



Teaching Intersectional Identity through Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

Alexandra Howell, Meredith College & Julie Hillery, University of New Mexico, USA

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Intersectional theory (“intersectionality”) is a framework that provides a context for the interrelated nature of race, class, and gender (Crenshaw, 1991). As subject positions one will inherently impact another. Johnson (2006) provides further context that society ranks subject positions as “dominate” and “subordinate.” For example, in the context of gender, male/masculinity is viewed as dominate and female/femininity as subordinate. In social psychology of appearance/dress additional themes of beauty, size, age, ability, and religion further complicate this matrix (Kaiser, 2012; Hill Collins, 1999), where individuals and groups may experience privilege as a member of the dominant group or oppression as a member of the subordinate group. Systems of privilege and oppression are often defined by culture and policy to keep certain groups in the subordinate category for generations (Johnson, 2006). The U.S. is a traditionally patriarchal society where white, Christian, cis-gender, middle class, hetero-men have long held a dominate role. The complexity of identity is covered under the broad umbrella of social psychology of appearance/dress. Undergraduate students while often versed in contemporary verbiage about identity politics rarely understand the systemic function that has plagued the U.S. for centuries.

During the 2016 – 2017 academic year two professors undertook a project to help students expand understanding of intersectional identity using an element of popular culture, Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade*. To the casual observer it may appear as though she is seeking public revenge for her husband's infidelity. A closer review of the film implies a conversation about race, class, and gender. Beyoncé and her team constructed a message about the lives of woman of color in the United States. Throughout the film images of black and brown women wearing antebellum dresses, natural hair, African body painting, and video vixen costumes; all associated with the constructs of black women in America. Through 11 “chapters” Beyoncé and her team give meaning and context to the struggle experienced by poor women of color in the United States, a subordinate group. Notably Beyoncé used imagery from post-Katrina New Orleans, the *Black Lives Matter* movement, and featured Sybrina Fulton, Lezley McSpadden, and Gwen Carr, the mothers of Treyvon Martin, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, respectively. What the audience observes throughout the film is the anguish, struggle, determination, and hope of women who have faced ridicule and discrimination throughout their lives and who's mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers were subject to the same. The film featured Jay-Z's grandmother, Ms. Hattie, who at her 90th birthday celebration proclaimed “I was served lemons, but made lemonade.” This is juxtaposed with a Malcolm X quote from 1962, “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman” (Rodriguez, 2016). Using this visual album as tool students engaged in discussion and writing to learn about intersectional identity.

The students were introduced to the intersectional theory and covered readings and lecture on appearance and dress as they related to race, class, and gender. The culmination of these topics was a class viewing of

Lemonade, discussion, and formal essay. The purpose of the immediate discussion following the film was to gauge understanding of the group. Both professors reported students (n=57) initial understanding as “varied.” A smaller sample of students (n=17) could articulate the representations of multiple oppressions Beyoncé discussed in her film. For example, one student stated “Not only did she make a statement by choosing only women of color, but having the women wear African American hairstyles such as braids and afros was revolutionary. With this, she has shown the race, ethnicity, and gender included in intersectionality.” The student here does not correctly understand the function of theoretical framework, but is able to demonstrate an understanding of intersectional identity. A larger sample of students (n = 39) had greater difficulty, initially, articulating understanding. Both groups of students markedly improved with the formal essay. Professors determined this improvement to be linked to the discussion and additional research for the essay, based on references used. In the formal essay students found broader context for intersectional identity and its accompanying theory, such as exploring the visual narrative of black hair, social and cultural contexts for being “low income,” happiness within black communities, *Black Lives Matter*, and constructs of femininity and masculinity within black communities.

Students were provided with a detailed grading rubric with points allotted to “participation in discussion,” “accuracy of analysis and quality of writing,” “appropriate inclusion of additional resources,” and “correctly citing one’s paper.” Each section explains what is expected for an “A” through an “F.” Student outcomes were positively skewed with a majority of students falling into the A – C range. In future iterations of the project a norming session will improve grading consistency. Beyond the graded results, students reported positive feelings about the project overall. One student stated “I have seen it (*Lemonade*) before, but I just thought it was about Jay-Z cheating on Beyoncé. I now can see that she (Beyoncé) is using her platform to get fans and haters to talk about race issues in the U.S.” Another student reflected on her own race in comparison to the film “I know that *Lemonade* isn’t specifically for me, but the film is showing me that everyone needs to talk about women and race.” A third student reflected in a slightly different manner, “I don’t like Beyoncé and I didn’t like *Lemonade*. What I learned is that the constructed identities created for low class, African American women is really hurtful and it is revolutionary to show happy African American women.” As identity politics continue to be central conversations in media today, it is important for educators to implore students to have these difficult conversations. Using Beyoncé simply makes the conversation easier to begin and more palatable to college students.

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