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Why I too write about Beyoncé

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One day after Beyoncé Knowles released her 2016 album *Lemonade*, Damon Young published an open letter to ‘white people who write things’, giving them (including me) the following advice: either don’t comment on the album or wait until ‘you’ve read dozens of the smartest and sharpest assessments and deconstructions of *Lemonade* written by Black people’ (Young 2016). Young’s point is well taken and evokes questions earlier raised by standpoint theory (see Collins 1990). Who am I – a middle-aged, white, gay, male, European academic – to write about an African American female superstar? Yet, I have lectured, published, and presented conference papers on Beyoncé, as well as other African American female superstars, such as Diana Ross and Whitney Houston (Kooijman 2014, 2017, 2019).

A possible response is given by bell hooks, who points out that both Beyoncé and *Lemonade* are commodities ‘made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers’, concluding that ‘Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no colour’ (hooks 2016). As a scholar of globally mediated US American pop culture, I cannot ignore Beyoncé’s global significance, not to ‘assess’ or ‘deconstruct’ her ‘blackness’, but to examine how Beyoncé functions as a commodity within a global entertainment industry, while, at the same time, being a potentially powerful voice of black, feminist, and queer politics and empowerment. However, that does not diminish the urgency of Young’s plea for white people like myself to reassess one’s position as white scholars studying black pop culture. Too often I have found myself in conference panels or seminars that ended up discussing the ‘authenticity’ (or worse, an alleged lack thereof) of African American pop culture without any black scholars present. Young’s point is well taken indeed.

My academic interest in Beyoncé is based on a personal investment in two of her most famous predecessors. Back in June 1982, at fourteen years old, I was one of those ‘ten thousand bumping, flying, cheering Dutchmen’ admiring Diana Ross live in concert (Hirshey 1984, p. 156). Together with her ‘best friend’ Michael Jackson, Ross meant ‘America’ to me – a wonderland of movies, disco, and pleasure. That very same month and year, Richard Dyer published an essay on Diana Ross in *Marxism Today*, in which he argued that Ross was one of the few black artists who was ‘allowed’ mainstream American success and that her live concerts were all about celebrating the star ‘Diana Ross’ as an embodiment of such success (Dyer 1982). One decade later, when I had become a graduate student in American Studies, I discovered that little scholarly work

had been written on Diana Ross and Michael Jackson. That these two superstars who – to me – defined US American pop culture were overlooked surprised me. After all, as Nelson George wrote at the time, Ross was ‘an American pop-cultural icon only Madonna has matched since’ (George 1992, p. 180), not to mention the unprecedented phenomenon of Michael Jackson as ‘The King of Pop’.

Instead, when I entered academia, so-called Madonna Studies was at its height, which rightfully challenged dominant gendered and racial perspectives in the study of US American pop music. Before Madonna Studies, most scholarly attention was paid to genres and artists that were not considered ‘pop’: white Rock ‘n’ Roll and Folk as well as ‘authentic’ black genres such as Jazz and Soul. Madonna Studies brought ‘pop’ to the foreground, raising questions about how notions of authenticity and authorship tended to reinforce the white male dominance in both the production and critical assessment of pop music. However, although Madonna Studies did address many issues relevant to African American pop culture, black pop stars remained conspicuously invisible. A telling example is one of the essays in the pivotal *The Madonna Connection* collection, in which Ronald B. Scott places Madonna ‘in the finest traditions of earlier black divas’, only to come to the baffling conclusion: ‘The fact that Madonna, unlike the divas before her, is a white female is irrelevant’ (Scott 1993, p. 62). That Scott does not even mention the pre-Madonna black divas by name shows the relevance of race, as it is Madonna’s whiteness that enabled her to cross the racially defined genre boundaries of the entertainment industry far more easily than black pop divas – such as Diana Ross or even Madonna’s contemporaries Whitney Houston and Janet Jackson – could. Whereas Madonna’s whiteness enabled her to incorporate black dance music into her pop sound, and even receive praise for doing so, African American female superstars performing pop easily could be criticised, and often were, for not sounding ‘black enough’.

With the notable exception of Marla Shelton’s essay on Whitney Houston (1995), the little attention that black pop divas received in academia at that time was in the study of disco, a genre often connoted as ‘gay’ and ‘black’, and which favours artificiality over authenticity. Moreover, the notion of the black pop diva betraying her ‘authentic’ blackness for mainstream commercial success was the main premise of the 1981 musical *Dreamgirls*, loosely based on the story of Diana Ross and the Supremes. In the 2006 film version, Beyoncé stars as the Ross-inspired Deena Jones, who replaces the ‘original’ lead singer Effie White (!), the embodiment of the ‘authentic’ black culture that is left behind. However, *Dreamgirls* is a musical, which, like disco, is a genre that highlights artificiality, theatricality, and diva worship, and as such ‘reflects the camp, surreal view of black divas that is a significant part of the gay aesthetic’ (George 2004, p. 44). Not surprisingly then, the musical’s main premise of betraying black ‘authentic’ culture merely functions as a melodramatic backstory to a pop spectacle that celebrates the glamour and success of Deena Jones – and thus, in extension, of Diana Ross and Beyoncé as superstars as well (Kooijman 2017).

Here it is relevant to note that Beyoncé’s portrayal of Deena Jones is set in the past and that her performance says more about black pop divas such as Diana Ross than about herself. Two decades after the height of Madonna Studies, Beyoncé effectively has challenged the *Dreamgirls* narrative that black female superstardom comes at the cost of betraying one’s ‘authentic’ blackness. Even before becoming known as ‘unapologetically black’ with her 2016 Super Bowl performance of ‘Formation’ and the *Lemonade* album, Beyoncé had come to be recognised in the American mainstream press as ‘by far the “blackest” – musically and aesthetically – of all the post-Madonna pop divas’ (Rosen

2013). The scholarly attention that Beyoncé currently receives, including courses at universities, conference panels, special issues of academic journals, and forthcoming monographs, suggests that Beyoncé Studies might become the Madonna Studies of the 2010s. This time, the relevance of blackness cannot be ignored as easily.

In 2008, Daphne A. Brooks published a convincing analysis of Beyoncé's 2006 album *B'Day*, arguing that the album 'articulates the questions and concerns of black women who are wary of having their movements controlled and policed in the public eye' (Brooks 2008, p. 201). Two years later, Ellis Cashmore published 'Buying Beyoncé', in which he mentions Brooks' analysis, but treats it rather dismissively, emphasising instead his – also convincing – argument that Beyoncé is most of all a brand, a commodity that transcends race (Cashmore 2010, pp. 141–142). Here I cannot help but notice the difference in ethnic, gender, and national identity of these two scholars: the former a black female American, the latter a white male European. Is it possible that Cashmore just does not recognise Beyoncé's potential political significance for African American women, simply because he is a white European man? Without suggesting that only black women can comment on Beyoncé as a pop-cultural phenomenon, I do believe that white, male, European academics like Cashmore and myself should take Damon Young's advice to heart.

To me, this does not mean that I will no longer lecture, publish, or present conference papers on Beyoncé, as I find the emerging Beyoncé Studies too significant not to participate. It does mean that I will 'wait' before writing and first continue to read the work by black female scholars that have written on Beyoncé and/or other black pop divas, including, among others, Daphne A. Brooks (2008, 2014), Simone C. Drake (2014), Aisha Durham (2012), Nicole R. Fleetwood (2015), Farah Jasmine Griffin (2011), Emily J. Lordi (2013), Francesca T. Royster (2013), Marquita R. Smith (2017), and Kimberly Springer (2007). Three decades after my very first Diana Ross concert, and thanks to Beyoncé Studies, the black pop divas that came before Beyoncé – such as Ross, Tina Turner, Donna Summer, Grace Jones, Whitney Houston, and Janet Jackson – have moved from the important yet niche study of disco and gay diva worship to the centre of US American pop culture, finally receiving the full scholarly attention that they deserve.

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