

Lemonade:

How Beyonce Manifested the Lemons of Black America Into Something Sweet

Eglen D. Galindo, Andrea Ruedas, Zora Z. Williams

Stanford University

Introduction

Akin to the old saying, ‘When life gives you lemons, make lemonade,’ music superstar Beyoncé Knowles turns the issues of police brutality and the patriarchal dominance of women—the lemons of Black America into something sweet. In her most recent album *Lemonade*, Beyoncé includes striking cultural visuals, sound bytes from Black historical figures, and consistent African and African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to develop a musical statement about the state of Black America. However, in addition to the mistreatment of communities of color by authorities, she takes advantage of the current spotlight on the black community, sparked by the death of Trayvon Martin, to surface other aspects of black culture including the role of superstition in matriarch dominant households and the expectations around the sexual expression for women. All of these insights are manifested through her language and use of AAVE, most notably used in the songs, “Sorry”, “Don’t Hurt Yo’self”, and “Formation”. Her usage spotlights four important topics 1) the legitimacy of AAVE as a variation of English, 2) a platform to discuss issues in Black America, 3) the struggles of women in a patriarchal society, 4) and Black superstition as a historical source of dominance for black women.

Legitimacy of AAVE as a Variation of English

Firstly, in the song “Sorry”, one of the most acclaimed songs from *Lemonade*, Beyoncé extensively uses AAVE lexicons, syntax, and phonology. Some of the phonological uses of AAVE include the realization of the velar η as alveolar n seen in words such as “lyin, grindin, thinkin” and the monophthongization of vowels as in the word “bye” which is pronounced as /bae/ (Rickford, 1999). Interestingly, she does not use AAVE syntax as often as she uses

phonology but there are some instances where she omits the copula and uses a stressed BIN. One lexical item in her lyrics gained a tremendous amount of attention and can be found in the last line of “Sorry” which reads, “You better call Becky with the good hair”; it refers to an average white woman with easy-to-manage hair and also references Beyoncé’s husband’s alleged mistress.

As Filmer explains, “Ignorance, racism, and white guilt make it difficult for most Americans to see why many African-Americans would want to maintain a distinctive identity from a society that has too often been tolerant of white supremacy and poverty” (Filmer, 2003, p. 264). While Beyoncé faced backlash simply for her inclusion of AAVE in her lyrics, the mere presence of AAVE validates AAVE as a dialect of English, which has for centuries faced harsh discrimination because of its use (Filmer, 2003). However, there was no outcry from non-AAVE speakers that Beyoncé’s lyrics were incomprehensible unlike Rihanna’s song “Work” which was critiqued for its use of Jamaican Creole and patois pronunciations (Arceneaux, 2016). Considering the popularity *Lemonade* has garnered, this means that a majority of Beyoncé’s audience understands and accepts AAVE to some degree. Additionally, Beyoncé uses her reputation as an internationally recognized artist to legitimize the use of African American Vernacular English, a tactic recognized by H.S. Alim who claims

the artists and participants in the Hip Hop Nation, in seeking to present a "street-conscious" identity, are the main preservers and maintainers of AAL. Further support for the Hip Hop Nation's potential impact on AAL is found in Rowe (2003), who suggests that Hip Hop artists employ a "performance register" and increase speakers' awareness of [AAVE] features (Alim, 2005, p.16)

Even though Beyoncé is not a hip hop artist, her influence has the same effect. Her inclusion of AAVE also creates solidarity among the Black community because it proclaims AAVE as a perfectly acceptable language while celebrating and preserving Black and African-American culture by denying the infiltration of Standard American English (SAE) (Baugh, 1999).

Platforms to Discuss Issues in Black America

Next, in Beyoncé's "Formation" video, she capitalizes on her stardom and reach to create a platform to discuss issues in Black America, most notably, police brutality. The prevalence of African and African American Vernacular English establishes the songs as a Black space; a forum for a Black audience to vent and connect with the emotions related to the issues (including police brutality) currently plaguing Black communities. The lyrics utilize syntactical features of AAVE including monophthongization as she says /a/ instead of /aɪ/, lack of rhoticity, saying /coʊnɪ/ instead corny, velar η realized to alveolar n , styling becomes /staɪlɪn/, and the deletion of first unstressed syllable: \emptyset cause (Rickford, 1999). This unites Black listeners with Beyoncé as she uses their voice to make a statement rather than using the standard voice of white America that she has employed in the past.

Furthermore, the visuals she presents further engage the discussion and analysis about Black America. These images portray the reality of Black America and the ideal response to the current issues it faces. In depicting the state of police brutality, the video shows an all white police force surrendering to a young Black boy in a black hoodie (Formation 4:22). The black hoodie serves as the symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement that was sparked by the murder of Trayvon Martin ("Trayvon Martin," n.d.), that in turn has spiraled into the scrutiny of the

relationship of law enforcement and communities of color. The inclusion of that scene illustrates Beyoncé's support for police assessing their circumstances before reacting brashly to suspects of color.

In continuation, as a performer that has developed throughout the Hip Hop era, Beyoncé exhibits some of the qualifications that a female performer in the Hip-Hop genre must possess to succeed in a predominantly White country. This includes using her long, often straight blonde hair,(that is sometimes cornrowed) seen in "Don't Hurt Yo' Self," and having a curvy, yet slim body; all of these aspects are necessary for a Black woman to succeed in the music industry which recording artist Erykah Badu can attest to (Lanehart, 2009). Her hair shows the "Push/pull, love/hate relationship to White America" described by W. E. B. Du Bois (Lanehart, 2009, p. 293). It is the pressure of White standards that explain her use of white hair dye. However, by having cornrows, Beyoncé attempts to take back a hairstyle that is integral to Black culture and to maintain a duality between her goals of success and her heritage. Ironically, Beyoncé does this at a time when cornrows have been gaining attention and popularity among non-Black people showing that the non-Blacks view Black culture as "cool" (Filmer, 2003; Rickford & Rickford, 2000). As Black culture becomes more trendy, it has become easier for Beyoncé to demonstrate aspects of Blackness in her music, but now she can do so without alienating her White audience.

Moreover, throughout her career, Beyoncé has used her sexuality as a way to make her music more attractive and also as a medium to develop her image. In the same song, she has driven away from the exploitation of her body image that Hip-Hop is known for. In comparison to her other videos, she uses clothes that cover most of her body while still showing her curvy

shape and cleavage (Lanehart, 2009). Beyonce pushes further away from the sensual dancing female “Hip Hoppas” are known for and continues, “raising the stakes on race and gender,” by using brash gestures male performers like 2Pac are known to use in their music videos such as aggressive arm swinging and fight-like motions (Morgan, 2005, p. 162).

Struggles of Woman in a Patriarchal American Society

Subsequently, Beyoncé starts “Don’t Hurt Yo’ Self,” by reciting excerpts from the poetry of the London based poet Warsan Shire whose line, “my fathers arms around my mother's neck, fruit too ripe to eat,” (Shire, 2012) echo the struggle of Black women in violent relationships. Elaine Richardson (2007, p. 162) explains, “one way to read females’ voicing of violence is as imagined nation-building,”- doing this creates unity among women, but especially Black women, to address the abuse. The Hip Hop era has depicted Black men expressing their masculinity by suppressing Black women figures (Filmer, 2003). Beyoncé’s lyrics defy Black hypermasculinity by stating she is a strong woman who can do much better on her own if her partner fails to support and respect her. In the final lines of the song she sings, “Love God herself,” referencing God as female which is against the tradition of Western society. This, like her possession of the Black female body as a medium of empowerment, is deeply looked down by the American public who often tends to attribute symbols of power to males and does not hesitate to assign derogatory terms to this type of work (Filmer, 2003).

Additionally, Black female “Hip Hoppas” do not have the liberty of forming their own identity because they must conform to the definition and standards of the oppressive White patriarchy (Lanehart, 2009; Richardson, 2003). These pressures prevented Beyonce from

producing *Lemonade*, a challenging, self defining album, at an earlier stage in her career (Filmer, 2003). Still, throughout *Lemonade*, Beyonce chooses self-respect as her area of development because of the freedom that accompanies her international success (Lanehart, 2009). In doing so, she empowers the women who listen to her album and who struggle to break the sexist patriarchal barrier.

Furthermore, in regards to the visual aspects of the *Lemonade* album, the song “Don’t Hurt Yo’ Self” includes a sound byte from Malcolm X , a public revolutionary figure , that sheds light on the undervalue of Black woman in America. His statements serve as a tool to challenge anti-Black female stereotypes (Richardson, 2003). Malcolm X uses a Black preacher style that makes great use of a rhythmic tone with highs and low intonation, as well as a participation from the audience before him (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). X seeks to unite the Black community and to create a platform to discuss the issues that affect it, similar to Beyoncé’s approach. It is important that this message comes from a figure like X in order for the visual album to maintain its connection with the underlying African American style Beyonce uses and to corroborate the theme of Black women that is presented. As the album progresses, Beyonce asserts her dominance as a Black woman in a cis-hetero White patriarchy in another song, “Sorry”, both through its visual components and the use of AAVE. Through her use of AAVE, she is able to demonstrate her anger and empowerment in the patriarchy. When there is the use of the stressed BIN, “Lookin’ at my watch he shoulda BIN home”, Beyonce, who serves as a representative of betrayed Black women, is angry that her partner has not yet arrived and that she is still waiting for him (Rickford, 1999). In other instances, such as “I ain’t thinkin bout you” and “I ain’t sorry” in which she uses phonological and lexical AAVE features, Beyonce takes control of her

situation and asserts self-love by leaving behind the man who continues to hurt her (Rickford, 1999). By assuming the role of the powerful, dominant woman in a relationship and abandoning the dependent version of herself, Beyonce also critiques the women who do not examine the intersection of the patriarchy: of Blackness, and lacking agency (Morgan, 2005).

However, the lyrics of “Sorry” also demonstrate the dominance and power which women, especially Black women, have. Beyonce constantly uses explicit and violent language throughout *Lemonade* which is in the tradition of the “Bad Sistahs” which Morgan explains: “Black women performers may use explicit language, be both sexual and nonsexual, defiant and compliant. They exploit the power of their sexuality” (as cited in Richardson, 2007, p. 799). Following this tradition, the lyrics of “Sorry” invites its listeners to “[put their] middle fingers up, put them hands high” as retaliation to the mistreatment of their partners and of a society which is tolerant of abuse, infidelity, and neglect from a man. In a protest of the misogyny present in previous albums and by other hip-hop/rap artists, the lyrics of “Sorry” challenge the pimp-ho stereotype in which Beyonce responds to the advances of a man by responding with lyrics of womanly dominance and self-respect as in “He tryin’ to roll me up, I ain’t pickin up” (Richardson, 2003; Dyson, 1996).

Another strategy to tackle the misogyny and patriarchal tone of hip-hop and rap is to exploit the “bad Black girl video vixen” imagery through the visual components of songs (Richardson, 2003, p. 298). Throughout the visual video of “Sorry”, Beyonce appears dressed in all black, surrounded by Black women who are all dancing in sync and twerking while she sits in a throne. The use of alluring dance and physical appearance are used by women hip-hop artists as leverage in a reality where their lives and ability are constantly ridiculed; by doing so,

Beyoncé claims control of her Black body and incites other women to do the same. Instead of being sexualized by others, she encourages other women to accept and control their own sexuality and race and to use it as a source of pride and power (Morgan, 2005). *Lemonade* is a testament to Beyoncé and other female MCs proclaiming “Black women’s history, social life, and dreams of being treated with respect as women in America” (Morgan, 2005, p. 428).

Introduces Black Superstition as a Historical Source of Dominance for Black Woman

In conclusion, in Beyoncé’s track “Formation” the audience witnesses a culmination and manifestation of all the aforementioned themes, but in particular, it showcases the idea of superstition as a historical source of dominance for Black woman. The video of the song is set in Louisiana in a post Hurricane Katrina era and it features images of primarily Black bodies who are reclaiming their Blackness with a vengeance in a dilapidated environment. At the forefront of this is Beyoncé with an all Black female dance ensemble. She reinforces her influence as a Black woman from this environment in a multitude of ways. First through her language with her iconic climatic verse “you mix that negro with that creole make a Texas bama.” This line highlights her allegiance and connection to Louisiana with her creole ancestry while providing us with the background of why she is qualified to speak on this topic. The AAVE lexicon “bama” meaning child/person links the experience of Louisiana Blacks to that of all speakers of AAVE.

Secondly, Beyoncé asserts her dominance through her use of superstitious imagery. Historically, in Louisiana there have been female figures, like Marie Laveau and her daughter, who practiced voodoo and black magic and were feared and revered by communities (Brouillette, 1983). The imagery in “Formation” is reminiscent of these feared woman figures

with scenes where Beyoncé is pictured in a Louisiana style mansion surrounded by an all male service staff (59:29 *Lemonade*) while her wardrobe features choker necklaces and lace wear in a traditional sitting room with her female counterparts (Varela, n.d.). Each time these images surface Beyoncé sings empowering and striking lyrics that reinforces the woman in power symbol. While she stands in front of a Louisiana style mansion with her male staff, she brandishes her middle fingers singing “if he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobsta.” In this lyric Beyoncé employs characteristic linguistic features of AAVE including deletion of the third person singular “s” in conjugation (Rickford, 1999), the lexicon “ass”, and r-lessness (Rickford & Rickford, 2000). By sing this Beyoncé trivializes her sexual relationship to not just a mere exchange- but an untraditional exchange in which she controls the output and resources. Her use of explicatives and seemingly vulgar hand gestures illustrates “Black women’s directness, what Arthur Spears (2001) characterizes as speech with ‘events such as cussin’ out’ (cursing directed to a particular addressee) (Lanehart, 2009, p. 240).” By being direct and unrivaled in her themes and mannerisms Beyoncé truly conveys authority and power in her environment. In sum, her vernacular usage, allusion to superstition and powerful voodoo magic and directness underline the Black woman as a force to be reckoned with, a symbol to respect and a resounding voice to consider, similar to the treatment of women who practiced black magic.

Conclusion

Overall, it is evident throughout the course of *Lemonade* that Beyoncé widens the looking glass of the issues of Black America and black culture. However, she does so in a way that is unforgettable and unlike she has ever done before. She weaves unexplored facets of African

American culture into the visual portion of the album including the role of Black superstition as a symbol of dominance amongst Black women. The visuals help add to the captivating effect of the album as it forces listeners to take notice and to take her words with weight. Then, she sheds light on the continuing struggle of Black women, specifically on the black woman's experience in a patriarchal society, touching on their undervaluation from the government and the repression of their sexuality in comparison to men. She refocuses the audience on both new aspects of Black America and old aspects that have been overlooked.

In the end, she does culminate her commentary on the state of Black America through her consistent use of AAVE, in addition to helping legitimize it as variation of English, she increases the exposure of the vernacular to non-AAVE speakers. In doing so, Beyoncé breaks down the stereotypes linked to speakers of AAVE as she, an affluent black woman, subscribes to the same language pattern of a Black blue collar worker. Moreover, her use of AAVE brings credibility to the current discussion around police brutality as *Lemonade's* commentary is congruent with Black America's outcries around the issue and in their way of speech no less. The fact that Beyoncé uses her medium of work and reputation to create a platform to discuss issues in Black America is a true testament to the pending crisis in this country. It is noteworthy for iconic figures like Beyoncé to use their influence to elevate the voices, humanity and concerns of underrepresented communities.

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