Thinking Blue Marxism and the (Post)Human Red Writing

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## 5. Beyoncé

Re: 'The Day Beyoncé Turned Black'. Many of us who teach introductory English courses will more than likely recall this title or something close to it as the subject heading attached to chains of email discussions that followed Beyoncé's Super Bowl half-time performance back in February 2016. It refers of course to the skit that aired on *Saturday Night Live*, that quickly went viral, about 'the day that [white people] lost their damn white minds' after the drop of her 'Formation' video, the song she choose to cover on prime time network television. Her performance of the song to the approximately 111 million live viewers that day, since viewed online by many more, had become, as they say, a 'teachable moment'. The question I would like to investigate here is why? My reason for doing so is to put forward the kind of 'transformative' reading/writing/thinking that I practice with my students and which, I believe, can empower them to pursue 'lifelong learning and civic participation', as the mission statement of the college where I teach puts it.

Many culturally obvious answers easily come to mind as to why Beyoncé had suddenly become much more 'teachable' the day she 'turned black' that revolve around just what 'blackness' might mean today. Perhaps the most vocal response, at least in the mass corporate media outlets like Fox News or CNN, was from conservative voices who perceived her performance, or, at least, said that they did, as a provocation to attack the police. They claimed to find this call to terrorism embedded in the black power imagery Beyoncé alludes to in her half-time performance (raised fist, black berets, etc.) as well as the video (with the image of a police car sinking beneath flood waters). In these tired discourses, 'black', it goes without saying, is never far from 'violence'.

<sup>1 &#</sup>x27;The Day Beyoncé Turned Black', dir. Don Roy King (NBC, 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w&ab\_channel=SaturdayNightLive.

I consider it is important to encourage students to investigate this 'reading' of Beyoncé's performance — with which, at the time, they were already familiar from their own media consumption and discussions on social media — because of how it reads Beyoncé's imagery by taking it out of the context of entertainment, where it normally appears to be trivial and unworthy of our sustained attention, and places it within a political one, where things are usually taken more seriously, as a popular composition textbook puts it.<sup>2</sup> In this way the conservative reading, despite its insistence that entertainment be *merely* entertaining and not 'political' and 'controversial', further demonstrates how 'reading' popular culture has become necessary in our media saturated world which is constantly resignifying the signs of culture to serve multiple and conflictual purposes, as Beyoncé's performance itself showed.

In more popular media such as YouTube and Facebook, Beyoncé's performance, it seems safe to say, received a more favorable response, and she was for the most part praised not only for embracing her blackness but also for adding her voice to popular movements such as Black Lives Matter and protesting against police brutality and mass incarceration, what Michelle Alexander calls the 'new Jim Crow'. However, to stop here and simply rehearse this familiar debate — to, in other words, follow the Graffian imperative and 'teach the conflict' — does not, I argue, really get at the underlying question of why the conflict exists, which, to my mind, should be the primary reason for educators to consider such current events as Beyoncé's 'coming out as black' at the Super Bowl half-time performance a teachable moment.

To be clear, I do not disagree that 'teaching the conflicts' has its uses in the composition class, especially because it disrupts the beginning reader's/writer's habit of assuming that the meaning of a text is exhausted by 'what it means to me'. In other words, teaching reading/writing as an engagement with an ongoing cultural 'conversation' or 'debate' at a minimum requires the student to step outside their

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon, *Signs of Life in the USA: Readings On Popular Culture for Writers* (Boston and New York: Bedford St. Martin's, 2015), p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (*Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Graff, Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1993).

'comfort zone' and see things from the point of view of the 'other', which is of course a primary civic virtue for a democratic culture. The kinds of reading/writing/thinking required by the college composition class should always have as their aim to 'defamiliarize' the student from the 'obviousness' of their own cultural assumptions if only to enable students to become more fully aware of not only what they actually believe but, more importantly, why, and thereby acquire a more articulate and powerful 'voice' in the 'conversations' that they will have in the workplace, the public sphere, and beyond. However, I argue that although 'teaching the conflicts' is necessary, for these reasons it is not in itself sufficient to produce the kind of media literacy that should be the task of the humanities today to advance: what I call 'transformative reading'.

A transformative reading, I argue, is reading beyond the cultural obviousness produced by the dominant media environment in order to uncover the cultural 'unsaid' and thereby not only become a conscious position-taker in the ongoing debates, but also become someone who is able to intervene in them and open up space for change. A transformative reading is necessary for moving beyond the manufactured stalemate of 'they say/I say', as another canonical composition textbook by Graff puts it, in order to show how differences of opinion are really signs of ongoing social conflicts over material resources.<sup>5</sup> In terms of engaging students in a discussion of Beyoncé's Super Bowl half-time performance, this means recognizing that, like all stories, the cultural debate over 'blackness' that it reignited has 'the function of inventing imaginary [...] "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions'.6 Transformative reading thereby enjoins the student to take a fresh look at the issues by investigating the roots of the conflicts in social practices and, in so doing, imagine possible real world solutions. My students call this 'thinking outside the box'. My response is always, 'which box'? I'm not being facetious. Thinking outside the box is one thing; thinking about why thinking is 'boxed' another. What I am inviting them to do, hopefully, is investigate the ideological 'framing' of the issues so they

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter In Academic Writing* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 79.

may begin to surface what is 'outside' ideology and thereby articulate what normally goes 'unsaid'.

As an example of what I mean by transformative reading, let's return to the 'debate' over Beyoncé's half-time performance that was staged in the media. What seemed to be missing in the framing of the debate over Beyoncé's 'coming out as black' is precisely how 'blackness' disguises inequities of power and wealth as a matter of cultural identity. On the one side, blackness is associated with cultural inferiority and violence by the culturally conservative, while on the other, it is made a source of pride in one's racial heritage and 'speaking truth to power'. However, both 'sides' in the staged media debate are really on the same side when it comes to their shared complicity of silence regarding the underlying ideology of 'Formation' and the way in which it conflates black empowerment with market individualism, as when Beyoncé sings, 'You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making' and 'the best revenge is your paper'.7 Is this not precisely the 'positive' message of free market individualism the cultural conservatives are always saying needs to be instilled by civil institutions? Its sentiment echoes, for example, Republican Governor Jan Brewer's law that banned ethnic studies in one Arizona school district on the grounds that it was teaching 'resentment toward a race or class of people' rather than that America is an 'opportunity society' in with all are equally empowered to succeed.8 The conservatives are of course right to recognize that the black power movement generally and the Black Panther Party specifically opposed such libertarian discourse, but not because they were 'un-American', but rather because the commitment to ending racial as well as class oppression requires advancing a socially emancipatory discourse.

On the other side, the 'BeyHive' was right to point out on social

<sup>7</sup> Beyoncé, 'Formation', Lemonade (Colombia, 2016).

<sup>4 &#</sup>x27;Arizona limits ethnic studies in public schools', CNN, 13 May 2010, https://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/05/12/arizona.ethnic.studies/index.html. The targeting of class-consciousness has in the time since this chapter was first published become not only the nationwide justification of MAGA fascists but of neofascists everywhere for attacking any socially critique-al pedagogy as 'cultural Marxism', see, 'Defending Our Right to Learn', ACLU/American Civil Liberties Union, 10 March 2022, https://www.aclu.org/news/free-speech/defending-our-right-to-learn, and David Paternotte and Mieke Verloo, 'De-democratization and the Politics of Knowledge: Unpacking the Cultural Marxism Narrative', Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society, 28.3 (2021), pp. 556–578.

137

media that the song protests racial injustice: it is a call to end, not a call to enact, racial violence. It is 'just a video', after all, and Beyoncé's use of the cultural signs of blackness not only activates the discourse of racial pride, and arguably, commodified 'sexiness', but also represents the kind of cultural politics that has been institutionalized as a result of the civil rights movements since the 60s. In these discourses Beyoncé's use of libertarian ideology must be read ironically, not as a sign of allegiance to the dominant, but in the tradition of a black vernacular that must 'make do' with the master's tools so as to resignify them for black empowerment. In this way, Beyoncé's performance of black pride supports a cultural politics of non-violence as a means to redress racial injustice. However, the equation of blackness with empowerment within the existing social framework through expressions of 'pride' on the master's terms, seems to concede the conservative framing of the issues by silently implying that social movements can at best only ever be protest movements against cultural exclusion that seek inclusion within the ranks of the dominant, rather than radical movements for more fundamental and comprehensive social change seeking to put an end to the mechanisms that produce inequality and injustice in the first place. Beyoncé demonstrates how the cultural appropriation of the signs of black radicalism can serve a culturally assimilationist ideology that, ironically, reiterates and maintains 'blackness' as a mark of 'otherness' that is central to corporatist 'wokeism'. And yet, cultural inclusion within the social arrangements as they are today means the accentuation of cultural 'differences' that elide the fundamental antagonism of class and class ideology between owners and workers, exploiters and exploited.

The shared 'unsaid' assumption of both 'sides' in the media 'debate' that followed Beyoncé's performance seemed to be that if and when social movements become emancipatory and attempt to prepare the people to assume power and establish a society founded on advancing the social good of all rather than individual enrichment, they can only be considered 'violent' because they violate the rule of liberal pluralism that supposedly protects our civil, or, in other words, individuals rights. But, to limit our conception of democracy to the terms of liberal pluralism is to sacrifice democracy to serving the interests of the powerful whose power is furthered by the failure to recognize how the right of the few regularly and systemically disempowers the many. Beyoncé's equating

cultural freedom with monetary enrichment is not simply ironic, after all, but a realistic assessment of the way that the private accumulation of social wealth corrupts democracy. It is her equating cultural freedom with advancement within rather than against the structures of wealth and power that is really the problem because of the way it repeats a familiar story that has 'the function of inventing imaginary [...] "solutions" to unresolvable social contradictions'. It seems to me that to be critically empowered to thoughtfully engage such questions — by changing the framing of the cultural debates through transformative reading rather than assuming the pre-established positions in the culture wars staged in the popular media — should be the goal of the college composition class, especially now at a time when our civil institutions are in crisis as they must serve an increasingly polarized citizenry the majority of which are losing the means to access them.

Transformative reading is empowering and encourages 'lifelong learning and civic participation' not only because it provides students with the analytical skills to read the culture, but because it demonstrates how the student is already placed within the ongoing debates by powerful cultural forces, and, as well, asks them to consider how this is so because these forces are tasked with the purpose of keeping things as they are. Transformative reading defamiliarizes the popular culture landscape for student-citizens — from being 'merely entertaining' to being intellectually and politically serious as well — and thereby transforms their image of themselves from being passive spectators to active participants who are able to change how the world will be.

<sup>9</sup> Jameson, Politcal Unconscious, p. 79.