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Dr. Michelle Wolff

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Beyoncé making *Lemonade* out of the Colonial System

The United Nations stated that decolonization “changed the face of the planet.”¹ It changed by eliminating some imperial colonies. However, decolonization at its core is a revolution, a call for change by addressing the hard truths of our history.² Beyoncé is a revolutionary, a decolonizer. *Lemonade* did more than process the infidelity within her marriage to Jay-Z. Through visual nods to the colonized and colonizer relationship, we see that *Lemonade* addresses black history, specifically for women of color. Beyoncé takes the remnants of colonialism and redefines it under her conditions, defusing its power but recognizing its impact. Through religion she reforms her relationship with herself and her husband and reclaims the black communities’ faith narratives that have been infused with colonialism. *Lemonade* acknowledges that the colonial system has had an indelible impact on black culture and family dynamics. I propose that through that recognition she disrupts the continued narrative of being lesser that the colonizer instilled in the colonized.

¹ “Decolonization.” United Nations. <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/decolonization/>. Accessed May 12, 2019.

² Amy Lonetree. *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 6.

In *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Albert Memmi discusses the colonizer/colonized relationship and all the negativity that comes with it. In his preface, Memmi states he wanted to at first examine mixed couple marriages, but realized that colonization invades the marriage as well and complexes that dynamic.³ The point being marriage is supposed to be true “happiness” but the relationship too is affected by colonization.⁴ In order to assimilate with the colonizer, the colonized will impoverish themselves and hate and neglect who they are, their true self. Through self-degradation, the colonized reinforce the value of the colonizer. To hate themselves and their people, the colonized are invited to reinforce the colonizer’s community, which Memmi argues is actually quite frail: “If one chooses to understand the colonial system, he must admit that it is unstable and its equilibrium constantly threatened.”⁵ Through vocals and visuals, Beyoncé takes aim at the systems stability in the most elegant of methods.⁶

Memmi ends the last section of chapter 2 discussing how the colonized will eventually find love for themselves and their culture. How everything they once hated is now celebrated and asserted not just to themselves but to the public. Beyoncé’s appearance in *Lemonade* highlights and showcases her love for herself and for her heritage. Her Victorian dress is Africanized through the selection of material and displaces the connotations of slavery because historically they would not be dressed in such high quality, nor have such a standing in society. She deliberately uses her image and current power in a period where her people believed they had none. She takes it and rewrites the history to her narrative, but still acknowledging the painful truth of the past.

³ Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 3.

⁴ Albert Memmi, 3.

⁵ Albert Memmi, 120.

⁶ Memmi.

Several scenes are shown in the American south, acknowledging a history of racialized slavery. However, surrounded by other black women, Beyoncé and her girls disrupt the narrative of the Mammy stereotype -the supposedly old, happy slave.⁷ As Emilie Townes explains, the Mammy, a counter to claims that black women slaves were being sexualized by their owners, was idealized as happy and did not “give any thought to the question of freedom.”⁸ All the women are dressed in beautiful lace gowns and situated on the steps of a plantation house. Actively defying the sexualization of the slave and the sterilization that is the Mammy. Their hair is never straightened like that of the colonizer; it is styled in natural curls, cornrows, ‘lemonade braids’ and even a Nefertiti Egyptian hair style. Memmi writes of colonizer views: “A blonde woman, be she dull or anything else, appears superior to any brunette.”⁹ Beyoncé rips that colonizer concept and wipes her hands clean of ‘Becky with the good hair.’¹⁰ That recognition of colonial nuances are still present today and does not come without pain, but through it: growth.

Each one of these new narratives and demands of change comes in various stages of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*: “intuition”, “denial”, “anger”, “apathy”, “emptiness”, “accountability”, “reformation”, “forgiveness”, “resurrection”, “hope”, and “redemption.”¹¹ Referencing major themes in Christian religion, some are more obvious than the others. However, some themes are debilitating to black women’s mental and physical health. Black churches stress that black women are responsible for their pain if they do not forgive their aggressor or take the

⁷ Kyle Roberts. “Blind Spots: What You Don’t See Can Hurt You.” Accessed May 4, 2020.

<https://cct.biola.edu/blind-spots-what-you-dont-see-can-hurt-you/>.

⁸ Kyle Roberts. “Blind Spots: What You Don’t See Can Hurt You.”

⁹ Memmi, 121.

¹⁰ Beyoncé, *Lemonade*. Directed by Kahlil Joseph and Beyoncé Knowles. Released by Parkwood Entertainment and Columbia Records. (2016). CD.

¹¹ Beyoncé, *Lemonade*.

accountability for their grievances.¹² This church mentality stems from colonialism because it still needs someone to be inferior and to accept the horrible treatment handed to them. Black women would have to stay in spaces and homes that do not love them, while maintaining faith in God that it will get better.¹³ “Many young Black Christian women grew up watching their mothers live out their complicated faith in these spaces. They watched them praying, crying, and shouting, pleading with God for better days.”¹⁴ Beyoncé prays to God for better days, but through self-love and self-respect she will not forgive and reconcile without it being on her terms, effectively denouncing the churches colonialesque teachings.¹⁵

Beyoncé continues to disrupt narratives in the black community and how black women are treated. *Lemonade* repeats Malcolm X’s famous line: “the most disrespected woman in America, is the black woman.”¹⁶ This level of disrespect towards black women from black men originates in the colonizer and colonized relationship described by Albert Memmi. He hates himself, his community, and to assert some power, to be like the white man, he berates and neglects his fellow woman. She uses this theme in connection with her own marriage, shaken by her husband’s infidelity: the deepest disrespect in a marriage. Beyoncé calls on women to be an equal if not better, and not to submit to black men: “okay ladies, now let’s get in formation.”¹⁷

“People have told the colonized that his music is like mewing cats, and his paintings like sugar syrup.”¹⁸ Beyoncé does not need that assurance in *Lemonade* from colonizers. She fully

¹² Candice Benbow, “Beyoncé’s “Lemonade” and Black Christian Women’s Spirituality.” Religion & Politics: Fit For Polite Company.. <https://religionandpolitics.org/2016/06/28/beyonces-lemonade-and-black-christian-womens-spirituality/>. Accessed May 12, 2019

¹³ Candice Benbow, “Beyoncé’s “Lemonade” and Black Christian Women’s Spirituality.”

¹⁴ Candice Benbow.

¹⁵ Benbow, “Beyoncé’s “Lemonade” and Black Christian Women’s Spirituality.”

¹⁶ Beyoncé, *Lemonade*. Quote by Malcolm X.

¹⁷ Beyoncé, “Formation.” *Lemonade*.

¹⁸ Memmi, 122.

recognizes her talents, her grievances, and her hopes and self-worth. She recognizes the colonized/colonizer relationship because she actively denounces it within the film. She, like the colonized in Memmi's writings, accepts the wrinkles and wounds that come from healing, and she will revolt from the colonizer's stereotypes.¹⁹ She reframes the church's teachings of who is inferior in relationships. She is not forgiving her husband because they tell her she should but because she wants to reconcile on her terms. *Lemonade* was Beyoncé's innermost struggles made public, but it also had a grander picture in mind. She is not just tackling her marriage, but her people's position in the colonial system. The colonized mentally still remains and recognizing its long-lasting affects is the only way to change it.

¹⁹ Memmi, 138 – 141.

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