

## **Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade* as a feminist critique of the representation of black people in the news**

*"The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman."* – Malcolm X, 1962

This essay will be discussing the ways in which Beyoncé, through her latest album *Lemonade*, subverts typical representations of black people in the news. It will look at both the visuals of the music videos and the lyrics of the songs, and referencing other relevant media texts. It will also look at why Beyoncé might feel compelled to bring politics into her music, and show her audience her point of view as a (black) feminist on topical social issues, particularly those relating to black civil rights.

There is a lot of literature written on the topic of music and society, how one influences the other, and the importance of popular music in cultural studies. The 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Kotarba et al's *Understanding Society Through Popular Music* (2013) is titled 'Politics and Popular Music,' and discusses how the two go hand in hand beyond 'protest songs' that explicitly subvert social norms or campaign against topical issues such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Similarly, John Street examines reasons why pop stars (who are not usually known to promote politics) might use their music as a political platform in 'The pop star as politician: from Belafonte to Bono, from creativity to conscience' (Peddie, 2006; ch. 4). Nelson George looks specifically at 'Post-Soul Black Culture' in his book *Buppies, B. Boys, Baps, & Bohos* (2001), a collection of essays on his experience as a black man who "[came] of age since the demise of the civil rights movement in the late '60s," giving precious insight into aspects of life as a black person from a first-person point of view. Particularly relevant to this essay was the 4<sup>th</sup> section of Part II: Media Impressions, titled 'Tracy Chapman: Today's Black Woman' (1989), looking at how this black singer went against many typical expectations and made her music about the struggles and triumphs of a black woman in America. Finding readings on black feminist politics and music was trickier, though *Black Feminist Thought* (Collins, 2000) claims that music, alongside poetry and essays, is one of the ways that black women share their 'collective thought' to 'oppose opposition'

(p. 9). One benefit of using music is that, as a form of mass media, it is much more accessible to non-academics (the general population) than a journal article, so the message gets spread to a wider audience.

I will be doing a content analysis of Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* (2016) to see a black feminist's critique of the representations of black people in the news, primarily looking at the Black Lives Matter protests that have been happening across America, catalyzed by the events in Ferguson in mid-late 2014. I have chosen this over other methodologies because it will allow me to look at both the lyrics and visuals of the album, and see the implications of these aspects. I will also look at news stories and other media texts to see how people have reacted to Beyoncé's political stances.

Beyoncé, often called the Queen of Pop, has always had political inclinations in her music. Her performance at the 2014 VMAs clearly showed her feminist ideals, and she has an obvious respect for those who have fought for equality of the sexes, as seen in the quote sampled from Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie during this performance, and more recently the above quote from Malcolm X in the song *Don't Hurt Yourself* from her 2016 visual album *Lemonade* (see appendix 1). This album has strong political themes, particularly relating to feminism and the Black Lives Matter movement. As a black woman, these topics must be important to her, and thus feels that as she has so much influence over a wide audience, she should use her music as a platform to get these issues in the public mind.

One of the ways in which Beyoncé critiques the representation of black people in the news is her overt 'pro-blackness' throughout *Lemonade*. This is not to say that the news is anti-black – according to Ian Law (2002; 49), "about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of [news] items can be identified as broadly presenting an anti-racist message." Beyoncé goes out of her way to say 'black women are equal to white women; women are equal to men' in her videos, making her a double-edged sword when it comes to equality. The American late-night variety TV show Saturday Night Live illustrated this in the sketch '*The Day Beyoncé Turned Black*' (see appendix 2), in which at one point two business men are hiding under a table after the 'white apocalypse' caused by the release of Beyoncé's *Formation* video. They're discussing, in terror, how

Beyoncé and other female celebrities, namely Kerry Washington, “may also be black.” One of the men cries, “how can they be black? They’re women!” to which the other replies, “I think they might be both!” causing them to scream “nooo!”

This aims to highlight how many obstacles a black woman has in her life, as she is part of two groups that face discrimination. The Malcolm X quote at the start of this essay clearly states that black women are seen as lower than white women and black men (both of which are below white men). As a black feminist, Beyoncé wants to show that neither her gender or her skin colour make her (or other black women) inherently lower than others, thus in *Lemonade* she constantly reminds the audience of her success, often breaking down gender roles in the process. “*I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making*”; “*when he fuck me good I take his ass to Red Lobster, ‘cause I slay*”; “*best revenge is your paper*”; all these lines come from *Formation*, and are her, in various ways, saying she is equal to any man by being just as successful as the richest person in the world (a white man worth \$75 billion according to Time.com) and being the main breadwinner and head of the house, breaking stereotypical gender ‘norms’. The last lyric indicates she believes that the most likely way black people (and/or women) will be equal in the eyes of white/male people is through bettering themselves as individuals and creating their own successes. This links to the idea of the Talented Tenth, a theory that early civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois explained as the best and brightest 10% of black people using “their knowledge of modern culture [to] guide the American Negro into a higher civilisation” (White, 1990; 66).

Feminism, contrary to what some believe, is not about making women seen as better than men in society. It is instead about breaking down gender roles/norms to create a mentality that no gender is better than another. It is about changing the power distribution in society so that people are not discriminated against and are treated on an individual needs basis to allow everyone the same chance of success. This acknowledges, for instance, that women have different needs to men, that black women face different challenges than white women, etc. Beyoncé’s song *Daddy Lessons* is about her father teaching her things that traditionally would fall to the (eldest) son; “*He said take care of your mother/Watch out for your sister*” and “*Daddy made me fight/It wasn’t always right/But he said girl*

*it's your second amendment*,” which is breaking stereotypes of gender as boys are usually told they have to take care of the family should anything happen to father, and they are usually shown to be play fighting in visual media such as advertising (‘toys for boys’ are often fighting-oriented; swords, lightsabres, plastic guns, superhero costumes, etc, whereas girls are shown to be more gentle and are given more ‘family’ toys like dolls and tea sets, while being discouraged from being violent and joining in with the boys’ epic make-believe battle). The visuals for this song also break stereotypes of black men. Meyers (in Law, 2002; 87) “argues that news coverage of [black] violence...reinforces stereotypes about... African-American men and their propensity for involvement in violence... [Meyers] highlights the representation of fathers as prone to violence.” In the video, there are ‘home video’ clips of young Beyoncé and her father, showing him to be a good father that clearly cares deeply for his child, going against this stereotype of black men as bad fathers.

Eurocentrism is another issue that Beyoncé addresses with this album, specifically Eurocentric beauty standards. She combats this by having nearly all of the people in the videos as black women with natural hair; as the Saturday Night Live skit puts it, they are “unapologetically black.” This social mentality that pale is beautiful and the lack of positive representation of ‘natural’ black hair (that is, hair that hasn’t been ‘relaxed’ – chemically treated to be straighter and more like white people’s hair) can be harmful to young black people who become “victims of internalised racism” that causes “anguish... in women’s lives as a result of trying to live up to externally defined standards,” which they feel they must do because of a “culture that [will otherwise] devalue their womanhood” (Spellers, 2003; 227, 228) by telling them they don’t ‘fit in’ or ‘belong’. In *Formation*, Beyoncé states “*I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros/I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils*” – promoting the idea that ‘black is beautiful,’ and implying that she doesn’t want her daughter, Blue Ivy, or any young black person to grow up thinking they have to change their appearance to fit into a certain image promoted by the media.

Another aspect of Eurocentrism is that since the media (particularly entertainment such as film, TV, books, etc.) predominantly features white people, the white audience has come to feel it is ‘entitled’ to see themselves/people who look like

them on the screen, which they cannot do with Beyoncé's *Lemonade*. The Saturday Night Live skit sums it up when one scared white man tentatively suggests "maybe this song [*Formation*]... isn't for us [white people]?" to which a horrified woman cries, "usually everything is!" This aims to make fun of the white people who expect the media to cater to them and who get mad when, for instance, people who aren't white get cast in major film roles. A perfect example of this is the attempted boycott of Star Wars Episode VII: *The Force Awakens*, in which 'men's right activists' (men who misunderstand the concept of feminism and feel it's actually the male population that is discriminated against in society) warned people that the film had a "non-white and [pro] female agenda," as it "took lead opportunities away from white actors," (see appendix 3) despite the fact that, as researchers from the University of Southern California found out;

*"Of the top 100 films of 2014, nearly three-quarters of all characters were white, the study showed. Only 17 of the top movies that year featured non-white lead or co-lead actors."* – PBS, 2015

This article (see appendix 4) also quotes British blogger and writer Nikesh Shukla, who says that having more diverse characters and portraying them in a wider variety of (positive ways) "feels like it's a celebration of otherness. I want my otherness normalised." The idea of black as 'otherness' again links back to Eurocentrism due to differences in appearance and culture; "racial differentiation begins to define otherness, and discrimination *against* the racially defined other becomes at once *exclusion* of the different" (Goldberg, 1993; 51); that is to say, in today's society, once someone is defined as 'different' (for instance, as being not white), they are excluded from certain areas (such as film leads) in a form of discrimination.

There have been news articles that have demonised the Black Lives Matter protests and those that fight for it. Fox particularly shows a pro-police discourse, as can be seen in the clip from 'The O'Reilly Factor' (1<sup>st</sup> September 2015 – see appendix 5), in which the interviewer (O'Reilly) repeatedly tries to get the guests to agree with him that the Black Live Matter movement has sparked an "open season on cops." Fox has also attacked Beyoncé for her 2016 Super Bowl half-time show (see appendix 6), in which she performed *Formation* (released the day

before). This song is perhaps one of the most politically charged of the album, with several visual references to the civil rights and Black Lives Matter movements. In the live performance, she is dressed in a Black Panthers-esque outfit and goes into 'Malcolm X formation' (see appendix 7). In the music video, there is a scene of a young black child dancing in front of some (white male) riot cops, who then put their hands up in a 'don't shoot' gesture. This may also link to the repeated use of the word "slay" in the lyrics; in a colloquial sense, 'to slay' means to look or do something amazing, or to win a (verbal) fight with a comeback that the other person can't come back from. Beyoncé can be argued to do both here, as the black child 'slays' with their perfect dance moves, which could be seen as an insult to the policemen as disrespecting their authority.

According to Street, the number of pop stars who are political in their music "will always be in a minority," (Peddie, 2006; 50). However, Collins claims that music is one of the forms of mass media that 'feminists from the hip-hop generation' use to express their politics, "[bypassing] scholarly venues and other traditional outlets" (2006; 161) to make it more accessible to the general public (as Street says, "relative to other cultural forms of expression, music is by far the most accessible" [Peddie, 2006; 52]). Beyoncé is one such feminist musician. In fact, it seems that civil rights has managed to inspire musicians to become political actors before Beyoncé; musicologist John Shepherd (Clayton et al, 2012; 240) notes the difference between Western art music (with "the emphasis on 'the music itself'") in the 1960s and '70s and the emergence of an 'anti-establishment' theme in popular music in the same period, when the UK and USA were going through massive "social, cultural, and moral changes", particularly with civil rights. He says the music was for politically-minded younger generations, and "had to do with the realities of everyday life" (ibid). This links to Street's article, which states, "one argument used to explain the political content of popular music is that it reflects or responds to reality... Mark Anthony Neil writes: 'as the political terrain for blacks began to change after the Brown vs the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas trial in 1954, so did the style and content of the dominant forms of black popular music" (Peddie, 2006; 52, 53).

It is safe to say that Beyoncé is a feminist icon, and a role model to all young black girls who will grow up in a society that will try and bring them down on two fronts, for their gender and their skin colour. People will always try to find something wrong with 'Queen B' and her music, because of the lyrics or the visuals and the messages they send out; "[music genres] considered more specific to the African-American experience, such as rap and hip-hop, have been criticized for their sometimes violent and misogynistic lyrical proclivities" (LaFrance, 1996; 133). However, any genre can be called guilty of this; two that come to mind – heavy metal and country – are both currently dominated by white men (though they both have their roots as black music in Blues and Jazz). She is committed to breaking down social norms in her music to show people that no matter their gender or skin colour, they can be successful, they are beautiful with their dark skin and afro, they should be black and proud.

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## Appendix

1. a) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 2014 book *We Should All Be Feminists*
1. b) Malcolm X's 1962 speech *Who Taught You To Hate Yourself?*
2. "The Day Beyoncé Turned Black" – SNL – YouTube, Saturday Night Live, February 2016. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w> Last accessed 16/05/2016.
3. *Star Wars: Men's rights activists claim boycott cost The Force Awakens \$4.2m* – The Independent, Jess Denham, January 2016. Available from: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/star-wars-mens-rights-activists-claim-boycott-cost-the-force-awakens-42m-a6796146.html> Last accessed 16/05/2016.
4. *Out of 30,000 Hollywood film characters, here's how many weren't white* – PBS, Laura Santhanam & Megan Crigger, September 2015. Available from: <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/rundown/30000-hollywood-film-characters-heres-many-werent-white/> Last accessed 16/05/2016.
5. a) *Is there an epidemic of violence against police in America?* – Fox News, September 2015. Available from: <http://www.foxnews.com/transcript/2015/09/02/is-there-epidemic-violence-against-police-in-america/> Last accessed 16/05/2016.
5. b) *Fox News Suggests Black Lives Matter Is A 'Murder' Movement, 'Hate Group'* – Huffington Post, Hilary Hanson & Simon McCormack, January 2015. Available from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-lives-matter-fox-news-hate-group\\_us\\_55e5c102e4b0b7a9633a3b12](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-lives-matter-fox-news-hate-group_us_55e5c102e4b0b7a9633a3b12) Last accessed 16/05/2016.
6. *Fox News attacks Beyoncé's Super Bowl salute to Black Lives Matter: It's not 'wholesome' or 'decent'* – David Edwards, February 2016. Available from: <http://www.rawstory.com/2016/02/fox-news-attacks-beyonces-super-bowl-salute-to-black-lives-matter-its-not-wholesome-or-decent/> Last accessed 16/05/2016.

7. 'Malcolm X formation' reference in Beyoncé's live performance of *Formation* for the 2016 Super Bowl half-time show, plus Twitter user @myblackmindd's reaction to it.



Yo, I just peeped that Beyonce's dancers were in the #Formation of an X.. like Malcolm.

5:18 AM - 8 Feb 2016

8. a) Beyoncé *Lemonade* lyrics and annotated script, available from <http://genius.com/albums/Beyonce/Lemonade> Last accessed 16/05/2016.

8. b) *Formation (Explicit)* – YouTube, Beyoncé, February 2016. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LrCHz1qwzTo&index=2&list=PL-E79MQ72MqVQWkmv0BEYOwXMc-hCTqHq> Last accessed 16/05/2016.