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# Identity and Écriture Féminine in Beyoncé's Lemonade

*Morgan Lewis*

On the morning of February 6, 2016, Beyoncé dropped the anthem that would come to frame her entire upcoming album: "Formation." She sang, "My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana / You mix that Negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama," declaring her heritage proudly to the world (Beyoncé). I remember watching the music video four times in a row on the couch in my small apartment and then replaying it for everyone who walked in my door that day—I could talk of nothing else. This song was not written for me, a white woman living in Utah, and yet I felt its impact deeply. Yes, Beyoncé was addressing current controversies and openly acknowledging her stake in those issues, but, more importantly, she was presenting her Self—and doing so unapologetically—which made me feel inspired to do the same. The rest of the *Lemonade* album was released two months later, and it became abundantly clear that this was her magnum opus: a cohesive and intensely personal journey told through a visual album, a unique medium combining poetry, music, and film, and the vehicle through which she could explore and articulate her identity. By presenting her past experiences through the mode of what Hélène Cixous coined *l'écriture féminine*, Beyoncé made an important contribution to the

dialogue about identity and self-acceptance, thereby allowing other women, especially women of color, to explore their own experiences and identities in the world today.

This problem of identity has long been debated by philosophers who struggled to determine whether the “self” actually exists and, if it does, how it can be discovered and defined in relation to other entities. Hume, as one of these philosophers grappling to define identity, found a lack of both simplicity and stability in his attempts to define his own self, contrary to Locke who claimed that there are certain unchanging elements in a substance’s identity. In his essay, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume writes “I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are remov’d for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist” (Hume 252). Hume, here, begins to argue that pinning down a single core identity is impossible, or at least unsatisfying, because a being’s identity is based solely upon its perceptions, which are constantly present, ever changing, and wholly dependent upon the being’s sentience. This observation in himself leads him to the larger claim that “[mankind] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity...all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment” (252). For Hume, our identities are constantly in flux and reside in our perceptions. In other words, our identity is determined by our minds in our observations about ourselves and the world around us.

Though Hume added an important layer of nuance to the issue of identity by acknowledging that volatile impressions construct a significant part of one’s self, he overlooked another substantial contributor to identity: the body. In her essay “The Laugh of Medusa,” Hélène Cixous builds from Hume’s theories, discussing the essential nature of the body in women’s writing. Cixous, like Hume, rejects the notion that the self is either singular or unwavering. Rather, she posits the notion that multiple “alterities”—or sources of otherness—exist within each person. Marta Segarra notes that, for Cixous, “the other is always plural, and ‘no other is first’ among these others. This also implies the necessity and importance of acknowledging the singularity of these multiple others” (100). This theory is reminiscent of Hume’s ideologies about identity: multiple perceptions are at play in forming

identity, and a stable identity is difficult to pin down because all alterities are influencing each other equally and simultaneously within a single being. For Cixous, some of these alterities include her femininity, her Jewish faith, and her Algerian nationality.

Yet Cixous moves beyond Hume as she discusses the role of the body in expressing identity—especially that of the female body. Cixous suggests the need for an *écriture féminine*, a “female writing.” But this “feminine practice of writing” is not binary, and is not even limited to only women. Segarra instead suggests that although *l’écriture féminine* cannot be defined without oversimplifying its intricacy, it “might be characterized by ‘writing with the body,’” or, allowing the perceptions that define one’s identity to flow freely, thus allowing the “self” to be heard (21). *L’écriture féminine*, therefore, is the medium that expresses the complex connection between one’s perceptions and one’s body—that connection being the source from which identity originates. According to Cixous,

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display. . . . Censor body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. (32).

Cixous recognizes that, for much of history, a woman’s body has been owned and censored by others while her own stories have been silenced. In freely writing her experiences, woman expresses and reclaims her body which has been so heavily censored. She is then able to interpret the alterities that constitute her identity.

That the body is inextricably linked to perception, and therefore to identity, is especially apparent in women. In her essay, “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,” Sandra Lee Bartky recognizes that Foucault overlooked the different experiences of men and women as defined by their bodies. She writes, “To overlook the forms of subjection that engender the feminine body is to perpetuate the silence and powerlessness of those upon whom these disciplines have been imposed” (27). Bartky reveals that current capitalistic society has placed stricter and more punishable regulations on women’s bodies, including body size, movement, hair, and beautification—regulations that many men often do not understand because

the patriarchy allows them a wider degree of freedom in performing their Selves.

Although society's expectations of gender and bodies also constrain men, these regulations often affect a woman's sense of self even more deeply. Bartky maintains that "To have a body felt to be 'feminine'—a body socially constructed through the appropriate practices—is in most cases crucial to a woman's sense of herself as female and, since persons currently can be only as male or female, to her sense of herself as an existing individual" (39). Bartky solidifies the theory that both the body and the mind interact and depend upon each other to create identity through alterities. These alterities are not limited to gender, but include race, religion, nationality, and other societal organizing functions. As a woman forms her identity, her body is interpreted by her society, which then projects its expectations of femininity (and other alterities) onto her, shaping her experience. A woman's experience colors her self-perception, which determines the future choices she will make with her body, which will then evolve her existing perceptions—and the cycle continues. Because it is nearly impossible to dissociate one's body from its surrounding culture, the body retains a profound influence on one's personal identity.

As women write to express their personal identity, they then liberate others to do the same. Cixous writes, "I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs" (28). This is the power of *l'écriture féminine*: it enables both the writer and the consumer of the text to discover and express their Selves more fully—especially when those roles are played by women. In *Lemonade*, Beyoncé uses the relationship between her experiences, her body, and her writing (the visual album acting as a written text) to form and express her identity, thereby freeing other women to do the same. At the beginning of the album, she reads a line from a Warsan Shire poem: "The past and the future merge to meet us here / What luck. What a f—ing curse." In *Lemonade*, time converges as Beyoncé analyzes past, present, and future to find her place in each. She considers her history and heritage, addresses contemporary issues that affect her as a Black woman, and invites her audience to help her break the curse and reshape the future.

The *Lemonade* visual album begins with the song, "Pray You Catch Me," a soft confessional that Beyoncé has lost trust in her significant other.

She sings, “You can taste the dishonesty / it’s all over your breath as you pass it off so cavalier. . . . My lonely ear pressed against the walls of your world” as one shot depicts her kneeling in the middle of a stage, and another shows her surrounded by only tall grass (Beyoncé). Her body language and surrounding scenery convey that she is locked out, alone and hurting. The song sets the premise for the album: her journey coming to terms with the infidelity of her husband. This song also presents the visual setting for the album: various places in the Deep South—the site of slavery and oppression for Beyoncé’s ancestors, but also of her childhood happiness. The scenery is both beautiful and painful, and in the silent moments between songs, the viewer can feel those conflicted sentiments in the moss hanging from the trees and the run-down plantation shacks. It is both her long-term and her short-term history, both her ancestry and her recent marital struggles, that have brought her to this album and have shaped her identity. Cixous explains, “In woman, personal history blends together with the history of all women, as well as national and world history” (35). And so, Beyoncé, in choosing to share this deeply personal story, addresses a cause much greater than herself. This album is about her personal journey of perseverance and forgiveness, but it is also about the journey of Black women in America, who are struggling to reconcile their history as, according to Malcolm X, “the most disrespected . . . the most unprotected . . . the most neglected person in America” (qtd. in Beyoncé).

The journey of Black women, especially those in America, has an arduous one with no foreseeable end. Rose Weitz, in her essay “A History of Women’s Bodies,” recalls that because African-American slaves were considered property and had no human rights, “Rape was common, both as a form of ‘entertainment’ for white men and a way of breeding more slaves, since the children of slave mothers were automatically slaves” (4). The results of this practice were that Black women were and are still hypersexualized, and therefore are often ignored or even blamed when they suffer rape and abuse—a problem that became especially evident once again in the recent R. Kelly case (Ross, “R. Kelly’s arrest”). Black women also continue to face a beauty standard that glorifies and caters to white women. Beyoncé addresses both the issue of residual effects of slavery and the issue of biased beauty standards in *Lemonade*, using her own story and her art to begin to correct the misconceptions about the bodies of Black women.

In the song “Six Inch,” Beyoncé reclaims Black female sexuality, subverting the previous tendency to hypersexualize Black women and turning that sexuality into female empowerment. The lyrics read,

Six inch heels, she walked in the club like nobody’s business  
... she murdered everybody and I was her witness  
She works for the money, she work for the money  
From the start to the finish  
And she worth every dollar, she worth every dollar  
And she worth every minute.

These lyrics focus far more on the subject’s act of working and earning a paycheck, rather than the aesthetic or sexual pleasure of her line of work, be it dancing or sex work. This humanizes the subject rather than objectifying her. The video for this song is colored entirely by the red light, indicating that the song is about the red-light district. However, instead of sexually exploiting the Black body, as media often does, the video focuses on female empowerment rather than male pleasure. Men hardly appear in the video, shown only from Beyoncé’s view as she rides in the back of a car, passing them all by. In the shots onstage, the focus is on Beyoncé as a performer in strong stances, not on a gawking audience. For the shots that depict Beyoncé in bed, she is fully clothed and alone—no man is present. In other shots, Beyoncé stands, swinging around a red lightbulb on a cord, symbolizing that she is in full control in her career. Therefore, the song is empowering to the so-called “working woman”—the female sex workers—who are doing what they have to do to support themselves. Because Black women have been so disadvantaged in America, prostitution or dancing are often their only options for making enough money to survive. These women use their sexuality, not because they have an insatiable thirst for sex, but because they have no alternative. This song switches that power dynamic by focusing on the workers, depicting them not as sex slaves, but as career women who “love the grind”—who love to work hard and are determined to succeed.

Beyoncé also subverts the power structure through the costuming in *Lemonade*, which is reminiscent of the antebellum South. Beyoncé and the surrounding Black women wear large brimmed hats, wide flowing skirts, and thick puffed sleeves, brandishing fans and wearing jewels while sitting upon rocking chairs or plush benches. In the antebellum South, this was the wardrobe of the upper-class, the white plantation holders who owned slaves

and profited from their work. However, by clothing the descendants of slaves in the apparel that the slave owners would have worn, Black women are given the power represented by that clothing. This allows Black women to reclaim an empowered identity rather than an oppressed one—perhaps an identity they would have inherited if they had not been uprooted from their African home. Beyoncé is writing herself and Black women into the narrative, speaking up for the silenced women who came before her by reversing the power dynamic and adorning Black bodies in the lavish antebellum clothing.

Another body-related issue for Black women is their hair. While Beyoncé's signature long blonde locks are iconic, she sings in "Formation," "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros," responding to the discussion surrounding whether she should style Blue Ivy's hair differently by expressing pride in her daughter's natural look. It's common knowledge that Black women's hair requires different maintenance than white women's hair because of the difference in texture. Often, society deems those hairstyles which protect Black women's hair to be "unprofessional" or "unattractive." Not only does Beyoncé defend her choice about her daughter's hair, she incorporates more typical Black hairstyles in her own appearance throughout the visual album—including corn rows, head wraps, afros, and braids. Beyoncé addresses the hair issue once again in "Sorry," singing, "You better call Becky with the good hair" as she says goodbye to an unfaithful partner. The name "Becky" here refers to any generic white woman, and Beyoncé is insulting her partner for buying into white beauty standards and choosing a white woman with "good hair" to be unfaithful with. In rejecting the white standard for hair, Beyoncé embraces her own hair as one of the alterities that makes up her identity and thereby allows other women of color to do the same.

Beyoncé's reclaiming of the female body involves more than just physical appearance, though. It also includes ideals of gender roles. Cixous asserts that, while each human has both masculinity and femininity inside of them, women are generally more accepting of the masculinity within them than men are with femininity in them. She calls this "bisexuality," or, "the presence—variously manifest and insistent according to each person, male or female—of both sexes, nonexclusion either of the difference or of one sex" (36). Cixous recognizes that each person has varied amounts of masculinity and femininity within them, and explains that bisexuality calls for acknowledging and playing with the difference between the two while still including both in one's identity and Self performance.



Beyoncé exemplifies this idea of embracing the difference between masculinity and femininity, which is especially prominent in the video for “Don’t Hurt Yourself.” The video opens with Beyoncé reading Warsan Shire’s poetry: “Why can’t you see me? / Why can’t you see me? / Everyone else can” and she glares into the camera, which moves away and downward (2016). By using this line of poetry, Beyoncé expresses her frustration that she is getting recognition from seemingly everyone except her significant other. She pleads for his attention and, in resolution, decides to speak in his more masculine language using her body language, emotion, and words. “Who the f— do you think I am?” she shouts to the camera which records her from a low angle, creating an air of intimidation. She walks with a slightly flexed swagger, imitating the posture typical of hip-hop and rap music videos by male artists such as that in the “Otis” music video from the Kanye West and Jay-Z’s *Watch the Throne* album. By presenting herself as masculine, Beyoncé is able to subvert the power structure which privileges the male voice, appropriating the masculine voice to speak her message. Yet, this appropriation is not acting out a character separate from herself, but simply the revealing of an aspect already in her identity. She is a powerful woman demanding to be heard, and she is capable of using her inherent masculinity to seize that power.

Through her very personal journey depicted in *Lemonade*, Beyoncé invites others to participate in creating their own stories, seizing power, and moving forward with her. She, like Cixous, is writing to a larger cause and recognizes the individuality in each person she addresses. Cixous writes:

There is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have in common I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing; their stream of phantasms is incredible. (27–28)

Therefore, identity is not only constantly in flux, it is entirely unique. Though there are common threads caused by shared experiences, women—and all people—are as diverse as snowflakes. This individuality, however, creates a space for celebration, both for common connection among people and for the infinite possibilities for inimitability in each person. By demonstrating that this album is about more than her own experience, Beyoncé sends out a call

to Black women to join her in the process of reconciliation—to feel the pain, anger, grief, and healing with her.

Throughout the entire album, Beyoncé opens a space for her viewers to put themselves into the narrative by showing headshots of Black women, average and unglamorized, in their everyday beauty. These headshots are a periodic reminder that the issues that Beyoncé addresses—infidelity and marital strife—affect a greater demographic than just herself. The headshots are shown for two or three seconds, giving the audience enough time to see the humanity and individuality of each woman's expression. Some of these women include the mothers of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and Mike Brown—three Black men who died from police brutality—holding the portraits of their sons. These headshots connect Beyoncé to her audience in a different way by demonstrating that Beyoncé, even with her fame and success, is not above the impact of racial injustices. Just as she invites viewers to feel her personal heartbreak, she allows herself to empathize with plight of the common Black woman.

The song "Freedom" shows the power of Black women coming together to support each other. The stage is the centerpiece in this song, beginning with a shot of all the women sitting on stage facing an empty theater. Beyoncé then takes the stage and begins singing a capella to an audience of all Black women, demonstrating that this is the time for Black women to shine, and to do so for no one but themselves. The connection between Black women is also prominent in this song through the symbolism of the tree, which extends in deep curves, draped in Spanish moss. The tree's shape evokes the curves of female bodies, and the moss reflects the textured hair of women of color. Women sit in the tree and stand around it; all are different in age, dress, and appearance, but all are facing the same direction. The tree here is also symbolic of a family tree, reminding women that they are all connected through genealogical heritage and shared experience. In facing the same direction, the women indicate that they have the same goals and are looking forward, hopeful and ready to make things happen. There is power in their stances and their solidarity with one another.

In addition to the connection among Black women shared through common experience, Beyoncé emphasizes love as the connective healing balm that will fix broken relationships and fractured histories. Once again, she places herself on equal footing with average people by juxtaposing her

own home videos with videos of other couples of all ages, races, and sexual orientations. She sings,

They say true love's the greatest weapon  
to win the war caused by pain . . .  
True love brings salvation back into me  
With every tear came redemption  
And my torturer became my remedy. (Beyoncé 2016)

The love that helped her overcome the trials in her marriage is the same love that will help heal the nation of its past blights against Black women. In these lines, she demonstrates that one cannot heal without confronting and working with the cause of the pain—in other words, true healing cannot be done alone.

Beyoncé's *Lemonade* was lauded as a love letter to Black women because of the album's focus on women of color and the issues they confront. But although she spoke to a larger demographic of Black women, *Lemonade* was so poignant because she was writing her self, and therefore writing *l'écriture féminine* with which women could identify. Cixous prophesied the power of *l'écriture féminine* when she wrote, "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (27). Though Black women have historically been violently torn away from owning their own bodies, *Lemonade* allowed Beyoncé to reconnect with and celebrate her body, which allowed other women to do the same. By exploring her own identity, she wrote Black women into the narrative and, because of her widespread platform and fan base, she enabled women on a massive scale to tell the stories they had previously hidden away. Cixous theorizes, "Writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures" (31). The process of writing and reading stories is the process of creating culture. When new stories are told that contradict the predominant culture, a transformation begins to take place—which can be seen in the impact of *Lemonade* only one year later. The album was the third best-selling album in the United States, and the top best-selling album globally in 2016, demonstrating that

Beyoncé's words resonated on a massive scale. ("Nielsen Music"; "Global Music"). The influence of her empowering album could be felt in the lives of women—especially Black women—from its inception, contributing to an environment that made possible powerful cultural moments like the Women's March, the #MeToo movement, and countless acts of resistance against racial injustice. Although there is still a long way to go to mend the past and current treatment of Black women, through *l'écriture féminine* like *Lemonade*, women can begin to write their own stories and enact the change necessary to reach reconciliation and healing.

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