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FROM MEMOIR TO MAKE BELIEVE: BEYONCÉ'S *LEMONADE* AND THE FABRICATION POSSIBILITY

LAUREN ROSEWARNE*

Beyoncé's Lemonade has been one of the most critically acclaimed but also critically autopsied albums in recent years. Over and over again those 13 tracks have been mined to expose an apparent treasure trove of secrets into the artist's marriage. So ready were listeners to assume that Lemonade was a confession of treachery and anguish, that completely lost was the possibility that perhaps the album was just 45 minutes of folly. In this essay I speculate about why audiences were so willing to interpret Lemonade as memoir rather than make-believe. I propose reasons ranging from the power of I, the influence of social media, and the severe constraints imposed by gender. Lemonade is a fascinating illustration of how a range of social phenomena and distinctly gendered stereotypes have strongly manipulated how women's art is perceived.

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I INTRODUCTION

In all of the forensic analysis that the album has been subjected to, largely overlooked has been the possibility of *Lemonade* being fiction. That rather than the album being an insight into Beyoncé’s marriage, a confession of her anguish, a disclosure of Jay Z’s treachery, instead, perhaps it’s just 45 minutes of make-believe. This essay questions why. Why was *Lemonade* instantly assumed as a memoir rather than 13 songs of folly? Here, I propose reasons ranging from the power of I, the influence of social media, and the severe limitations imposed by gender. The conjecture around the album serves as fascinating testimony to a range of social phenomena and stereotypes that have strongly manipulated how women’s art is perceived.

II I, STRANGLEHOLD

Politicians are experts at ducking and weaving around it. Instead of using that one tiny word, phrases like “it has been suggested” and “some people believe” get deployed. It’s a way of detaching, of putting a long arm’s length between oneself and an idea. Avoiding “I” is a weaselling way to both be heard putting voice to an issue, but also later being able to deny that it was personal opinion.

In the oily world of politics, “I” is a dangerous letter. In popular culture though, it means something a tad different. There’s still danger, sure, but there’s also an element of default, of design.

First-person narration in songs, in books, is typical. The objectivity offered by third-person narration might be lost, but first-person makes a tale personal, intimate. And it's Beyoncé's liberal use of "I" that cajoles audiences into making the perhaps logical assumption of confession: that on *Lemonade*, Bey is singing her story.

While such a leap makes sense, audiences aren't always so easily deceived.

Johnny Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues"; Axl Rose's "Used to Love Her"; Nick Cave's "O'Malley's Bar" — each song is a first-person narrative about murder. And yet it's completely impossible to imagine any listener pondering whether these gents really put their dastardly deeds to song. So what's the difference? Why do Cash and Rose and Cave escape speculation of spilled sin, but Beyoncé is assumed to have laid her life out bare?

To sing of committing a murder seems madcap. Surely had Nick Cave really shot a handful of folks in a bar, we'd know about it already. Such songs, therefore, get enjoyed as theatre, as performance, and credit is given to the writer for crafting such an arresting vignette. Such an interpretation, such an accolade however, wasn't extended to Bey.

In too many writing classes the aspiring scribe will hear the maxim write what you know. And while it's a millstone for novice writers, I suspect it places its heaviest burden on women. Women have long been associated with the home, with the domestic. Not only is there an assumption that they are connected most closely to domestic interiors, but to inners in the broadest sense: to inner worlds, inner lives, inner thoughts. When the write what you know dictum is applied to their writing, the assumption is that love and relationships and melodrama is women's realm. That it's what women know. The domestic, the soap operatic, apparently is lady terrain. Rather than having the opportunity for *Lemonade* to be considered as a collection of imagined stories and fictionalised feelings, instead, the assumption is that it's a diary. And it's just a diary because the lyrics are coming out of a woman's mouth and because a woman's name is all over the credits. And even if it's exaggerated, dramatised, or highly-stylised, it's assumed to emerge from Beyoncé's area of expertise: what she has lived; what she has felt. In such a reading, craft and creativity each get downplayed and, instead, the focus is on scuttlebutt, on gossip, on the triviality of the feminine.

Gender however, is only one part of this. Social media provides another element to the memoir presumption.

III SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE VANQUISHED PRIVATE LIFE

Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram have revolutionised how we communicate. Today, the way we socialise, remain connected and move in and out of each other's lives looks substantially different to a generation ago. And just as it's altered the relationships we have with friends and family and colleagues — sometimes supplementing real-life relations, at other times completely substituting for them — such technology has also altered the celebrity-fan connection.

If you're a public figure — in actuality or just in your imaginings — a presence on social media is expected. Doing so creates an often mutually beneficial relationship whereby fans have access to you and you have a point of contact to keep them informed and interested. Resultantly, many celebrities work very hard at presenting themselves as open.

Beyoncé's updates are sporadic on Facebook and Twitter. Instagram is where she's most active. Providing photographic glimpses into her life — often completely captionless — Bey offers a highly curated, minimalist intimacy that allows the Beyhive to believe they're not only getting contact, but getting direct contact from her. While Beyoncé isn't a celebrity of the Kardashian ilk using social media to document her every up, down or pedicure, nonetheless, Beyoncé is a product of this same culture. And her audience have long been primed to think of media — particularly social media — as the site of modern confession.

For a good decade, social media is where we go to vent, to share, to gloat, promote. So when Beyoncé releases an album online — using the modern delivery system of a streaming service — it's unavoidable that her product will be consumed in the same way as other celebrity content delivered similarly. The audience is readied in such a space to construe — to consume — online output as personal, as intimate. Receiving *Lemonade* this way is a fundamentally different experience to purchasing it on CD in JB Hi-Fi. Online is where we read those personal Facebook and Twitter updates, it's where we see

all of those Instagram photos, and it's where we now wait for the next celebrity reach-out.

Even if Beyoncé is less active on social media than other celebrities, she is nonetheless producing music in an landscape where confession is construed as normal — where in song Justin Bieber will criticise ex-girlfriend Selena Gomez, for example, and where the spat will get a new life on Twitter — and where gossip and speculation is rife. No Beyoncé fan would be unfamiliar with the 2014 elevator footage showing her sister, Solange, “attacking” Jay Z. No fan would be unaware of the speculation that Jay Z is a pants man. Those in the Beyhive already know the names Rihanna, Rita Ora, and Rachel Roy. So when *Lemonade* comes out, it's released to an audience already familiar with the cast. And fans thrive on the opportunity to decode the presentations; to concoct their own theories about who “Becky with the good hair” is. To feel rewarded about knowing enough of the background to piece it all together.

Privacy in the social media age is less about secrets, is less about happenings occurring behind closed doors, and centres squarely on the orchestrated release. The assumption in the Internet age is that the sufficiently salacious stuff will eventually get out so framing is crucial. And sure, *Lemonade* might look slick and stylised, and it might not be as fly-on-the-wall as some fans might have hoped, but then again it looks an awful lot like the kind of contrived reality delivered to us by television and by Insta-celebs, and it appears “real-enough” for residents of a world where the definition of reality is ever-evolving.

IV WOMEN AS ARTISTS: BOTH FINE AND BULLSHIT

A side effect of a culture of both orchestrated reality but also high-level media literacy is that authenticity is considered as premium. Within this is a quest to expose people who are fake and to beatify those who show us their “real”. Beyoncé thus, gets praised — in some circles even deified — for an album that seemingly dares to speak about the less than shiny aspects of her life; that dares to present herself as less rarefied and more so just like us. And Bey doesn't correct her audience. Doesn't provide annotation or footnotes to her lyrics. Rather, the possibility of fans, of critics construing this all as an affidavit can only work to her advantage in this age of prurience, of cynicism. Lost however, in the accolades for her authenticity — lost in praise for anyone's show of real

— is recognition that it too can be highly stage-managed. Just as Amy Schumer and Jennifer Lawrence’s “real girls” shtick has started to wear very thin with their slips, stumbles, and goofy gaffes beginning to look a whole lot orchestrated, a celebrity now needs to do more than Tweet a makeup-free selfie to prove veracity. An entire album therefore, much which offers pain and triumph-over-adversity, can achieve this.

Culturally we have a conflicted relationship with reinvention, with transformation. An artist like David Bowie was celebrated for presenting new versions of himself across decades. Bowie was celebrated as an artist, as an innovator: of self, of medium. For an artist like Lana del Rey however, from the moment she shook off the shackles of her Lizzy Grant indie origins and rebranded herself as — to borrow her phrase — a “gangster Nancy Sinatra”, she was shredded. Few critics considered the possibility that the once barefoot-and-stool folk singer could also be a pouty-lipped seductress. The more common interpretation was that she was a puppet in some label’s Zeitgeist exploitation. For the entirety of her career del Rey has been dogged by the question of authenticity. That while performance of music will, naturally, always be part of how an entertainer is judged, equally so will be the performance of identity. It’s perhaps why we care so much that if Lena Dunham, for example, espouses feminist or anti-racism sentiments in her writings, that she’s consistent it in all sectors of her life. If not — if a rogue quip is made, or an off-the-cuff joke told — then she gets named, gets shamed. To be respected as an artist, the public — the critics — apparently need to feel they know you. A real you. Such a concept implies of course, that you in your entirety can ever really be known.

The burden of authenticity falls most heavily on women. With the tools of artifice — make-up and hair dye and push-up bras — at our disposal, women have long been subjected to the speculation of fakery. While men can, and do, dabble in such tools themselves, there’s a different judgment placed on women in a world where we’re urged to be ourselves while simultaneously hearing you’re not good enough as you are. The idea of fakery isn’t an accusation hurled at men with much frequency; rare however, would be the famous woman who hasn’t had her authenticity autopsied.

Beyoncé isn’t new to identity-play. Akin to Eminem becoming Slim Shady to give his darker side an airing, in 2008 Bey presented herself as Sasha Fierce, giving voice to a stronger, sassier, and sexier persona. It’s not unprecedented therefore, that audiences

recognise the capacity for the star to play with her identity. She's done it before. And yet, apparently when a new self-presentation appears to be self-referential, to converge with rumours and innuendo, and to not appear fierce enough or dark enough or sufficiently different to the public imaginings, audiences are quick to assume they're now hearing the real Bey.

V THE MULTIPLE IDENTITIES POSSIBILITY

In 2010, when Beyoncé laid Sasha Fierce to rest, she said her alter ego was “done. I killed her.”¹ She claimed that the Fierce persona was created to overcome her shyness which two years on, apparently was no longer necessary: “I don't need Sasha Fierce anymore, because I've grown and now I'm able to merge the two.”² Lost in our frequent use of alter ego is the acknowledgment of multiples: that the “alter” ego is still part of a greater whole, albeit one performed publicly with less often. To express an alter ego a person can only use the ingredients, the traits, they already possess. Ultimately however, it's the same person standing there.

The Fierce identity had a little fake-it-'til-you-make-it element about it, sure, but it also served as an acknowledgment of selves within the superstar. That none of us are the same persona all of the time and in reality we're each a bundle of contradictions with often multiples egos, often bristling against each other. In our preoccupation with authenticity, we seem to operate under a severely flawed assumption that there is only one single self at the heart of it. When Australians demanded to see the real Julia when Gillard was PM, or when Americans begged to see the real Hillary, lost was the appreciation of us each being a composite of selves. When Sasha Fierce was on stage, it wasn't a hologram, it wasn't an impersonator, it was Beyoncé, playing up a version of herself. A new moniker and some slightly more salacious styling liberated her enough to give an alternate side an airing.

Lemonade might be autobiographical, and then again, it might be completely fabricated. A possibility lies in the middle in that it might also be a bit of both: of real selves, invented selves and identity-play all at once.

¹ Hillary Crosley, 'Beyonce Says She "Killed" Sasha Fierce', *MTV News* (online), 26 February 2010 <<http://www.mtv.com/news/1632774/beyonce-says-she-killed-sasha-fierce/>>.

² *Ibid.*

Hillary Clinton is also relevant to this story for a second reason. As a public figure, she had no option but to face marital humiliation in front of an audience of millions. In turn, she was judged, savagely, by an audience who condemned her decision to stay by Bill's side. In her decades long career, Hillary was never just her betrayal and yet, for years, this is what she gets remembered for. If Beyoncé was actually betrayed, she has a vested interest in this status not becoming the sum total of her identity. She quite possibly, therefore, chose to present betrayal as just one bit of a greater whole. That it might have been something that happened to her, but that it's not her. That she is Beyoncé above all else, and in turn, her betrayal gets downgraded to just one of a slew of song-worthy experiences.

An extension of this is the opportunity to not only control the story, but monetise it. That rather than issuing press release after press release, or another swag of happy-couple photos, instead, why not stoke the flames, keep the public guessing. And make a little cash in the process.

VI ONE'S SELF, ONE'S STORY AS COMMODITY

Beyoncé and Jay Z are both industry leaders. None of this is an accident; the duo knew precisely what they were doing. It's not mere chance therefore, that *Lemonade* was released on Jay Z's streaming service. It's no accident that the duo didn't do a sit down with Oprah or Barbara Walters to dissect their marriage. It's no coincidence that Jay Z later released his own post-*Lemonade* rap cryptically addressing some of the speculation. Beyoncé and Jay know that the game today is more than just the music — that a backstory, that ongoing newsworthiness, is vital.

Neither are unaware of the interest in their personal lives. Neither is oblivious to the gossip that has hounded them both for years. Even in the aftermath of the elevator scuffle, their ambiguous statement of it just being a "family" issue only worked to further fuel interest. In keeping fans on a drip feed of information, the release of *Lemonade* had them salivating; had commentators and critics poring over every line. Akin to Angelina and Brad releasing the troubled marriage film *By The Sea*, or Tom and Nicole doing the same with *Eyes Wide Shut*, these stars know that there is a ready, if voyeuristic, interest in their lives and thus, via their creative output they can play — if not also manipulate — perceptions whilst never really answering anything and thus perpetuating intrigue.

In 2016, *Lemonade* can never just be an album. It's the creative output of a woman, a wife, a mother, an African American who has reached the absolute pinnacle of success in an America, in a world, still — perhaps even increasingly — divided along gender and racial lines. The merit of the music is for others to judge. For me, the true story lies in all the chatter existing quite separate to the songs. In questioning why the idea of a memoir sits better with us than the compliment of art.

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