

‘Beyoncé Feminism’ and the Contestation of the Black Feminist Body

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At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, black American pop superstar Beyoncé not only led nominees with eight nominations (taking home awards in three categories), but was also scheduled to receive the Michael Jackson Video Vanguard Award, also known as MTV’s Lifetime Achievement Award. Before the award was presented to her by her husband, hip-hop mogul Jay-Z, and her daughter Blue Ivy, she performed a medley of her entire most recent album, *Beyoncé* (2013). Within a performance not lacking in visually stunning moments, the most striking image (judging by the subsequent avalanche of ‘gifs’ and pictures used in articles) was Beyoncé’s body in front of the word ‘feminist’ in bright, capital letters during the song ‘***Flawless’.

Her MTV Video Music Awards performance in general, and her claiming of the word ‘feminist’ in particular, triggered an ongoing debate as to whether she was indeed a feminist, or, due to the sexualised nature of the performance and her prominent championing of her marriage, whether she was not. Possibly the most prominent reaction was from feminist pop icon Annie Lennox, who claimed that Beyoncé’s use of the word represented what she dubbed ‘feminist lite’ (Azzopardi 2014). Alongside black feminist academic bell hooks’ description of Beyoncé at a panel discussion at New York’s New School in May 2014 as a ‘terrorist’ who potentially harms black girls with her sexualised performances (Sieczkowski 2014), this constituted a media backlash that questioned her feminism through the voices of older, more established, and presumably more authoritative, feminist voices. This essay will not question Beyoncé’s self-identification as feminist, but rather will attempt to draw out the tensions between the (black feminist) audiovisual discourse of Beyoncé’s performance and the (white feminist) rhetorical discourse of Annie Lennox’s reaction to it.

Musically speaking, Beyoncé’s engagement with feminism or issues aligned with feminism predates her Video Music Awards performance. Although she did not publicly identify as ‘feminist’ until recently, songs with her former band Destiny’s Child, such as ‘Independent Woman Pt. 1’, display a basic, if perhaps naïve and postfeminist, ‘girl power’-inspired feminism. And in Beyoncé’s second solo album, *B-Day* (2006), an album concerned with the politics of romantic, sexual, emotional, and economic labour, Ann Brooks identifies ‘a particular kind of black feminist surrogation’ (2008, p. 183) that articulates Beyoncé’s control over and ownership of her own work, body, and property. Furthermore, this album marks the introduction of her all-female band, the Sugar Mamas, which she formed in order to inspire young girls to pick up and learn instruments, having lacked such role-models in her own childhood.

With an implicitly feminist back catalogue, her self-titled *Beyoncé* album marks her public ‘coming out’ as a feminist. Released without any preceding PR, secretly produced and tightly controlled, the album features a sample of Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s ‘We Should All Be Feminists’ speech on the song ‘***Flawless’. Additionally, she published an essay entitled ‘Gender Equality is a Myth!’ (Knowles-Carter 2014) for the Shriver Report on gender inequality, produced by the Center for American Progress, a non-profit institute concerned with progressive public policy research. The album therefore serves as a catalytic moment that frames the themes of bodily and monetary control evident in her earlier work as explicitly feminist.

In this context, Annie Lennox’s reaction to Beyoncé’s MTV Video Music Awards performance is significant, particularly due to her own feminist credentials both off and on the stage (Rodger 2004). Asked about the use of the word ‘feminist’ by Beyoncé, Lennox states that:

I would call that 'feminist lite'. L-I-T-E. I'm sorry. It's tokenistic to me. [...] I see a lot of it as them taking the word hostage and using it to promote themselves, but I don't think they necessarily represent wholeheartedly the depths of feminism – no, I don't. I think for many it's very convenient and it looks great and it looks radical, but I have some issues with it. Of course I do. I think it's a cheap shot. [...] What can I tell you? Sex always sells. And there is nothing wrong with sex selling, but it depends on your audience. (Azzopardi 2014)

Perhaps due to the generational difference, her statement reveals an unease with the conflation of a (possibly postfeminist) sense of empowerment through sexuality and feminist politics, which becomes more evident in Lennox's subsequent elaboration of her controversial statements. Asked by the US-American radio station NPR to clarify her comments, Lennox explained that she placed Beyoncé on a spectrum of feminism, where Beyoncé represents the tokenistic end and feminists working at the grassroots represent the other. Pressed further, she stated: 'Listen. Twerking is not feminism. That's what I'm referring to. It's not – it's not liberating, it's not empowering. It's a sexual thing that you're doing on stage; it doesn't empower you' (Leight 2014). This rhetoric is reminiscent of the 2013 Miley Cyrus/Sinead O'Connor 'feud', during which O'Connor criticised Cyrus for her sexualised performance at that year's Video Music Awards. Their dispute gained a similar degree of attention, hinting at a lasting media interest in the feminist 'catfight' (Douglas 1995) between women. Moreover, these comments shift the focus to Beyoncé's body, which in itself is not surprising, considering the very embodied performance she delivered. But this focus on the body here is used to question Beyoncé's selfidentification as feminist, and by implication her feminist body of work.

Lennox's critique not only ignores the more practical feminist work Beyoncé has done, it also foregrounds Beyoncé's body as a site of contestation and, by extension, her body as a site for the contestation of her feminism and her feminist credentials. This kind of critique becomes particularly problematic when one considers the historical (and ongoing) victimisation and dehumanisation of black women on the grounds of their perceived hypersexuality (Collins 2005). The limitations of Lennox's critique reveal the urgent need for more explicitly intersectional thinking about celebrity and feminism in order to account for this kind of marginalisation. The fact that, up until the release of her most recent album, Beyoncé chose to perform her more sexually adventurous routines as her alter ego 'Sasha Fierce' is indicative of the continuing regulation of black female sexuality (Durham 2012). Assuming this alter ego served to disassociate Beyoncé to some extent from the history and present of the 'controlling image' (Collins 2005) of the hypersexual black woman. Therefore, Beyoncé's juxtaposition of her sensually and

sexually suggestively dancing body with Ngozi Adichie's words 'We teach girls that they cannot be sexual beings in the way that boys are' can be read as a negotiation of that marginalisation, and a reclaiming of the black female body and sexuality. Placing 'Flawless' and its sampled speech as the interlude between the two parts of 'Partition' works to emphasise the song's message of female sexual agency. 'Partition' also uses a surrogate voice to express explicitly feminist statements, in French, which translate into 'Men think that feminists hate sex, but it's a very stimulating and natural activity that women love.' Arguably, this juxtaposition of voices serves to elevate both the lyrical female protagonist and Beyoncé from self-sexualising pop star to female sexual agent. With this in mind, the same points of critique (too much sex, too little 'actual' feminist work) that removed her from the discourse of feminism place Beyoncé firmly in the discourse of hip-hop feminism and its motivation to move feminism beyond the walls of academia through the privileging of popular culture as 'space for a new generation of feminist theorizing' (Durham et al. 2013, p. 722). Within its pro-sex framework in the context of the lingering legacy of respectability politics, Beyoncé's performance can be understood as an exploration of the potential of hip-hop feminism: her combination of

explicitly feminist content with performances of sexual agency signifies an exploration of black female sexuality beyond respectability politics. Locating Beyoncé in hip-hop feminism rather than mainstream celebrity feminism therefore accounts for an intersectional approach to self-sexualising pop performances by black female artists in a way that the majority of popular feminism does not. With its insistence on 'living with contradictions' (Durham et al. 2013, p. 723), hip-hop feminism would also give space to explore the contradictions and tensions in Beyoncé's work and public persona – as the post-racial poster girl (Cashmore 2010) of a global music industry, Beyoncé operates from a position of privilege that should not go unexamined.

Nonetheless, it seems reasonable to argue that the dismissal of Beyoncé's feminism is more indicative of a lack of intersectional thinking in the current celebrity feminism discourses and dialogues that are largely shaped by white women such as Annie Lennox, Emma Watson, and Lena Dunham. In this context, Beyoncé's body does not contest her feminist status, but instead her body contests the whiteness of mainstream feminism.

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