkerlund, Melina Matsoukas, Dikayl Rimmasch, Mark Romanek, and Todd Tourso) was revealed to the masses beneath a shroud of mystery; no one knew what it was, what to expect, and what was in store for them in its modest timespan of just a little over one minute. And yet, its brief snapshots into the landscape that would become the visual album reverberated throughout the world, suspense and praise and lemon emojis cascading across every social media feed imaginable. From the moment that the visual album *Lemonade* was released, it has generated a wealth of attention that further solidified Beyoncé's status as an artist who is more than capable of improving upon her already astounding collection of creative genius. No era of hers can be forgotten from public, global memory. While her impact could be felt in the childhoods of many, singing her songs on cheap karaoke sets and orchestrating dance routines to her latest release with a group of friends, her impact can be felt in my adulthood on a different conceptual plane that deserves exploration.

The visual album acts as more than a well-produced piece of art; it is a process, a story, and an insight into a Black woman's existence in the south that can be extended to many of the lived realities that Black women in the south share between themselves. And Beyoncé uses something in this process that is at once simplistic on the surface but expansive once manipulated: Water. When both concepts are put in conversation together, a womanist autoethnography emerges, which allows Black women to write themselves into existence. Water reflects the womanist autoethnography by acting as a medium through which Beyoncé expresses her spirituality, the tides of her emotions, the act of cleansing, her connection to the African Diaspora, the pain of loss, questioning, and the reconciliation and revelation she gains within herself and between her loved ones as a southern Black woman. How water maps out the emotional and spiritual journey in the film humanizes Beyoncé even as she enjoys the status of a cultural icon and allows her story to be accessible, because she, like her fans and her audience, expresses resilience and vulnerability. Walker's womanist insight into Black families, healing, spirituality, and interconnectivity between Black women in conjunction with Boylorn's autoethnographic process of speaking oneself into being can unravel themes of how water undergirds powerful scenes in the film and acts as a guide through Beyoncé's experience of southern Black womanhood.

2. Conceptual Framework: The Womanist Autoethnography

Womanism is the ideology, and autoethnography is the practice. Robin M. Boylorn's *Sweetwater* explores the stories of Black girls who grew up in rural North Carolina and allows them to tell their stories with no filters, barriers, or coaching¹. Boylorn uses a Black feminist framework to analyze why it is significant that Black women and girls are able to tell their stories using orality, a common form of communication and story-telling in the African diaspora. By representing the voices of southern Black women and girls, Boylorn offers a platform where Black women and girls can freely express themselves in the cultural context of the south. *Lemonade* tells a story through orality, with the use of music, lyricism, and poetry with Southern imagery as the canvas; swamps, plantations, locations in the South all serve as a backdrop in the story. In *Show, Don't Tell": Redefining Contemporary Black Southern Rurality in Robin M. Boylorn's Sweetwater*, Brittney Cooper and Susana M. Morris respond to *Sweetwater* by highlighting the significance of work that does not strictly follow the "show, don't tell" rule in literary writing. They write,

Folks advise aspiring writers to do the following: "Show, don't tell." Now, this may be a way to get writers to narrate experience better or prove a point, but it is also a piece of motherwit we both heard growing up: "I can show you better than I can tell you." In *Sweetwater*, Boylorn has let these women tell it all. And in the masterful ways she weaves the narrative choices and details of these many intertwined lives together, she has shown us everything."²

Their analysis states that work does not need to conform to the "show, don't tell" model in order to be valuable. *Lemonade* presents a complex rendering of *Sweetwater*'s autoethnographic method by both "showing" through the imagery of Water among other landscapes associated with the south and "telling" through the use of poetry and lyricism. Aisha Durham, in *Kindred Narratives* responds to *Sweetwater* and states "I can taste *Sweetwater*. [...] the bittersweet, matrifocal memories she pens about lovers and loved ones fighting to see themselves, to free themselves, to be (good with and to) themselves using whatever cultural tools at hand."³ Beyoncé also explores themes of love between herself, her husband, her parents, her child, and her loved ones that conclude with *Formation*, an ode to a Black female empowerment that is woven into the empowerment of Black Americans as a nation.

When approaching work specifically concerning Black womanhood, two methods tend to be the most used: Womanism and Black Feminism. Although they are thought of as synonymous because they both concern the lives of Black women, Womanism and Black Feminism are two distinct practices. Previously, Beyoncé has come forward with support for feminist ideology in her song *Flawless* on the self-titled *BEYONCE* album by featuring a sample with Nigerian feminist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie where she defines Feminism as "equality between the sexes." Beyoncé also had the word "Feminist" emblazoned on a screen behind her during a performance at the 2014 Video Music Awards. Black Feminism is school of thought that is rigorously political, and argues in favor of Black women's liberation by means of ending the institutional and social barriers that prevent Black women from being free human beings. *Lemonade*, however, is ripe for Womanist readings. This begs the question: what differentiates Womanism from Black Feminism?

Black Feminism is articulated in the contemporary world by the Combahee River Collective Statement like so:

Our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's may because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. [...] We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation are us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.⁴

Black Feminism is, then, a revolutionary movement to end the oppression of Black women in all spheres of society. It seeks to eliminate that oppression through raising the consciousness of Black women, participating in political parties, political actions, and all institutions where Black women are not represented. This method concerns Black women speaking to their own political and social concerns that need to be acknowledged and addressed in the larger project of liberation movements because Black women occupy a unique position in the world *as* Black women. Contemporary Black Feminism has appeal and does appeal to Black women outside of the academy, but it is primarily being articulated and expanded through academic study and practical, political application. The journey and popularity of the term “intersectionality”⁵ in the modern landscape of liberationist struggle by Kimberle Crenshaw, which was born out of the specific analysis of Black women’s oppression in the western world, is a testament to Black feminism’s academic and political rigor. Although there is political significance in *Lemonade* as it speaks to political issues in the Black community, it primarily exists in a realm outside of academia, which is consistent with Womanism.

Why is *Lemonade*’s non-academic space relevant for Womanism? It complicates and rejects notions of respectability, that a Black woman must speak herself into existence on terms approved by an intelligentsia, and is free from the, at times, limiting nature of scholarly work as a means to express oneself with no barriers. Where this non-academic space undergirds the visual album can be seen in the many different ways that water is used as a medium in the film. Beyoncé’s use of Water in the film is articulated through cinematography and music; the levels of abstraction that can be presented in film can be more accessible to others than dense academic work. Simply because it is more accessible does not mean it is less worthy, less important, or less profound, and all of these qualities are displayed in the various scenes where Water provides a space, a platform, for communication and story-telling through Beyoncé’s dynamic journey of self discovery and resilience. This format is consistent with Walker’s Womanism as well, as the third definition of Womanism states “Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the Spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the Folk. Loves herself. *Regardless*.”⁶ As Beyoncé sings, dances, and performs her story on screen, she breathes Womanist life into her work.

Where *Lemonade*’s use of water meshes with the womanist idea can be seen in the imagery Beyoncé crafts along her journey in the visual album, speaking herself into existence as a southern Black woman through the practice of autoethnography. In the beginning she is seen lost, in a swampy terrain, in search of something. She is seen taking a leap off of a building, falls in a body of water, explores a self-reflective consideration of her spirituality and emotions within a confined space while submerged, then arises anew in a way that culminates in the *Hold Up* piece. These sequences are entwined with the womanist idea as pioneered by Alice Walker as she writes,

Womanist: From *womanish*. (Opposite of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. [...] Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.⁷

Throughout *Lemonade* as a visual album, Beyoncé exemplifies the womanist idea by her “outrageous, audacious, courageous, or *willful* behavior”⁸ throughout her work by exploring themes of racism, sexism, interpersonal relationships, family, love, and empowerment with a level of introspection that deserves to be appreciated for the depth given to each subject. These avenues of Beyoncé’s life that appear in the visual album are presented in a way that moves beyond the single, isolated individual (Beyoncé herself) and places Beyoncé into a context of community with others who can find a relation between themselves and the picture that Beyoncé paints, which falls into the context of “Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one”⁹ that Walker defines in Womanism. The visual album may be centered on Beyoncé, but it does not constitute the isolated experiences of just one singular individual. Instead, in the spirit of Walker, the visual album acts “in greater depth”¹⁰ to show how Beyoncé speaks herself into existence by relating to not what is simply “considered ‘good’ for one,”¹¹ but relating to the motions of communal existence that Beyoncé’s art is produced by and exists within. In this vein, Beyoncé

assembled a team of various other artists from makeup artists, lyricists, the poet Warsam Shire, film directors and more to assist her in bringing her visual album to life, and through this communal work that produced the visual album, Beyoncé produced a visual narrative of experiences in her life that other communal spaces, namely the Black community from the vantage point of southern Black women, can relate to.

The womanist autoethnographic significance in the ways that *Lemonade* utilizes Water as narrative guide can be further explored by Layli Maparyan's "spiritual archaeology of the womanist idea"¹² as she states:

...the womanist idea is constituted by multiple spiritual and religious strands that converge at a point of dynamic coordination. Narratives of personal spiritual journeys are used to illustrate the eclectic, synthetic, holistic, personal, visionary, and pragmatic aspects of the spirituality that animates the womanist idea and, in turn, undergirds womanism as social/ecological transformation praxis.¹³

In *Lemonade*, deeply personal moments of emotional and spiritual exploration occur when Water is a significant facet of the imagery presented in the film. Water as baptism, introspection, cleansing, and revelation during the transition from *Don't Hurt Yourself to Hold Up*, Water as a connective force within the African diaspora in *Love Drought*, Water as a metaphor for oppression in *Formation*, and there are various other instances where scenes act as a spiritual and personal conduit for Water as a guiding subject in Beyoncé's womanist autoethnographic journey. Maparyan's critical focus on spirituality can be used to provide a new outlook on Beyoncé's approach at womanist autoethnography. In this sense, Melissa Brown writes, "She announces what Black women represent to us all: "When you love me, you love yourself, love God herself,""¹⁴ which is a self love that emerges through personal and spiritual exploration of herself as a Black woman.

Where the communal existence of Womanism coincides with the medium of water and shapes the autoethnographic process can be specifically found in four sections in the visual album: *Pray You Catch Me*, *Hold Up*, *Love Drought*, and *Formation*. While these scenes are not the limit of the womanist autoethnographic process that Beyoncé partakes in, they display what my work explores in the context of the use of water in the visual album. By following these scenes to the conclusion of the visual album, an appreciation of the womanist autoethnography can be mapped throughout specific points of interest.

3. Visual Album Analysis

3.1. Pray You Catch Me

During the very first spoken word piece in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé and a group of Black women appear around the scenery of a plantation in a traditionally southern dressing style. Here, Beyoncé's voice is heard while a community of Black women exist on the set, silent, but evocative of the tension that Beyoncé expresses through her words in the aftermath of her initial questioning of the status of her relationship with her husband. In the spirit of the "show and tell" aspect of the autoethnographic process, Beyoncé shows a number of Black women, some contemplative, and some focused directly on the camera at the viewer, while she tells through spoken word, "I tried to make a home out of you, but doors lead to trap doors, a stairway leads to nothing. Unknown women wander the hallways at night. Where do you go when you go quiet? You remind me of my father, a magician ... able to exist in two places at once. In the tradition of men in my blood, you come home at 3 a.m. and lie to me. What are you hiding?"

Beyoncé offers the viewer to meditate on these questions in the moment as the viewer looks at the images of Black women on a southern plantation, which Maparyan calls "Mindfulness Meditation."¹⁵ This mindfulness meditation involves "focusing on the breath, observing the mind's thoughts without judgment, letting go of past and future concerns, and increasing awareness of the environment and its details in any given moment,"¹⁶ and it can be experienced in the culmination of the spoken word, imagery, and scenery displayed in this part of the visual album – Beyoncé reflects on her current state of questioning that exists over the backdrop of southern Black women signifying their own form of tensions and silence until she settles on a specific emotional response that underlies her questioning. This act progresses from what Maparyan calls the "faculty of broad awareness"¹⁷ towards "the other faculty of very specific awareness"¹⁸ which connects the community surrounding Beyoncé to Beyoncé as an individual as she contemplates her own conclusions when she says, "The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a f*cking curse." It is in that conclusion that Beyoncé reaches her insight through various avenues of consideration and results in a type of meditation that Maparyan calls "Contemplation,"¹⁹ which focuses on the specific nature of one's personal insight.

As Beyoncé says “What luck. What a f*cking curse,” she is seen sitting in a bathtub with candles in the background. Here, water acts as comfort, a means of cleansing Beyoncé not only physically but spiritually of her muddled questions regarding infidelity. Beyoncé is shown in a vulnerable moment in her journey to clarity that speaks to Walker’s definition of Womanism as “doing grown up things.”²⁰ Displaying vulnerability is a sign of maturity as a person self-reflects. Once Beyoncé sees her questions as a curse, brought on by tension, uncertainty, and disappointment, she continues singing. She continues exploring. She does not resign herself only to contemplation, but walks through her emotions as she finds peace and holds onto hope.

3.2. Hold Up

While the *Pray You Catch Me* sequence comes to an end, Beyoncé is seen on top of a building. She jumps, then falls, and just as it seems she will hit the ground, instead, she falls into a body of water. After going deeper into silence, from the womanist lessons of love and courage, Maparyan states a lesson to learn is to “Show up—and stand in—with a different kind of politics”²¹ in order to move forward in one’s journey so that it is possible to be transformative with the insights gained from silence. In this scene, water is not just a space for comfort, but it is a medium for transformation through Beyoncé’s narrative. Beyoncé is entirely engulfed in this body of water, her exploration bound to it, and her reflection of herself, her own actions, and the questions she still has all culminate into a new awakening when she emerges from the water with a new question while she contemplates her romantic relationship, “Are you cheating on me?” While in this scene underwater, Beyoncé expresses how she tried to change herself, monitor herself, for the sole purpose of wondering if there was something in her own actions that caused her husband to stray away from her or betray her trust. She removes her previous, constraining outfit from her moment of tension, and emerges into another outfit that symbolizes the act of her changing herself mentally and physically – “I tried to change. Closed my mouth more. Tried to be soft, prettier. Less awake.” These various actions evoke feelings of submission; closing your mouth more means you speak out less, being soft and pretty is demanded of women, being less awake could signify being asleep more and it could signify being less aware of the world around you.

Then, after Beyoncé says “less awake” she finds a doppelganger of herself asleep on a mattress as she says in relation to changing herself “Fasted for 60 days. Wore white. Abstained from mirrors, abstained from sex. Slowly did not speak another word. In that time, my hair, I grew past my ankles. I slept on a mat on the floor. I swallowed a sword. I levitated. Went to the basement, confessed my sins, and was baptized in a river. I got on my knees and said 'amen' and said 'I mean.'” Beyoncé is changing here in a way that is transformative in the womanist idea, as she freely expresses the constraints and anxieties she feels, embracing her vulnerability. The refuge towards the spiritual signifies a common notion that praying to God will heal, but instead, Beyoncé flagellates herself until she emerges with another insight of the possibility that her husband is cheating on her. As Maparyan states, “Peace must reside in the body and the heart/mind/soul”²² for the womanist lesson of love and courage to be realized, so this scene speaks into existence not only vulnerability, but insecurity, questioning, and the internal struggle of what it means to face infidelity through the vantage point of a Black woman. This scene is not presented as a caricature of Black women’s pain, but a scene that pays sensitive, careful attention to it in a way that is rarely seen on film. Here, water cleanses in such a way that it seeks to understand and resolve pain.

Once Beyoncé emerges anew once again, another teaching of womanism is shown, and that is the act of “bringing meditation out of the closet”²³ as Beyoncé takes her personal meditation out into the world around her to transform her environment and to bring her closer again to communal existence, which happens in the form of her symbolizing the Yoruba goddess Oshun and causing destruction in the city to the surprise and interest of onlookers.

Oshun is praised as the goddess of love and acts as the protective deity of the River Oshun in Nigeria. The symbolism of Oshun evokes the spirituality consistent with the previous scene of Beyoncé being submerged in water; she fell into uncertainty, now she arises as a Goddess of water, the same water she used to explore that uncertainty. As Beyoncé sings about love, another aspect aligned with Oshun and the womanist idea, she uses a bat to destroy objects around her as catharsis, bringing that catharsis fully into the communal space instead of falling silent. Once she breaks a fire hydrant, she dances in the ensuing waterfall, and other Black people, namely children, join in the celebration. Not only does this exemplify the womanist idea on a spiritual level, but it weaves together the importance of communal spaces in realizing the full potential of Walker’s womanism as a means to speak oneself into existence and not only exist as one individual, but as one connected to the depths of many from a multitude of backgrounds. Young and old, man and woman, light and dark, and so on.

3.2. Love Drought

Water, communal space, spirituality and the womanist autoethnography emerge in this scene through imagery of what it means to exist in the African diaspora as a southern Black woman. This scene symbolizes the Igbo Landing, which was a place where enslaved Igbo people conducted a mass suicide in 1803 on St. Simons Island, Georgia as Mikael Owunna states:

A group of Igbo slaves revolted and took control of their slave ship, grounded it on an island, and rather than submit to slavery, proceeded to march into the water while singing in Igbo, drowning themselves in turn. They all chose death over slavery. It was an act of mass resistance against the horrors of slavery and became a legend, particularly amongst the Gullah people living near the site of Igbo Landing.²⁵

Owunna's reading of this scene as it relates to slavery is welcomed and accepted: the imagery of resistance against domination as seen in Beyoncé pulling back against being tied to a rope, how it relates to the southern legends of the Gullah people, and the significance of Beyoncé and her community of Black women walking farther and farther in the water to symbolize the act committed in the Igbo Landing. When slavery is discussed, typically this system of domination is viewed through the narratives of Black men, but Beyoncé shows what it means to see these narratives of resistance through the eyes, the work, and the emotions of Black women. She sings of her lover refusing, or being unable to, display the kind of vulnerability that Beyoncé herself explores throughout the entire visual album; this lack of vulnerability is an impediment to sharing genuine love between husband and wife.

Womanism cherishes genuine love between all persons comprising a family and/or community, and in this song, using the visuals of Black women symbolizing resistance to the shared oppression of slavery by the sea, Beyoncé calls for a communal space where she and her husband can exist as equals, as emotionally available to one another, and connected in a way that moves beyond her submission and his distance. Maparyan says of this womanist practice, "the womanist idea obtains a unique quantum of potency from its original location within African-based spiritual understandings, globally flung, transculturally synthesized, then reinterpreted and rearticulated through the visionary pragmatism of Black women whose focus is the well-being of all people and the Earth,"²⁶ and this is woven together by the imagery of the Igbo Landing as Beyoncé, a southern African American woman, re-enacts that powerful act of resistance with her Black female community; showing the interconnectedness of the African diaspora by paying homage to the spiritual and cultural relevance that water has to the oppression and resistance of slavery strengthens communal space in a way that can be applicable to persons outside of the Black community. This reality adds another realm of communal space in womanism that extends outward from the one individual to the many in a community, and then to the world, as water binds all of humanity together.

3.3. Formation

In the final scene of *Lemonade*, the viewer is treated to an ode to Black empowerment performed with Black women as the focal point with a distinctly southern flavor as it opens with a quote from the late Messy Mia stating "What happened at the New Wil'ins [New Orleans]? Bitch I'm back, by popular demand!" All of the confusion, questioning, vulnerability, love, hope, and empowerment that pushed the visual album forward blossoms into a song of transformative power and potential. The womanist autoethnography's qualities of love, communal space, and spiritual healing shine as Beyoncé is accompanied by Black women and girls of multiple backgrounds as she sings and dances her narrative of triumph into existence. One can hear Black queer figures of the south speak such as Big Freedia and the late Messy Mia from New Orleans. Beyoncé proudly proclaims her southern Black heritage ("My daddy Alabama, mama Louisiana, you mix that negro with that creole make a Texas bama."). The spirituality that is integral to southern Black existence in the form of church life is on full display with multiple glimpses of a soulful sermon. These scenes and sounds are woven together among a number of other visuals that symbolize the Black experience in the South.

Water as the medium for exploration appears once more as Beyoncé can be seen atop a New Orleans police cruiser in a body of water in a flooded neighborhood, which is reminiscent of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and a callback to Messy Mia's opening line to the song. When the police cruiser descends, Beyoncé falls along with it, drowning in water – this act elevates a core concept in Walker's womanism and the womanist spirituality of Maparyan, speaking truth to power and using one's voice to be courageous. Symbolizing the imagery that followed Hurricane Katrina, Beyoncé shows one of the most tragic instances of injustice that Black Americans have experienced. In contrast to the media frenzy in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane that portrayed Black people in need as

criminals, Beyoncé humanizes the victims who were failed by institutions (the police, the government, the military) that claim to serve all Americans. As Maparyan reiterates from Walker, one must be unafraid to participate in “speaking truth to power and speaking truth inside power”²⁷ as both acts constitute “valuable transformational strategies”²⁸ because using one’s voice to speak to the shared existence of many can help construct a world where all beings can be free, realizing the womanist autoethnography.

4. Fin

Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* offers an exploration into womanist autoethnography in a way that is uniquely southern, Black, and womanish. The use of poetry, music, dance, and performance in southern landscapes constructs *Lemonade*’s story through the vision of southern Black womanhood. Alice Walker’s womanism, Layli Maparyan’s womanist spirituality, and Boylorn’s *Sweetwater* may be wedded together to offer new possibilities for reading and representing the work of southern Black women, highlighting its complexity, and allowing Black women and girls to show and tell in any form that feels authentic to themselves. The spiritual and personal significance of Water in the film exemplifies the womanist autoethnographic framework. When fully explored and appreciated through this philosophical work, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* offers a fresh, compelling, and enlightening narrative of how southern Black women speak themselves into existence, and by extension, how Black women can speak new potential for freedom of the world.

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