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She Ain't Sorry

Gavinya Wijsekera

FYI 102: Black Rage Matters

Dr. Ashely Burge

Spring 2021

Short Analytical Essay

She Ain't Sorry

In her twenty-four years in the music industry, Beyoncé Giselle Knowles Carter has established herself as a powerhouse. However, it took nineteen years from the start of her career in 1997 and the release of her visual album *Lemonade* in 2016 for her fans, more specifically her white fan base, to truly see her for who she is. Beyoncé is a Black woman in a predominantly white industry. The interaction of her race and gender, her Blackness and womanhood, put her in a unique position where she needs to face issues related to both racism and sexism. And this unique struggle is one that is shared by other Black women in white America. *Lemonade*, a visual album spanning a period of sixty-five minutes, consists of twelve songs that narrate the journey of a “woman scorned” as she comes to terms with the betrayal of her lover (Phillips). It is a manifestation of Beyoncé's rage. And what makes *Lemonade* remarkable is the way in which this rage is celebrated. Rage is used not only as a medium through which Beyoncé challenges and debunks common stereotypes about Black women but also as a tool to condemn and reclaim historically white spaces in the Antebellum South used to oppress Black women. She addresses how it is only by acknowledging and embracing the Rage of Black women that true healing can take place.

Beyoncé uses rage to highlight how Black women are beautiful, multifaceted individuals, far from the one-dimensional stereotypes as which society and popular media like to portray them. One of the stereotypes she debunks is that of the “Strong Black Woman”. The “Strong Black Women” is a common trope found in popular media and is used to describe a Black woman that is “selfless strength personified”, a “natural nurturer” that lives to help others “and disregards her own needs” (Strong Black woman, Explained). Aibileen from *The Help*, and the women in *The Colour Purple*, are other prime examples of this trope (Strong Black woman,

Explained). In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé chooses to let the walls fall and reveal to her audience that she is anything but the “Strong Black Women” she is expected to be. By doing so, she not only uses *Lemonade* as an incredibly raw expression of grief and anger but also as a way in which to send out a message to other Black women that they are allowed to be vulnerable and soft without the need to constantly live up to this ideal enforced on them.

The opening number of *Lemonade*, “Pray You Catch Me,” has Beyoncé on her knees behind closed curtains, her face void of any visible make-up. She’s dressed in all black, almost as if she is mourning the death of something important to her, which in context would be her relationship. She’s visibly distressed and heartbroken. It’s shocking to see Beyoncé, someone admired and worshipped among so many, in such a vulnerable state. Black women are often portrayed as strong and immovable in times of crisis or personal tragedy. In a world that is fundamentally built on systems that exclude and discriminate against Black women, Black women need to realize that they deserve a break from being the caretakers who put the rest of the world before themselves. By openly expressing her grief and heartbreak, Beyoncé normalizes being vulnerable as a Black woman, thereby showing other Black women that to be sad is to be human. In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé not only combats the “Strong Black Women” stereotype but also shows her audience that you can be a Black woman who is both strong and vulnerable and that these things aren't mutually exclusive.

Beyoncé’s choice to be vulnerable with her audience and bear her soul in the name of art also brings into light how the very “Strong Black Women ” that society loves to celebrate and put on a pedestal are not exempt from feelings of hurt, sadness, betrayal, and rage. This is something that society very conveniently leaves unacknowledged. Black women are not allowed to grieve like the rest of the world. They are required to stay strong for their husbands and sons, as well as

each other. Their strength plays an essential role in holding not just their community, but the “broader American community together” as well (Cooper 2). However, reducing Black women to this stereotype, and this stereotype alone, is another of the countless ways in which they are oppressed. When a human being is reduced to one single ability they are stripped of their other needs, such as the need to grieve. And to deny an individual their right to grieve is to take away what is fundamentally part of the human experience. This disenfranchisement denies Black women the opportunity to heal from centuries of abuse and trauma. Beyoncé ties *Lemonade* to the expression of sadness, something that she as a Black woman is denied, by segmenting it into the different stages of grief. From “Intuition”, to “Denial”, to “Anger”, to “Forgiveness”, to “Resurrection”, and finally to “Redemption”, Beyoncé’s *Lemonade* takes us through a journey of hurting and healing. Beyoncé’s willingness to share her vulnerability with her audience sends out a vital message to Black women everywhere that even one of the most powerful and influential Black women known to our generation gets frustrated, and that, like her, other Black women can have moments of weakness while continuing to retain their power and strength.

Beyoncé does not hide her anger and she uses her expression of rage to challenge the stereotype of the “Angry Black Women”. The “Angry Black Women” trope, also known as the “The Sapphire Caricature” trope, is one that is characterized by a “rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing” Black woman who has “venom for anyone who insults or disrespects her” (Pilgrim). This trope is used to invalidate, shame, and punish Black women when they outwardly express their anger, an example being the media’s ridiculing of Serena Williams during the US Open finals in 2018 (Prasad). Anger in these situations of betrayal and lies comes naturally to us. Like sadness, it’s one of the many emotions that make us human. But this right to be angry is also one of the many things that are denied to Black women. And as mentioned

earlier, one of the ways in which popular culture and society invalidate the rage of Black women is by turning them into caricatures. Society makes it so that to be a Black woman in rage is a dangerous thing. Dr Briteny Cooper discusses this in her book *Eloquent Rage: A Black Feminist Discovers Her Superpower*. Cooper says that rage as a Black woman is “risky- because we have jobs to keep, families, to feed, and bills to pay” (Cooper 4). Research shows that this stereotype, and how it is used as a means to dismiss the rage of Black women, is “detrimental” to their health as it plays a significant role in “further exacerbating the deleterious health effects of the chronic stress associated with racial discrimination” (Manke). Professor Amani M.Allen who studies community health sciences and epidemiology at the University of California, Berkeley elaborates on this, stating that “the most common emotional reaction to discrimination is anger, and anger is bad for health” (Manke). And when this anger is further villainized and used as a way in which Black women are made into caricatures, it should not come as a surprise that most Black women rather suffer in silence.

However, Beyoncé shows Black women that they have every right to own up their anger by portraying and celebrating her rage in *Lemonade*. In her track “Hold Up” we see Beyoncé galavanting through the streets swinging a baseball bat, destroying cars and fire hydrants, after realizing she’s been cheated on. She’s livid, and rightfully so. But the brilliant smile on her face throughout this whole ordeal stands in stark contrast to the havoc she creates. She embraces the anger and frustration. The lyrics of the track “Don't Hurt Yourself” are one of the other instances in which she lets her fury run loose. She calls out her lover on his betrayal, referring to herself as a “dragon breathing fire”, a “lion” who’ll be “fucking up all [his] shit”. Her use of language, coupled with the thud of the drums and heavy bass in the music, leaves no doubt that whoever she’s angry at will face her wrath. To say that *Lemonade* debunks this stereotype of an “Angry

Black Woman” would be inaccurate. She does more than debunk it. What makes Beyoncé’s work in this visual album so revolutionary is how she outright challenges this stereotype. She reclaims this right to her wrath, her rage. She transforms the “Angry Black Woman” that society rendered into a mere caricature into someone powerful and beautiful. And she is not apologetic. The fourth track “Sorry”, in which Beyoncé repeats the phrase “I ain’t sorry” a total of eighteen times in just the official lyrics, is almost a mantra that reminds her audience of how she will not apologize. Her refusal to do, especially when we take into context that Black women have been refused the right to express their anger, is groundbreaking. She ain’t sorry. She does not, and will not, apologize for her moments of weakness, her anger, her choice to be vulnerable, or her body. And no Black women should have to. There is no one more deserving of the right to be angry than Black women. Black women who have been “dreaming of freedom and carving out spaces for liberation since [their] arrival” and “know what it means to love” in a world that gives them nothing but hate (Cooper 4). Beyoncé's choice to provide a platform for her wrath and anger in *Lemonade* is monumental, because it may be the first time that an influential Black woman openly reclaimed her right to be angry. She shows us that her anger as a Black woman is not something that should have to be made to feel ashamed of. And by doing so, Beyoncé opens the doors to so many other Black women, allowing them to redefine what it means to be an enraged Black woman.

In addition to debunking and challenging the aforementioned stereotypes, one of the other ways in which *Lemonade* highlights and celebrates the Black Female experience is by Beyoncé's artful use of costumes and props to reclaim spaces historically denied to Black women. Towards the second half of the album, we see Black women occupying plantations, dressed in clothing that belonged to wealthy, white women in the Antebellum era. This is both

jarring and powerful. Jarring in the sense that this poses a juxtaposition to the stories of enslavement and abuse that we come across when looking back on the South during this era. Powerful in the sense that this is a reclaiming of spaces that were used to oppress Black women and a reminder of the true nature of the Old South's past. A past that modern-day America likes to sweep under the rug with an "airbrushed" version of history with "a world of benevolent masters" (Williams). The best example of this would be her track "Freedom". The opening lines are sung by Beyoncé as she stands on a platform facing a gathering of Black women. At first glance, this platform mimics that of an auctioneer in a slave market in the Old South. Beyoncé's choice to use this as a prop that she stands on as she demands her freedom is a testament to her greatness. Beyoncé Giselle Knowles Carter, a descendant of the African men and women who were stolen from their motherland and brought to the United States enslaved against their will, standing on a podium that was the foundation of an industry that profited off of their pain, singing "I break chains all by myself, Won't let my freedom rot in hell" is powerful. Her use of space and words is astoundingly clever, and this scene alone is a testament to her genuineness. It is an acknowledgement of what her ancestors had to go through. And it's an incredible reminder of not only what Black women have had to endure, but also how hundred and fifty-six years after the adoption of the 13th Amendment declared Slavery to be illegal Black women are still fighting for their rights (The Emancipation Proclamation). Another scene from the same song shows us a vast gathering of beautiful Black women dressed in Antebellum attire under a magnificent tree. In contrast to these dresses and all they stand for, these women wear their hair in all its natural, curly glory. Here, Beyoncé and her community of Black women send out a very clear message on how Black women have every right to occupy spaces that are denied to them

without the need to conform to what is viewed as right such as modern-day Eurocentric beauty standards.

Lemonade is a masterpiece. With the coupling of Beyoncé's ruggedly beautiful vocals with astonishing visuals, this album transcends music. It is art in its truest, most vulnerable form. However, despite all of this Lemonade still lost Album of The Year to Adele's 25 in the 2016 Grammy awards. Based on this, one can make the argument that Beyoncé's Lemonade is not as impactful as this essay hypes it up to be. In turn, it can be argued that the Grammy awards are a racist institution catering to white supremacist ideology. It has a history of snubbing Black artists (McDermott). There is no denying that Adele's 25 is a masterpiece on its own, with soulful lyrics that speak of lost love and moving on from heartbreak. But Art in its truest form gives a voice to the people and sparks revolutions. And 25, despite being a good album, pales in comparison to the impact Lemonade has had on the public. Lemonade may have not been made for everyone, but that does not mean that we can't recognize its significance. As Adele herself put it, "The way [Beyoncé] makes my black friends [specifically Black women] feel is empowering" and no Grammy snub can take away that feeling of understanding and celebration that Lemonade gives to Black women away from them.

Lemonade is a testament to the fact that Beyoncé is one of the best artists of her generation. Not only is Lemonade a no skip album, but a medium in which Beyoncé opens up multiple avenues for Black women that were blocked off because of the stigma associated with being a Black woman and displaying signs of grief and anger. Beyoncé is a magician that takes hold of all her anger, hurt, and frustration and transforms this rage into a sixty-five-minute visual album. When life gave her lemons, she made lemonade and showed the Black women of her generation, and generations more to come, that their rage holds incredible power and beauty.

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