

You Know You That Bitch When You Cause All This Conversation:

Examining Beyoncé's Feminism in *Lemonade*

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HUM 103: Connections and Conflict in the Humanities I

November 22, 2020

Beyoncé's album *Lemonade* sparked a media craze over Jay Z's infidelity and launched a manhunt to find the "Becky with the good hair" whom Beyoncé angrily sings about in her song titled "Sorry."¹ Separate from this witchhunt, another side of the internet shook from the impact of *Lemonade* dropping: the black feminist community. Conversations largely revolved around people's definitions of feminism and how these definitions were affected by Beyoncé's stardom. The perspectives of four black feminists in this conversation are outlined below.

Author and activist bell hooks' (also known as Gloria Jean Watkins) posted her essay titled "Moving Beyond Pain" a little over two weeks after the album's release. In it, she praises the album for its positive depictions of everyday black women and for its message of self-love. She nonetheless contends that Beyoncé's feminism is a kind of "fantasy feminism" that operates within the patriarchy and therefore cannot be trusted. Beyoncé's vision of feminism, according to hooks, is about demanding equal rights for men and women within a heteronormative sphere and without regard to class and race hierarchies.² It gives onlookers an incomplete view of feminism that hooks believes is detrimental to the cause.

Mako Fitts Ward in "Queen Bey and the New Niggerati: Ethics of Individualism in the Appropriation of Black Radicalism" is similarly wary of Beyoncé's feminism, which she dubs "power feminism." This brand of feminism, she writes, is characterized by an "invest[ment] in individualism and economic self-advancement".³ Ward points to the last line Beyoncé's "Formation" as an apt example of this thinking: "always stay gracious, best revenge is your

¹ Parker, Rachel, "Okay, Ladies, Now Let's Get in Formation: Intersectional Feminism in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*," *University of North Georgia Annual Research Conference*, March 23, 2018.

https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/ngresearchconf/2018/English_Communications/18.

² bell hooks, "Moving Beyond Pain," *bell hooks Institute*, May 9, 2016, <http://www.bellhooksinstitute.com/blog/2016/5/9/moving-beyond-pain>.

³ Mako Fitts Ward, "Queen Bey and the New Niggerati: Ethics of Individualism in the Appropriation of Black Radicalism," *Black Camera* 9, no. 1 (2017): 155. <https://doi.org/10.2979/blackcamera.9.1.09>.

papers.” Her individualist thinking is particularly prevalent in this song with other lines like “I slay,” which Ward refers to as only superficially radical because it paints individual advancement as the route to liberation.⁴ Beyoncé's use of radical phrases and iconography such as the black panther-inspired outfits her dancers wore in her “Formation” performance suggests a desire for radical change that Ward argues is ultimately not delivered upon in her work.

Beyoncé's emphasis on personal achievement is understandable given her extreme success, but it is also due to this success that Ward believes it is necessary to interrogate the responsibility that comes along with her authority as a pop icon. Her cultural capital is massive-- her words alone are capable of moving the masses. And while Beyoncé's emphasis on individual economic self-advancement fits well with capitalist, individualist American modes of thinking, Ward asserts that it is ultimately to the detriment of actual social change as it “runs counter to the communal uplift necessary to enact radical systemic change.”⁵

Author Roxane Gay provides a different point of view on Beyoncé's feminism through her exploration of what it means to be a “good” or “bad” feminist. She used to buy into the notion that there is an essential feminist and an essential feminism. She shied away from the label because she feared the condemnation of what she terms “the sisterhood”: an imagined assembly of feminists who embody this ideal. These women are independent, work and know how to fix their own cars, eschew beauty standards... they have it all. In her “Bad Feminist” essays she asserts that there is no essential feminism, and that the notion that there is such as thing - perpetuated by the gatekeeping attitudes of those who believe in it - drives people away from the cause and is thus ultimately harmful to it.⁶ By proudly proclaiming herself a “bad feminist” Gay rejects these ideals and gives women like her who were or are afraid to take on the

⁴ Ward, “Queen Bey and the New Niggerati,” 155-159.

⁵ Ward, “Queen Bey and the New Niggerati,” 152.

⁶ Gay, “Bad Feminist,” 93-95.

label the space to do so without fear of imagined or real condemnation. In many ways her journey parallels Beyoncé's, who once shied away from the feminist label for similar reasons.⁷ They may not follow the stringent guidelines of the sisterhood, but they both believe in the necessity of feminism.

Unlike the previous three feminists, Omise'eke Tinsley cares less about what kind of feminist Beyoncé is and more about how she publically is one. In her book "Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism" Tinsley presents a "black femme-inist criticism" - a type of critical analysis that "investigate[s] the ways that black women's cultural productions critique white heteropatriarchal construction of black women's race, gender, and sexuality" - of *Lemonade*.⁸ Though the lens through which she analyzes Beyoncé is inherently queer, Tinsley maintains that she is not interested in applying the "queer" label to Beyoncé. She instead declares that Beyoncé or any "ideal of black womanhood" does not have to be queer to be intimately related to black femme self-expression. "Beyoncé's lemonade," she writes, "can be sweet to me even if her recipe isn't the same as mine."⁹ *Lemonade* creates a public space that welcomes people to perform their identities that was not in the mainstream prior to it.

Much of Tinsley's book is dedicated to the concept of *femmephobia*, the fear and hatred of things that are feminine, and how it is present in many critiques of Beyoncé's feminism. While the term "femme" is more popularly used to refer to feminine lesbian women, Tinsley presents it - and the detractors that come with it - as relevant to analysis of Beyoncé's critical work. The same femmephobia Tinsley discusses is evident in Roxane Gay's essays in the belief

⁷ Janet Mock, "My Feminist Awakening & the Influence of Beyoncé's Pop Culture Declaration," *Janet Mock*, September 4, 2014, <https://janetmock.com/2014/09/03/beyonce-feminist-mtv-vmas/>.

⁸ Omise'eke Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism*, (Austin, United States: University of Texas Press, 2018), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1885880>.

⁹ Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation*, 14.

foisted upon her that her “fondness for fashion and smooth calves” makes her somehow weaker or any less of a feminist.¹⁰ Like Gay, Tinsley rejects the notion that feminism and more particularly *black* feminism is a doctrine with specific beliefs and practices that must be upheld to claim the title. According to Tinsley, “the most important qualification for black feminist status is self-identification.”¹¹ And Beyoncé fulfilled that one with all the fantastic flair she has come to be known for in 2014.

When Beyoncé stood in front of a blazing “FEMINIST” sign at the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, for one of the first times “feminism” wasn’t associated with the words “*militant, radical, man-hating*” but rather with *Beyoncé*.¹² Tinsley encourages young people to use Beyoncé’s music as a starting point “...use Beyoncé’s music as a starting point to think through personal and political issues that matter in our lives as twenty-first-century black feminists.”¹³ This point of view conflicts with bell hooks and Mako Fitts Ward’s. But to Tinsley it does not matter exactly what kind of feminist Beyoncé is-- whether she is a power feminist or a fantasy feminist or a bad one. To her it is much more important that Beyoncé has openly and proudly identified herself as one, and that others have then followed suit.

¹⁰ Gay, “Bad Feminist,” 93.

¹¹ Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation*, 8.

¹² Jessica Bennett, “How to Reclaim the F-Word? Just Call Beyoncé,” *TIME*, August 26, 2014, <https://time.com/3181644/beyonce-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/>.

¹³ Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation*, 9.

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