

## BEYONCÉ IN FORMATION: REMIXING BLACK FEMINISM

**Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley** (author)

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Reviewed by Giuseppe Polise

In her innovative study, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley writes about Beyoncé as a femme-inist. Describing herself, Tinsley offers a definition of the word: “for over twenty years I’ve lived my life as a lipsticked, high heeled, glittering black femme, a queer gender marked by a highly stylized and aestheticized femininity” (2018, 8). Drawing on Sydney Lewis’s attempt to define a black femme-inist criticism, Tinsley intends to explore the co-constitution of self-identified straight and queer femininities, showing that Beyoncé does not need to be labelled as “queer” to be profoundly related to the black femme experience. As a major contemporary black culture signifier, in fact, Beyoncé effectively opposes white heteropatriarchal constructions of black women’s race, gender and sexuality, and unapologetically affirms subjectivity.

Before focusing on the main body of the work, the author engages the issue of femmephobia, too often internalized. In a society where the fear of women has slowly, but steadily turned into the fear of the feminine as synonym for weak, even homosocial contexts tend to replicate heteropatriarchal structures of dominance and take eroticism, sensuality and “girliness” as matters of insufficient interest, and much less do they bother taking seriously those who do. Fiercely claiming her black femme-inist identity, Tinsley urges to collectively recognize desire as a means of challenging critical regimes that demand separation of body and mind for intellectual credibility.

At this point, the reader is enabled to access “Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism” in its intricacy. As partly a memoir, the book follows the example of many post-Black Lives Matter publications that bear witness to the fragility and hardships faced by real black bodies on a daily basis, while nourishing pro-black sentiments. In this specific case, the book sidesteps linear narratives and brings forth personal anecdotes, thoughts on other singers, TV celebrities, and people that have a

place in the life of the author as well as in her growth as a black scholar. All this is skilfully put in conversation with a well-developed cultural analysis of key songs from Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album (2016). However, as deep and rich as the analysis may be, it is not envisioned as the primary goal of the book. "Beyoncé," Tinsley maintains, "is not my target audience. [Rather, this is] a textual mixtape for all the women and femmes" (2018, 14) who know Beyoncé, look up to her and grow in a culture where her (admittedly flawed) contributions to black feminism through popular production can be the beginning of fruitful conversations. What she calls a "Femme-inist mixtape" consists of intertwined pieces of analysis of black women's sexuality and gender, an analysis where the private life of the scholar and the public persona that Beyoncé shows in *Lemonade* smoothly flow into each other. Shedding light on what it means to be femme and how it can be the opposite of weak is indeed at the heart of the book.

Section One is titled "Family Album: Making *Lemonade* out of Marriage, Motherhood and Southern Tradition." In it, Tinsley proposes a reading of Beyoncé's rock song "Don't Hurt Yourself" in its association to the blues of Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holliday. The themes of self-sufficiency, man-shaming, extra-marital sex as a form of revenge, in fact, sustain a parallel between Beyoncé's struggle for agency and that of the great blues women of the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, the sampling of the rock record "When the Levee Breaks" by Led Zeppelin, which in turn was constructed around an old blue classic by Memphis Minnie, hints at the possibility of a re-appropriation of the blue classic itself. In this light, the song would then take a broader cultural meaning, Tinsley maintains: "If she was singing with and to Jack White (producer of *Don't Hurt Yourself*) as the representative of contemporary blues/rock that builds on black women's legacies without giving them acknowledgment and appreciation [...] the revengeful tones would become another kind of black feminist artistic protest" (2018, 36).

Included in the same section, the song "Daddy Lessons" provides the possibility to focus on black feminist models of Southern motherhood that defy stereotyping. As the many memories of her paternal grandmother fill the pages of the section, they also intercept autobiographies of white country-music women who perpetuate the narrative of the Southern sentimental mother. In opposition to such a pious, enduring, and unrealistically sweet model, the type of mother Tinsley concludes Beyoncé aims at portraying in "Daddy Lessons" is not at all fictionalized. Differently from the unreachable

model of the (white) Southern mother, the black mama is flawed, yet her existence is tangible. She is not an invisible shadow in her children's life, she is not waiting, hoping and praying like the sentimental mother; mothering for her means fighting: it means protecting herself and her children by any means necessary. In the idealized plantation villa where the video has been shot, Beyoncé as the narrator is heard saying "you go to the bathroom to apply your mother's lipstick [...] You must wear it like she wears disappointment on her face." As much as she wants to be like her mother, Tinsley concludes, she induces the viewer to the realization that she cannot be anything like her: "Teach me how to make him beg. Let me make up for the years he made you wait" she chants. The love and admiration for her mother do not leave her short-sighted. For her, succumbing to the man, to be put on a revered yet dusty pedestal is not an option. Acknowledge the complexity of "black mamas" lives and feelings is what she aspires to.

Section Two is titled "Most Bomb Pussy: Towards a Black Feminist Pleasure Politics," and it quickly moves from the maternal scenarios that characterize section One to explore the black femme-inist use of sexual politics in the "6 Inch" music video as they coincide with the scholar's strong rebuke of respectability politics. While dispensing several anecdotes about the harsh criticism and praise that her wardrobe choices on university campus have drawn to her over the years, Tinsley resorts to Beyoncé's conjuring of many entities from an Afrocentric tradition to urge an end to respectability and its toxic by-products. The most relevant of these images is the 'mulatta prostitute of New Orleans', which in turn intrinsically evokes other mythical entities like Yoruba goddesses Oshun and Pompa Gira, divine reflections of lust and promiscuity. Because of their explicit articulation of sexuality and authority, Tinsley comes to understanding Beyoncé's engagement with such images as constitutive of a genealogy of powerful black women that stands unbothered with the manipulative forces that have belittled them through the centuries. By incarnating them, Beyoncé provides black women with an opportunity to access the "ratchetness" and promiscuity inside of them and "use it for a divine purpose: supporting other black women's lives and bodies" (70) who have been simultaneously de-sexualized and hypersexualized by the male gaze.

Section Three first looks at the "Freedom" video in relation to black women's difficulties to mother their children in contemporary times. Here, the long table laid by the plantation villa and the dozens of women who are having a feast symbolize an

appropriation of historical markers of black subjugation. To the scholar, those images particularly symbolize an attempt to envision black women who successfully raise their offspring despite the systematic withdrawal of all the basic principles of reproductive justice. As the author reports, “African American children spend more time in foster care, are less likely to go home to their parents, and wait longer for adoption” (115). In portraying all those women, many of whom are the mourning mothers of the Black Lives Matter Movement, the will to show how they can enjoy their time together with younger generations of black girls is fundamental. Through such an idealistic picture, Beyoncé embodies a call for comprehensive black justice, demanding not only individual reproductive health but also the health and security of the communities where black women choose to bear children.

Tinsley’s vision for the book comes full circle at the end of Section Three, where she skilfully construes the “Formation” video as the clearest expression of black feminist pride of the entire project. To this end, the scholar inscribes the cameo of New Orleans queer queen of bounce Big Freedia in a broader message of female communion, while she also elaborates on the symbiotic relationship between cis-gender women and transgender women as enacted by the common signifier of the Southern hair store. A place where wigs, extensions and other styling products are bought, hair shops’ appearance in the visual represent a safe space for women of color to perform the cultural and conceptual labour of working through womanhood. Whether it is assigned at birth, reassigned, or just temporarily performed as in drag, femininity finds power and self-expression in such material spaces of Southern matrilineal tradition. In the author’s words, these are “touchstones for black Southern women, a place where trans-feminine and cis-feminine folk come together to create beauty,” where “cis- and trans women work together to coproduce womanhood” (133). In this sense, the aestheticized vision of black femininity that bell hooks has harshly labelled a “fashion plate fantasy” upon watching *Lemonade*, claims back its legitimacy through Tinsley’s work. This book ultimately suggests that black women’s cultivation of beauty on their own terms does not represent a liability and is indeed much more than frivolous adornment. It is an extension of the self of the black woman and, as such, should always be celebrated with pride.

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