"All That You Can't Leave Behind": Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe

Daphne A. Brooks

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Abstract

This essay explores the critical work of Beyoncé’s second solo recording, and places it in conversation with yet another under-theorized yet equally dissonant R&B performance by her “hip-hop soul queen” contemporary Mary J. Blige. In relation to both Beyoncé’s and Blige’s work, I examine the politics of black women’s pop music culture in relation to the Gulf Coast catastrophe and the extreme marginalization of black women in American sociopolitical culture. I suggest that we look closely at the musical performances of Beyoncé as well as Blige, as each artist’s work creates a particular kind of black feminist surrogation, that is, an embodied performance that recycles palpable forms of black female sociopolitical grief and loss as well as spirited dissent and dissonance. Their combined efforts mark a new era of protest singing that sonically resists, revises, and reinvents the politics of black female hypervisibility in the American cultural imaginary.

It has been more than a decade since black feminist cultural critic Hazel Carby explored the early-twentieth-century phenomenon of “policing the black woman’s body in an urban context.” In her groundbreaking essay, Carby illuminates the myriad ways in which postbellum and Gilded Age black female migrants wrestled with sexually and morally pathologizing labels imposed on them by social and political institutions. In search of new work in northern cities, these women found themselves the subject of
a “moral panic,” one that resulted in stringent forms of cultural surveillance and institutional efforts to control and discipline their collective behavior in a shifting industrial environment (Carby 1992). 1

Ring the Alarm

One could make a claim that a curious new version of this phenomenon—call it “policing the upwardly mobile black woman’s body in a high-profile context”—has taken shape at the turn of this new century. The year 2006 alone featured a range of media events in which working black women were spectacularly punished and policed in the media’s eye. The spring of that year unfolded with former Georgia Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney allegedly striking a capitol police officer who tried to stop her from entering a House office building (supposedly for failure to present proper identification). One week later, New York state senator Ada L. Smith was charged with third-degree assault for allegedly having thrown hot coffee at a staff member in the workplace. We might think of these women as on their way to or presumably in the midst of “work” and yet not looking and/or acting the (proper) part.

By summer, the focus had shifted to a dubious martyr at work: Star Jones fought to preserve a semblance of dignity in the midst of being banished from her workplace on the kaffeeklatch gossip bowl The View (presumably for having extensive work done on herself). Further down the B-list ladder, the phenomenal R&B singer-songwriter Angie Stone failed to toe the line on VH1’s reality series Celebrity Fit Club, refusing to work to shed unwanted pounds for most of the season and sparking the ire of former Love Boat bartender Ted Lange. Even Oprah Winfrey and Gayle King, women who often revel in showcasing the work of grand and sumptuous “legends,” by fall had stumbled into situations on their “road trip” across America in which cranky bigots in backwater towns lashed out at them for trespassing unwanted into their territory (e.g., “there goes Oprah, that n** b**!”). Hard at work on television, even the “Queen of All Media” was chastised for supposedly bringing her work to forbidden spaces.

Certainly these lesser cultural events should remind us of the 1990s and the very high/low points in public memory when upwardly mobile, putatively successful black women were punished and policed for their supposed transgressions. From Anita Hill to Lani Guinier to Jocelyn
Elders, the middle years of that decade read like a roll call of over-achieving, rigorously educated black women who nonetheless found themselves attacked and “on trial,” at the center of hearings and media scrutiny in the midst of simply trying to do their jobs.²

Perhaps this is why mega-superstar Beyoncé Knowles’s video for her hit single “Ring the Alarm” is in fact so disturbing. Under the direction of veteran video director Sophie Muller, the stunning Knowles, dressed in a caramel-colored trench coat to match her glistening skin, is dragged away by policemen in riot gear, locked in a padded cell, dressed in army fatigues, and restrained by interrogators in a scene that overtly references Sharon Stone's leg-crossing moment in Basic Instinct.³ Knowles is no Hollywood femme fatale, though, and these images that catalogue her in severe distress and entrapment while staring the camera down and calling for someone to “ring the alarm! I’ll be damned if I see another chick on your arm!” remind us less of Michael Douglas’s misogynistic oeuvre and more of not only the powerful black women who have been chastised and punished for “misbehaving” in recent years, but also of the growing number of black women who are or have been in lock-down with little opportunity for recourse or rehabilitation (the much less adventurous recording artist Alicia Keys nonetheless gave mention to this dilemma in her breakthrough 2001 video for “Fallin’”).

In the custody of the police, Beyoncé struggles and writhes, is brought to her knees, and is dragged by her arms and legs. The image no doubt sounds an alarm of its own, one that should make us think too of Diana Ross and her image-shattering star turn in the opening scene of 1972’s Lady Sings the Blues, in which Ross’s fictionalized Billie Holiday character turns up in jail on drug charges with smeared eyeliner and tousled hair, desperately in need of a fix. And while the comparisons between Ross and Beyoncé were in abundance not long ago as the latter jettisoned her Supremes-inspired vehicle Destiny’s Child for a full-fledged solo career, as well as the Ross-inspired role of Deena Jones in Dreamgirls, the Beyoncé of the “Ring the Alarm” video is perhaps an entirely misleading representation of the artist and the highly theatricalized character who emerges in the 2006 classic that is B-Day, one of the oddest, most urgent, dissonant, and disruptive R&B releases in recent memory.

Equally concerned with work (romantic, sexual, and physical as well as monetary) as it is with questions of black women’s access to property,
ownership, and modes of production, B-Day is the post-Hurricane Katrina answer to southern black women’s spectacular disenfranchisement in the wake of that natural disaster. It is a record that documents the sheer virtuosic mastery of a singer-songwriter-performer’s claims to owning and controlling her own work, property, and much-lauded body. Likewise, it is probably the most high-profile musical effort by a black female entertainer who has made no bones about embracing and affirming her own class privilege by birthright with roots that run deep in New Orleans as well as Houston familial history.

Below I explore the critical work of Beyoncé’s second solo recording, and I place it in conversation with yet another under-theorized yet equally dissonant R&B performance by her “hip-hop soul queen” contemporary Mary J. Blige in order to examine the politics of black women’s pop music culture in relation to the Gulf Coast catastrophe and the spectacular marginalization of African-American women in American sociopolitical culture. I suggest that we look closely at the musical performances of Beyoncé as well as of Blige, as each artist’s work creates a particular kind of black feminist surrogation, that is, an embodied cultural act that articulates black women’s distinct forms of palpable sociopolitical loss and grief as well as spirited dissent and dissonance. Their combined efforts mark a new era of protest singing that sonically resists, revises, and reinvents the politics of black female hypervisibility in the American cultural imaginary.

“I Hold No Grudge”: Black Feminist Dissent in Song

Much has been made of how the Beyoncé of recent years is a far cry from what pop-culture critic David Swerdlick calls the “sistah grrrl power” of early Destiny’s Child recordings (Swerdlick 2007). On those records, and particularly on the multi-platinum The Writing’s on the Wall, Knowles and her fellow “children” belted out densely arranged urban anthems with Waiting to Exhale themes of romantic distrust, material disillusionment, and “ne’er do well” scrub boyfriends who are roundly criticized and kicked to the curb. And while much credit was given to a then-teen-aged Knowles for having penned or co-written the lyrics to chart-topping hits such as the Grammy-winning “Say My Name,” Beyoncé has herself claimed that large portions of her song-writing inspiration and the vivid detail that infuses some of these early songs came as a result of having ventriloquized the
intimate “woman-talk” coursing through the aisles of Houston’s Headliners salon, a successful business run by über-mom and clothing-designer Tina Knowles (Weiner 2006, 79).

But just as Destiny’s Child’s early classics—“Bills, Bills, Bills,” “Bugaboo,” and “Independent Women, part I” among them—document Beyoncé’s emergence as a popular late-twentieth-century black female songwriter, one could easily make a case that her newer material marks her arrival as an artist unafraid of complicating and disturbing her well-regarded cultural persona in less conventional ways than the strait-jacketed patriarchal models afforded most contemporary pop divas (see, for instance, the ways in which pop culture represents Christina Aguilera’s “virgin-whore-virgin” transformations, Britney’s “virgin-whore-whore” dissolution, or even Madonna’s “whore-to-mother” moves).

To be sure, the Beyoncé on B-Day is a far cry from the “daddy’s girl, naughty-but-nice” icon who came bounding onto the scene with her first solo effort, 2003’s monstrously successful Dangerously in Love. Rather than mistaking “edge” (the MTV marketers’ much-overused term to reference the allure of “pushing the envelope”) for dirtiness, Beyoncé’s latest recording imagines her growth as an artist by stretching (until it’s taut) the emotional register of her lyrical and musical content. Although she returns time and again to conflicts between love and money, the material on B-Day examines an ever-sophisticated range of emotions tied to black women’s personal and spiritual discontent, satiation, self-worth, and agency. From this standpoint, rather than dismissing B-Day as the arrival of a new emancipated diva figure in danger of miming (through her singles and videos) a “Mariah/Mimi-size” breakdown or an unhinged and wholly incoherent Whitney meltdown, we might do well to consider the shrewd and complicated articulation of rage, “resentment” (the title of B-Day’s closing track), desperation, and aspiration that Beyoncé’s album charts at a time when public and sociopolitical voices of black female discontent remain muted, mediated, circumscribed, and misappropriated.

Crafting a voice of black female discontent in black female popular culture is, however, a slippery slope if one aims to avoid the caricature of “the angry black woman”—immortalized by everyone from Hattie McDaniel’s simmering and contemptuous cinematic characters to the sour squint of genius comic LaWanda Page, or of late, the wickedly “sick and tired” stand-up of Wanda Sykes.
In contemporary pop music, black female (sociopolitical) discontent is even trickier to trace. Certainly eclectic performer Nina Simone’s song-book ranged from the sly, oblique, and ironic critique in classics such as “I Hold No Grudge” (“I hold no grudge/There’s no resentment und’neath/I’ll extend the laurel wreath and we’ll be friends/But right there is where it ends”) to the searing political satire of civil rights “showtune” “Mississippi Goddam.” But while Simone and Odetta remain forebears of a certain kind of critical voice that emerged as the cultural arm of the civil rights and anti-war movements, twenty-first-century black female pop stars—save for folkies like Tracy Chapman, bohemian rebels like Me’Shell Ndegeocello, or sharp and powerful emcees like early MC Lyte, Lauryn Hill, and Jean Grae—are more likely to couch their dissatisfaction in domestic, romantic, and/or gospel-religious R&B zones.

No wonder that the most adventurous and provocative R&B female singers who traffic in articulating material, quotidian discontent have roots, like Beyoncé herself, that run deep in the confrontational aesthetics of hip-hop. Envelope-pusher Kelis, a frequent crooner and collaborator on singles by the late Ol’ Dirty Bastard and Busta Rhymes, burst into the mainstream with her coarse and vituperative single “Caught Out There,” a PJ-Harvey-smoking-blunts-with-the-Neptunes-sounding breakup song most memorable for its nails-on-a-chalkboard refrain of “I hate you so much right now!” Likewise, the brilliant upstart singer Keisha Cole, an artist with a hardscrabble upbringing in Oakland, California (which gave her instant street cred), released one of the most brutally visceral, emotionally assertive, and convincingly combative R&B records of the decade, The Way It Is, ushering in a new generation of black female recording artists who are willing to do battle with lovers and friends in order to gain some kind of personal agency. Both of the aforementioned singers owe much (if not nearly everything) to the inroads made by the woman oft-regarded as the “Queen of Hip-Hop Soul,” Mary J. Blige, who, it seems, is the iconic “sister-spirit” of sorts, hovering in the background of Beyoncé’s B-Day.

Since her rise in the early 1990s, Blige has cultivated a beloved pop persona as the fighting survivor from Yonkers, New York. As rock critic Jessica Willis notes of Blige: “everything about her appearance . . . gives her the aura of a sexy outlaw with a rough past” (Willis 2003, 19). Increasingly, Blige has cultivated an image as something of the Fannie Lou Hamer of hip-hop R&B, a woman who’s “sick and tired of being sick and tired” but...
who nonetheless rallies the energy to deliver show-stopping, James Brown-
Live-at-the-Apollo stage histrionics to declare the end of “drama” in her
personal and public life.

Not surprisingly, Blige was the ideal figure to emerge in the wake of
Hurricane Katrina as the (singing) voice of black female testimony and social
critique. As political scientist and black feminist scholar Melissa Harris-
Lacewell cogently observes in her forthcoming study on the disaster: “It is on
the bodies, lives and minds of black women that the story of Hurricane
Katrina was written. Their suffering became the conduit through which a
conversation on race, class and vulnerability was initiated. They were
literally the bridge over the deadly waters that gave the rest of America a
place to cross into the agonizing realization of how unequal the country
remained at the dawn of the 21st century” (Harris-Lacewell forthcoming, 3).

It is fitting, then, that Blige (and not the attention-grabbing Kanye West)
would stage the most cogent political coup of the airwaves during a
telethon performance of U2’s 1990s elegy-anthem “One,” turning what
could have been an awkward duet with frontman-activist Bono into a
metanarrative, a staged musical dialogue of sorts that brought to light the
emotional dimensions of black female disenfranchisement and white
patriarchal and legislative power, arrogance, and humility.\footnote{Candles in the
Wind: Surrogation and (Collective) Grief in the Age of Pop Protest}

Within the first two and a half weeks after Hurricane Katrina struck New
Orleans, a stunning four separate relief benefit telethons aired on major
networks across the country. During the weekend of September 9 alone,
NBC, ABC, CBS, and other networks jointly aired the commercial-free
benefit concert special titled Shelter from the Storm, while MTV, VH1, and the
Country Music Channel followed with their own respective televised-relief
events; Black Entertainment Television (BET) offered a separate program as
well. Each of the specials raised money for blanket “relief efforts” directed at
assisting Katrina survivors, and each featured a carefully selected mix of pop
music veterans (Randy Newman, Rod Stewart), MTV mainstays (Alicia Keys,
Mariah Carey), and activist musicians (Stevie Wonder, Neil Young).

Alicia Keys’s performance of “Father I Stretch My Hand to Thee”
alongside Shirley Caesar, Alvin Slaughter, and Bishop Daniels, and Mariah
Carey’s “Fly Like a Bird” were, for instance, suggestively offered up as articulations of collective grief, anguish, and spiritual catharsis. New York Times critic Ned Martel characterized these performances and others as examples of “the power of songs to transcend generational and ethnic boundaries.” As Martel keenly observed, many of the shows, but particularly Shelter from the Storm, “could be seen to have lasting value: as a teaching tool, as a meditation on American expression, and as a pop-political jazz funeral—a wake—the dead march for the whole New Orleans musical scene. It was a tribute that reflected history as much as it tried to shape it” (Martel 2005). As sites of mythical collective healing, the Katrina telethons repeatedly aimed to create a kind of cultural renewal across the body of the singing pop star, who provided the occasion for communities in crisis to register loss, outrage, and melancholia in the space of a four-minute song with big hooks, heavy string arrangements, and a wall of Pottery Barn candles burning brightly in the background.

“Into the cavities created by loss” stepped pop artists, figures whose words, bodies, and songs were intended to do the work of what performance studies theorist Joseph Roach has influentially characterized as “surrogation.” In the wake of both a horrific natural disaster and a shameful government-led response to social catastrophe, the (in)tense emotional occasion of these telethons demanded that various entertainers “perform effigies to evoke an absence, to body something forth, especially something from a distant past” (Roach 1996, 2). To be sure, rock culture has often been the pop cultural site where musicians and entertainers repeatedly and ritualistically traffic in “performances” that “so often carry within them the memory of otherwise forgotten substitutions—those that were rejected and even more invisibly, those that have succeeded” (Roach 1996, 36; 5). But the impossibility of adequately responding to communal loss during the Katrina telethons presented a particularly poignant surrogation for the spiritual and existential opacity generated by the phenomenon of the hurricane itself.

No doubt Shelter from the Storm and other benefit concerts were seeking to follow in the endless stream of protest songs, benefit songs, and tribute songs that erupted out of rock culture in the second half of the twentieth century, but that took a particularly commercial shape in the 1980s when Boomtown Rats lead singer Bob Geldof called together his British musical brothers-in-arms to create the “Band Aid” benefit record to raise funds to
fight African hunger. Geldof’s effort, “Do They Know It’s Christmas” begat “We are the World,” which begat Farm Aid and a slew of concert events in which, as members of the agit-prop English rock group Chumbawumba recently put it, celebrities essentially instructed people with “less money than them to donate to causes,” in turn potentially reinforcing the very inequality these events ostensibly sought to extinguish. Certainly, with the 2005 release of the parody-novelty record “Do They Know It’s Halloween” (a single that mocks the obtuse condescension of Geldof’s twenty-year-old song), the political power and the social utility of protest pop music activism seems in peril of slipping all too easily into the jaws of ironic lack of interest. Indeed, while many heaped praise on rapper-producer Kanye West for his skill at social agitation and for reminding the nation of just what George Bush thought of black people, less public note was made of what was perhaps the most provocative performance aired on any of the telethons. It was a performance that pushed beyond merely evoking spectacular absence as a kind of protest, instead playing with the historically dense liminality of the black female performer singing her way through rock memory and the national imaginary.

Few critics talked much about Mary J. Blige and U2’s duet of the band’s memorial anthem “One,” but we might look to that performance as a cogent site of pop music historical recuperation as well as a space for the production of history wherein the work of memory, absence, presence, collective desire, substitution, sacrifice, and expenditure get worked out through the voice and “kinesthetic imagination” of Blige, the “Queen of Hip-Hop Soul.”

By drawing from Roach’s critical discussions of memory and performance, I want to examine the ways that rock memory collided with the Katrina catastrophe in the fall of 2005, and how the black female soul and R&B heroine emerged with her own circum-Atlantic “displaced transmission, rising like a Phoenix, from the ashes of diaspora and genocide on wings of song” (Roach 1996, 66), in turn paving the way for Beyoncé’s deceptively slick, re-packaged protest on B-Day.

The Testimony of “One”: Recovering Black Female Citizenship in Rock Culture

When the Irish pop prophet Bono appeared on stage during the multi-network Katrina relief concert with a big straw cowboy hat and a severely
furrowed brow, he seemed destined to deliver a repeat performance of the band’s post-9/11 network telethon gig, a somber affair shot in black and white as a dirge-like wake. But the transformation of one of the group’s most recognizable anthems, “One,” into a duet with Yonkers’s hard-scrabble, hard-singing, sometimes-hard-on-the-ears Mary J. Blige, opened up a space to make rich, powerful, multi-layered references to the complex intersections of race, gender, and class embedded in the Katrina catastrophe. Called by one fan in the wake of the performance “the most intriguing and wistful cover tune since Johnny Cash covered Nine Inch Nails’ ‘Hurt,’” Blige’s Shelter from the Storm version of U2’s “One” is perhaps the most insurgent political work of a black female pop singer since Nina Simone’s “Four Women” and “Mississippi Goddam.”

A song that has retained its place in contemporary rock culture for its multiple and intersecting meanings, “One” has been interpreted by critics as a narrative of a conversation between a father and his queer, HIV positive son. Others have described it as the documentation of an emotionally abusive relationship coming undone. The band itself has recounted it as the pivotal song that was inspired by an effort to find aesthetic resolution and peace while they recorded their identity-transforming 1991 album Achtung Baby.

But Blige’s performance of this song in this context at this moment in time opens up the historical value of Bono and company’s lyrics and musical arrangements. Easing her way around guitarist The Edge’s Exile on Main Street, Beggar’s Banquet-era Rolling Stones riff, Blige steps into the rock pantheon here in a moment that musically resonates with exposed erasures and absences—the erasure of black female artists from rock genealogies, the erasure of black female sexual exploitation in rock memory (see the Stones’ “Brown Sugar” for instance), and most critically and urgently, the absence conjoined with the spectacular presence of black female suffering in America, what some might call the ur-text of this national disaster.

As Harris-Lacewell makes plain in her work on the politics of black female citizenship in American culture:

Black women were at the center of this literal and rhetorical storm. Photographs of black mothers carrying their infants as they waded through filthy, chest-high waters became the enduring images of this disaster. Television news and popular news magazines used images of
desperate, frightened and suffering African American women to dramatize the tragedy facing the residents of New Orleans as they battled the aftermath of the hurricane with little assistance from official authorities. (Harris-Lacewell forthcoming, 3)

Within this brutally charged context, Blige's surplus performance highlights the unheralded position of black women in rock, the unheralded position of black women in America, the violence of white patriarchal political neglect and discrimination, the violence of white patriarchal sexuality in rock—all of this comes to the surface in her performance. Off key.

Never before (nor perhaps since) have Mary J. Blige's tonal eccentricities been put to more powerful use. Here I am suggesting that we pay close attention to Blige's trademark bent voice, the voice—as Roach might describe it—“of African-American rhythm and blues [that] carries awesomely over time and distance, through its cadences, its intonations, its accompaniment, and even its gestures.” As he observes,

the degree to which this voice haunts American memory, the degree to which it promotes obsessive attempts at simulation and impersonation, derives from its ghostly power to insinuate memory between the lines, in the spaces between the words, in the intonation and placements by which they are shaped, in the silences by which they are deepened and contradicted. By such means, the dead remain among the living. (Roach 1996, 69)

In the midst of the Shelter from the Storm telethon, Blige's performance reminds us of the ways that the black singing voice is not confined to the ethereal netherworld (as techno-shaman Moby would have it). Indeed, her rendition of this song gives living voice to the mythically-driven, overdetermined, under-theorized scapegoat figure (an accretion of caricatures, as Hortense Spillers has shown), allowing her instead to enter in the flesh into the public conversation to which she has been denied access (Spillers 1987). Blige here majestically reinforces Lindon Barrett's powerful contention that “the singing voice sounds of the most enduring of African American testimonies to the exigencies of our presence in the Americas” (Barrett 1999, 65). In this regard, Blige's duet-cover performance marks a particular kind of black female resistant vocal presence where previously there had been a putative silence in the era of post-Katrina relief and
recovery. As Simon Reynolds might suggest in his Barthes-inspired ruminations on the singing voice, we should listen for the noise in Blige’s embodied voice, and we should hold still to catch “the way she chews and twists language” in this performance, “not for any decipherable, expressive reason . . . but for the gratuitous voluptuousness of utterance itself. In [Blige’s voice] you can hear a surplus of form over content . . . of ‘telling’ over ‘story’” (Reynolds 2004, 58).8

Blige’s performance thus complicates the pop-cultural constructions of black female Katrina survivors, women who were—as Harris-Lacewell contends—“framed as distant foreigners [but who] retained the power to ‘shame the nation’ through their suffering. These black women were shameful to the nation,” she argues, “because their vulnerability indicated the continuing existence of poverty and racism. As women and mothers they retained a power to represent victimization in a way that male survivors were less able to embody” (Harris-Lacewell forthcoming, 9).

In contrast, this rendition of “One” deploys an emotionally charged dialogue between black female soul singer Blige and white male celebrity-politico Bono. Their duet stages a sage, sobering, brutally honest summit between two figures who are iconographically conjoined in America’s miscegenated history, and it underscores repeated rehearsals of that brutal history of white patriarchal power and black female abjection—here rewritten and recast in the voice of black female difference and resistance. “Did I disappoint you,” Blige begins, “or leave a bad taste in your mouth?” That trademark, rough-around-the-edges, is-my-girl-really-singing-off-key? delivery serves Blige most powerfully in this tale where the black female voice of dissonance and disappointment observes wryly of the man who conserves his compassion that “you act like you never had love, and you want me to go without.”

Blige plays here the role of the fighting survivor, a character she’s crafted into her persona over her decade-plus career. As critic Willis notes of Blige, her physical aesthetic, “her come hither-step back stare, her big tattoos and the scar under her left eye” effectively accessorize her urban survivor image. No doubt she has cultivated a “loner-in-high-heels persona with great care,” and here in “One” she channels that iconography, something of a palimpsest of Simone’s “four women,” into an interventionist anthem that champions the preservation of difference and specificity as a fecund site for coalition-building: “We’re one but we’re not the same/We get to
carry each other/Carry each other.” Blige here rejects “crawling” in the temple of love, the temple of democracy, demanding instead recognition of her worth as a citizen in this “contract with America.”

Like Curtis Mayfield, who, English rock critic Charles Shaar Murray argues, perfected “the seamless fusion of form and political content” by “secularizing gospel and lyrically anchoring it here and now [and declaring that] salvation is [of] this world” (Murray 2005), Blige recycles “One”—a song that mainlines the twice-removed blues of the Mississippi Delta by way of Keith Richards and the Edge—re-placing it and replaying it as the soundtrack for the Louisiana Gulf Coast women who, in this moment in time, on this night, at this benefit, will—through this act of soulful surrogation—indeed have their say.

Diary of a Dissenting Black Woman: Beyoncé’s B-Day and the Politics of Evacuation and Ownership

For some, it may be a stretch to associate Beyoncé’s fierce, two-in-the-morning club beats with Blige’s poignant wake of a performance and the natural (and national) disaster that has come to define twenty-first-century race relations in this country. But I want to suggest there are ways to listen to B-Day on another frequency so as to hear the register of post-Katrina, Blige-esque discontent in pop music culture, as well as the ways in which Beyoncé Knowles reconfigures this sort of dissent as fleet, urgent desire, and aspiration. Listen closely and one can hear the sounds and words of Knowles the artist imagining ways for her character on the album to transcend despair through a sharp attendance to work, her own property, and the attainment of her own version of “control,” one that recalls, rivals, and outpaces Janet Jackson’s two-decade bid for autonomy.

B-Day arrived in stores on September 5, 2006, coinciding both with the artist’s own birthday (9-4-81—a date she chants at the opening and close of the album) as well as the much-publicized one-year anniversary of the storm that damaged and destroyed large swaths of the Gulf Coast. That week, in addition to news retrospectives and Spike Lee’s stunning Wagnerian documentary When the Levees Broke, music video outlets like MTV (and BET earlier in the summer) showcased tributes to Katrina survivors in their awards show telecasts. Beyoncé appeared at both the MTV and BET awards and yet was never overtly involved in any of the Katrina tributes.
Nevertheless, Knowles and her fellow Destiny's Child group members Kelly Rowland and Michelle Williams joined in with other black pop stars in particular to make charitable contributions to hurricane survivors (the group’s “Destiny’s Village,” was organized in December 2005 to house 100 displaced families for the holidays).

There are more metaphorical than literal ties to Katrina on B-Day though, the visual imagery being just one of several ways that the album invokes the specter of Gulf Coast culture. Images of a glistening, bronze Knowles, looking like a hard yet luscious Jet magazine centerfold, adorn the back cover and inner photos of the CD, which also find her lifting a leg in a thigh-high juke joint mini on the dock of the bay, navigating twin crocodiles by the leash through verdant wetlands in high heels and a cut-out swimsuit, and walking the path of dusty railroad tracks in a leather and frills bodice. Whether showcasing the singer as sexually titillating against a landscape that resonates with (Eve’s?) bayou imagery is a purely provocative move or one that offers compelling (or perhaps confounding?) social commentary may be hard to glean in the end. But the consistent ways in which B-Day’s marketing remains linked to recognizable visual markers of southern bayou culture is undeniable. One need look no further than the controversial video for the album’s first single, “Déjà vu,” in order to find images of a historical déjà vu of sorts, a tricked-out plantation setting with Knowles alternately draped across ornate Victorian furniture and dashing haltingly through everglades and (cotton?) fields looking like a deer in headlights, or perhaps more accurately, like a fugitive (house) slave on the run (Beyoncé 2006a).

Online message boards and pop music critics alike expressed shock and disappointment with this lead single (called “flat” by some)—both at its video promotion of a southern heroine who waxes paranoid and obsessive over her desire for on- and off-screen love interest rap mogul Jay-Z, and at the song itself, which on the surface does little more than reproduce both the best of the horn-driven arrangements that made Knowles’s biggest single to date, “Crazy in Love,” such a worldwide smash, and which seems also to merely reiterate the virtuosic gangsta-flow and “dough” of Jay-Z at the expense of showcasing Knowles (who, in one famous frame of the video, tugs longingly at her lover’s belt buckle while writhing on her knees).

Dismissing the album for “Déjà vu’s” seemingly retrograde gender politics would, however, miss the point of the song entirely, since the track
clearly serves as a “decoy” single of sorts. In the wake of two previous top-
ten songs recorded together (2003’s “Bonnie & Clyde ‘03” as well as “Crazy
in Love”), an endless stream of paparazzi photos detailing their every
move, and a shrewd unwillingness to discuss their relationship in public,
Knowles and her “jigga” man were wise to draw on this notoriety in
ushering in the release of B-Day. The allure of their “hush-hush” relation-
ship creates its own aura around the single. Likewise, the rap solo at the
core of “Déjà vu” celebrates the capital and genius of rapper-turned-record
executive Jay-Z, his “Hova’s flow so unusual” who “just make the hits like a
factory” (Beyoncé 2005).

On this lead track of the album, if one listens closely, one can hear the
early traces of a different Beyoncé voice from previous recordings—one
that vocally belies the submissiveness or the paranoia of her video persona.
Co-written by Knowles (as are all of the tracks on B-Day) and co-produced
by the singer in collaboration with Rodney “Darkchild” Jerkins (the man
who gave us J. Lo’s first single and a reconstructed Whitney “It’s Not Right
But It’s Okay” Houston), “Déjà vu” initially opens—before any of the
bluster and braggadocio of her “partner”—with the diva emerging as the
conductor—calling for bass, hi hat, and 808 drum machine.

And while the would-be savvy utterances of pop songstresses “calling
out,” as it were, to their bands, disc jockeys, mix masters, and backup
singers to get in line is as old as the era of the blues queens and as tired, in
some ways, as the most derivative Christina Aguilera track—Beyoncé’s
lead-off roll call here still nonetheless gives us a taste of what is to come on
the album: a vocalist who urgently and masterfully traverses dense sonic
arrangements and who fully controls space—musical, lyrical, and meta-
phorical—in deft and unprecedented ways throughout the album. (It may
be worth mentioning too that the artist expanded the reach of female-
centered space when she assembled an “all-female band” to accompany her
on her worldwide 2006–07 tour.) Even as Knowles’s voice escalates to arch,
sky-scraping ranges at a rapid, hysteria-inducing pace on “Déjà vu,” one is
reminded of how hard, in fact, the singer is working here and how much
effort—physical and aesthetic—it takes to dash at breakneck speed
through Knowles’s trademark wordy-verses, jam-packed lyrics that
threaten, as their very content suggests, to break “out of control” (one need
only recall Destiny Child’s last great hit “Lose My Breath” to get a sense of
how prevalent these tropes of urgency and excess are in Knowles’s work).
So on the one hand, while “Déjà vu” details the singer’s inability to “get over” her lover, while it details the ways that Jay is all-consuming, filling up her senses, trapping his lover in a haze, really it is Knowles whose powerhouse vocals increasingly command space on the song, dwarfing Jay-Z’s harmless rap at the center of the track. Watch as Knowles takes the reins on “Déjà vu” and leads her listeners into provocatively controlled and controlling spaces on the rest of B-Day.

Nothing else on B-Day sounds quite like “Déjà vu.” Knowles abruptly shifts gears and alters the tempo of the record entirely from the second track forward. “Get Me Bodied,” a Swizz Beatz-produced, dancehall track, combines Rasta percussions with double-dutch syncopations and gorgeous vocal harmonies (by Knowles herself) to celebrate once more the joys of girls’ night out: Beyoncé and “three best friends” on the town in a “vintage Rolls” with plenty of money to spend. Yes, the young-women-clubbing anthems are, on the one hand, ubiquitous right now with everyone from Red-State fave Gretchen Wilson getting “all-jacked up,” to Us Weekly cover girl Jessica Simpson glorying in her flaccid “Public Affair.” There is, however, something particularly provocative about Knowles’s reworking of this theme on B-Day, inasmuch as the song reaffirms Knowles’s control of her space on this album. “Get Me Bodied” is a track that is both more percussively oriented than “Déjà vu” and more resonant with the sounds of black girls’ play—rope-twirling, hand-clapping, and improvised cheers—games that, as ethnomusicologist Kyra Gaunt reminds us, are the backbone of black popular music culture (Gaunt 2006).

The militaristic pace of “Get Me Bodied” yet again signals that fierce beat that Knowles has called attention to at the opening of the album. She is, in fact, the leader of the “drumline” on this record. Think of her as a majorette or impresario of sorts who takes center stage again and again on tracks that find her openly controlling the pace of the arrangements (on the irresistible “Freakum Dress,” a “desperate-housewife” Knowles halts the beat like many a dance diva so as to “fix her hair” before launching into her sartorial seduction anthem). This role of the conductor overseeing a frantically paced environment is an image that Knowles herself has marketed as a part of making the album.

Indeed, the current and carefully crafted legend behind the making of B-Day is how short a time the artist took to record the tracks, and how Knowles herself oversaw a studio dynamic that heightened its urgent
sound. Recorded in what was reportedly a mere two weeks and in the wake of the Dreamgirls shoot, B-Day has been described by Knowles as an effort to put down on record the feelings conjured up by playing her doomed diva character (in her “hidden” address to the “fans” at the close of the record, Knowles—perhaps in a Freudian slip—alludes to Dreamgirls as “the film of my life”). Allegedly recorded in “secrecy” from both her Svengali-manager father Matthew Knowles and from Knowles’s Columbia label, B-Day has been repeatedly defined in interviews by the artist herself as a Beyoncé-orchestrated endeavor (Amber 2006, 174). This is a rather unusual and remarkable spin story for a female R&B artist’s album (whether we believe it or not in this age of publicist-driven image control), if only in light of the fact that everyone from Mariah Carey to Blige to Aguilera have, at one point or another, aggressively centered the “making” of their recordings around narratives that involve the centrality of producer figures.

For her part, Knowles makes use of her own impressive array of production wizards (everyone from the old stand-bys the Neptunes to Norwegian hitmakers StarGate to youthful soul revivalist Ne-Yo). But what’s interesting about their presence is how Knowles has discussed her own involvement in arranging and conducting their multiple roles in the production process. If the recording of B-Day is unique in its abbreviated session time that recalls, at the very least in spirit, the kind of mythical aura of “performance authenticity” (fewer takes; a raw, “live” feel) of indie rock and hip-hop albums, it is equally fascinating how Knowles arranged for her producers to work in multiple studios simultaneously reportedly so as to capture the feel of “battling” emcees so prominent in the making of her Roc-A-Fella partner’s records (Amber 2006, 174). B-Day is an album, then, that sounds like a battlefield—or at the very least a race of sorts—in which Beyoncé emerges victorious as a co-producer and entrepreneur engaged in multiple forms of “redress” that are, on the surface, couched in domestic and romantic terms, but that consistently make metaphors of the exigencies and the emotional and material stress of post-millennium and perhaps post-Katrina life as well.

No track sums up this theme more startlingly than “Suga Mama,” a song that marks the evolution of Beyoncé’s relationship with the (dollar) “bill” and her search for a partner who fits the bill. On “Suga Mama,” Knowles promises to her baby that she “won’t let no bills get behind,” effectively assuming the role that her Destiny’s Child-era lover of her “Bills, Bills,
Bills” days cannot fulfill. Producer Rich (“Crazy in Love”) Harrison yokes a
gut-bucket-blues-guitar lick from J Wade and the Soul Searchers into an
easy pickup-truck-on-a-back-road beat as Knowles claims purchase of a
nubile lover whose services are worthy of the gift of a “short set.” The
slinky retro blues chorus coursing through this track holds a special
resonance of sorts inasmuch as it recalls the sexual candor and assertive-
ness of blues legends such as Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. All the same,
Knowles’s pickup line here is thoroughly 2006 in its emphasis on the
purchasing power of the singer herself, whose love is seemingly not for
sale but who is capable of providing the bling, the “new whip,” the “new
heavy on the wrist” to satisfy her lover’s needs.

On a broader level, this is a song that sheds light on the phenomenon of
sponsorship in the wake of (emotional) evacuation and (domestic) disaster,
and it forces the post-catastrophe question of what does it mean to sponsor
someone and to provide redress (literally and figuratively)? What does it
mean to be a “Suga Mama” with an “accountant waiting on the phone”?
What does it mean to be a woman who proudly claims to be the “type to
take care of mine” in an age of gross federal (read patriarchal) failure to
serve and to protect? There is something remarkable, almost parodic,
about this track with its sinuous chorus (“Sit on mama lap/Hey, hey/Come
sit on mama lap”), and its insistence on acknowledging the power and the
allure of the maternal entrepreneurial figure, of which Knowles’s own
mother Tina has clearly set a life-long inspirational example.

Again and again on B-Day, Knowles assumes the role of the female
entrepreneur, the conductor, just as capable of assembling heavyweight
producers at once in multiple studios as she is of (re)assembling the best
traits of her lover. “Upgrade U,” the second track that features Jay-Z, finds
Knowles once again playing the role of the producer of sorts. Jay and
Knowles “do battle” like emcees throughout the track, as the singer makes
a bid to refine and reform her partner, “switch [his] neckties to purple
labels.” It is, on the surface, an astoundingly retrograde song, one in which
the Beyoncé of Destiny’s Child’s controversial track “Cater 2 U” re-emerges
and offers to “take care” of the home and her man. There is, though,
perhaps a bit more to this track with its cowboys “out-on-the-range” horns
and synthesizer arrangements. Even in a line as ludicrously overblown as “I
can do for you what Martin did for the people,” Knowles’s fixation on
uplift, upgrade, and enlightenment steers the track toward the broader
concerns of redress that hang over B-Day. The song assures that uplift will take the form of the material as Knowles flips the Svengali script in the latter verses, announcing to her lover that “you my project celebrity.” Rather than assuming the role of the helpless “dreamgirl,” Knowles declares her gift at turning Jay-Z into good product, declaring that “Unless you’re flawless/Then ya dynasty ain’t complete without a chief like me.”

If anything, “Upgrade U” is a track that reinforces the tenor of B-Day as an album focused on ownership and personal property. It also returns time and again to modes of evacuation and our heroine’s efforts to maintain spatial control in various circumstances. This is why the lyrics to the album demand special attention. For, on the one hand, while the “Ring the Alarm” video threatens to replay hackneyed images of a “girl gone Fatal Attraction wild,” the song itself is a far more complicated narrative than that of the familiar “woman scorned.” Like “Bills, Bills, Bills,” it would be easy to misread “Ring the Alarm” as a result of the chorus alone, an abrasive, in-your-face mantra in which Beyoncé yells a refrain that’s punctuated by red alarm sirens: “I been through this too long!/But I’ll be damned if I see another chick on your arm.”

If the cathartic outrage that shapes “Ring the Alarm” recalls the kind of carefully crafted breakup ire voiced by the likes of pop songstresses such as Alanis Morrissette and Kelly Clarkson, Knowles is carving out a very particular kind of palpable female R&B anger, one that sounds more like Kelis’s debut single, yet one that lyrically is much more concerned with property and ownership than any other song of its kind. “Ring the Alarm” gives loud, burning-down-the-house voice to a woman more concerned with losing her property, her “chinchilla coats,” the “house off coast,” “everything I own” than she is with love itself. Relationships, in Beyoncé’s cold, class-act world, are, in fact, for much of this record, business transactions. If “Déjà vu” charts a kind of obsessive love, the intimacy of “Ring the Alarm”—a song that rhythmically has more in common with the shifts in tempo found on “Get Me Bodied” and “Upgrade U”—conveys a narrative reduced to a woman’s relationships to her goods. Female discontent is rooted in lost “things” on “Alarm”: “I don’t want you but I want it/And I can’t let it go/To know you give it to her like you gave it to me, come on, . . .” The “it” that Beyoncé laments losing—sex, money, power—is cause for starting a fire. As empty as this relationship is, Knowles is clearly wary of reminding her listeners of the alienating effects of the
material on intimacy itself: “How can you look at me/And not see all the things that I kept only just for you? Why would you risk it baby?/This is my show and I won’t let you go/All has been paid for, and it’s mine.”

Even a seemingly knock-off sexual innuendo track like “Kitty Kat,” in which the singer declares that she and her feline “pet” are leaving an uncaring lover, is infused with the rhetoric of evacuation and the repossession of (sexual) property. Lyrics that point to the fact that the singer and her lover are “at two places but different paces” and that declare that “we in trouble but you won’t meet me at the bridge” perhaps point to more complicated images of stress and the stinging recognition of being devalued in a relationship (the “bridge” imagery even brings to mind the many bridges that hurricane evacuees were forced to wait on and, in some cases, were not allowed to cross at the height of the disaster). If this is a song about getting out, about evacuating a relationship, “Kitty Kat,” with its refrain of “What about my body, body?/You don’t want my body, body/Acting like I’m nobody,” also underscores a longing to revalue the self in real, corporeal ways. In the end, there is something poignant that pulses beneath the surface of this euphemistic attention-grabber, something that reinforces the deeper social and emotional dimensions of the record as a whole.

More often than not, then, the Beyoncé on B-Day does battle with lovers who need upgrading, who betray, and who fail to fulfill. By the time the euphoric crescendo of the Neptunes’ signature bass-driven “Green Light,” this heroine has emerged in full boast-and-toast mode, encouraging her (ex)-lover to recognize the “green light” and go rather than “holdin up traffic.” Once again conducting, setting the pace, morphing into the arbiter of flow, Knowles orders her lover to “move along” and acknowledges her own “pimpish” worth that “gets no older.” “Green Light” signals the liberation of her character and transitions the album into its final “unpretty” act, “Irreplaceable,” the hook-driven, number-one smash akin to some of TLC’s most successful crossover pop material. With so many orchestrated movements throughout the record, it’s fitting that this track would find Knowles once again efficiently directing an ex-lover “to the left, to the left . . . Everything you own in the box to the left/Yes, if I bought it, then please don’t touch.” Evacuation is once again afoot here as Knowles reminds him that it’s her “name that’s on that jag/So go move your bags, let me call you a cab.” The purchase(d) power of “Suga Mama” has turned
sour here as Knowles informs her boyfriend-product that he should never “for a second get to thinkin’” that he’s “irreplaceable.”

The cordial disillusionment of that track, however, comes undone in “Resentment,” B-Day’s dissonant, closing number proper (the album includes an additional, product-placement track, “Listen,” from the film Dreamgirls, which debuted later that year, as well as a reprise of “Get Me Bodied”) that loops a sample of Curtis Mayfield’s melancholic “Think” with gospel and doo-wop-tinged harmonies to convey the pure depths of romantic bile that lead the singer to a hard, grief-stricken nadir. With shrill vocals stretched to the very extreme, “Resentment” is a difficult, visceral track on which to officially end the record. In many ways it delivers the retro arrangements of En Vogue’s 1990s smash cover, “Giving Him Something He Can Feel,” but re-outfits electric sexual “feeling” here as shards of pain. The “feeling” of resentment is rushed, off-center, arched, and surfeiting with emotion that sounds as though it is at the crossroads of a choir solo and juke-joint nightclub abandon. It’s an extraordinarily uncomfortable crescendo, a jagged little pill for fans of the 40/40 club dreamgirl-covergirl to swallow, and one that reminds us, as pop critic Jody Rosen argues, that this is indeed a “tough record” produced by “a storm system disguised as a singer” (Rosen 2006).

Rosen’s allusion reminds us too of the Gulf Coast roots in Beyoncé’s own familial past. Born and raised in Houston, Knowles is nonetheless the product of a maternal line that hails from New Orleans. Indeed, that one-of-a-kind first name is in fact a variation on her mother’s maiden name, “Beyince,” the mark of a proud Creole heritage as well as an example of her parents’ self-inventive spirit. Embedded in Knowles’s family history, then, is a tale of migration from New Orleans to Houston as well as one of resourceful self-styling. Knowles herself has reiterated the importance of her upper-middle class roots, her father’s got-to-know-how spirit that propelled him from working as an executive in medical sales at Xerox to managing her career and, likewise, her mother’s solid example as a black female entrepreneur. And although this privilege, this recognition that for her there is “no pressure, because” her parents “are going to be successful regardless of what they do” (Toure 2004, 44) would seem to set Knowles at utmost odds with the women who survived the storm, the sheer sense of entitlement and the rejection of disenfranchisement on B-Day is perhaps a subtle yet powerful emotional statement about the politics of black
women’s property in the wake of that national crisis. It is a record whose visceral dimensions around the subject of ownership challenge century-old American myths about race, class, and gender—one that, as Carby once argued, still imagine black women as lazy, feckless, “degenerate,” and unwilling to work (Carby 1992). Knowles’s album asserts a willed response to black women’s social dislocation in the wake of yet another massive migration, and it imagines a language of socioeconomic autonomy that is, in every way, troubling in its fixation on materialism and yet provocative as well in light of the gross loss of property endured by so many African Americans and particularly by female-headed households in the wake of the storm.

Beyoncé’s steady chart success and, perhaps more importantly, her still vaulting iconicity represent the extent to which the social, political, and cultural desires of R&B music fans—and especially female R&B music fans—still remain largely overlooked and under-theorized in popular music studies. Save for the likes of Mark Anthony Neal, few critics have analyzed the ways that both female R&B performers and the fans who love them are actively and consistently producing a public record of cultural expression that affirms the intersecting personal and political questions and concerns of women of color in the early twenty-first century. Their musical subcultures should remind us of the point that Neal has often made, that popular R&B demands that we take it more seriously since it articulates overt as well as latent desires pulsating through contemporary African-American culture (Neal 2003).

B-Day makes many of these desires manifest. It is an album that articulates the questions and concerns of black women who are wary of having their movements controlled and policed in the public eye—from Sojourner Truth to Super Bowl Janet. In the post-Hurricane Katrina era, both Beyoncé’s B-Day and Blige’s stirring duet with U2 mark the emergence of resolutely off-center, surrogated performances of discontent and dissent. Taken together, Beyoncé’s urgently paced album and Blige’s pointed, methodical-as-a-heartbeat cover song score an R&B response of sorts to this long history of black women who have been stripped and stressed and displaced and denied, and each artist’s performance imagines new ways of moving and singing under duress.
NOTES

1. Portions of this article appeared previously in Brooks 2006. Many thanks to Christine Smallwood, Eric Weisbard, and Reginald Jackson for their helpful suggestions and feedback during the writing and revision of this essay.

2. For more on the politics of race, gender, class, and 1990s media spectacles, see Lubiano 1992.


4. Much work has yet to be done on the culture of black women’s popular protest and dissent music. Of the major works on this topic, most have focused on the work of blues and jazz pioneers. See, for instance, Carby 1994; see also Davis 1999; Griffin 2001; and Feldstein 2005. Alice Echols is currently working on a study of black women’s social and political aesthetics and identifications in 1970s disco, soul, and funk culture (Echols forthcoming). For studies of black women and rock and roll cultural dissent, see Mahon 2004; Wald 2007; Hobson 2008.

5. We might heed the fact that the moment was quickly co-opted by Blige for her forthcoming album and later staged and re-staged—in effect “watered down”—at a string of awards shows, variety specials, and sporting events. In this regard, the staging and re-staging of the song led to a kind of tragic evacuation of the meaning of this stunning, original performance.


8. See also Barthes 1977, 179-89. For more on the currency, cultural appropriations, and trans-historical resonance of the black female singing voice, see Griffin 2004, 102-25.

9. See also Weiner 2006, 75-84.

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