

Undergraduate Student Research Internship

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The Black Artiste: Politization as Racialization

Introduction

Understanding the personal as political is an increasingly relevant way of thinking about several socio-political contemporary ideologies and movements such as Second Wave Feminism, The Civil Rights Movement, The Black Panther Movement, and more recently, the Black Lives Matter Movement. Terms like ‘identity politics’ describe this phenomenon well, illustrating how the personal and the political are merging in not only name alone, but also theoretically-insinuating that today the two arenas cannot be isolated (Walters 476- 478).

For the Black artist today, the same is true. We witness a Black artistic landscape that cannot be traversed without bringing into question these kinds of personal identity politics. A tradition wherein Black artists often find themselves between their art and their politics; in which many never seem to create art only for art’s sake but rather to also exact an equally necessary socio-political end.

In this research, I navigate the relationship between the personal and the political for Black artists in order to examine the extent to which Black art is inherently political. To do this I will reframe the definitions of politics to a more appropriate understanding. I also intend to use modern-day Black artists and their relationship with politics as case studies. Extending from

previous my research, I will also be making significant references to the works of Keith A. Mayes and Richard Iton.

Definitions

The discussion of politics in this essay is not limited to government, legislation, or policy, but rather is inspired by the popularized twentieth-century process of re-identifying individual acts as symbolic of a larger socio-political framework which collectively impacts legislation.¹ Understanding individuals and state policy as symbiotic and agents of social ideology is rudimentary in understanding the significance of politics vis-à-vis Black art. Therefore, throughout this essay I refer to a ‘politic’ as the expression of a singular socio-political ideology usually exhibited through individual actions. In other words, by regarding a seemingly innocuous act as representative of a politic we revisit said act’s socio-political implications and encourage a deeper investigation into its symbolic meanings. Similarly, I use the term ‘political potency’ to refer to the extent to which an act, regardless of intent, may further a socio-political agenda/politic. I apply these more contemporary understandings to Black art in the Americas in order to better examine Black artistic traditions and particularly current art-making practised by Black artists.

The Superpublic

Addressing Black sociopolitical issues remains a persistent necessity as well as a driving creative force of today’s Black art. This is not to say that today’s Black art is permanently at

¹ Most notably, second wave feminism’s slogan ‘the personal is political’ and the Civil Rights Movement’s mobilization of Black politics through personal and cultural signifiers (hair, music, religion, etc.) encapsulates the epoch’s pattern of readily understanding selfhood in relation to traditional politics.

odds with more traditional forms of political activism such as campaigning, voting, audits, research, practice, or policy-making. Rather, one of today's most powerful expressions of Black politics is to engage these civic practices through a variety of creative media such as song, story, and video. This is a key point of Richard Iton's *In Search of the Black Fantastic*. Iton argues that for much of their history, African Americans created Black art as a separate public sphere where they practised their own form of civic engagement outside of the political spaces that excluded them (cited in Mayes 158). This sowed the seeds for the 'superpublic' which we live in today, a ubiquitous post-civil rights video-age technology that multiplies Black media representations in American society. This new site of Black production consists of live speeches and mass campaigns, but also music videos and pro-Black radio stations and television. For Iton, this superpublic causes Black office holders and Black artists alike to engage in Black political work together, redefining the meaning and expression of the term "political" (cited in Mayes 159).

Iton's Black fantastic is crucial for comprehending how history, politic, and racialization intersect to re-frame and motivate Black civic engagement. As Lawrie Balfour states, "Black artists, activists, and intellectuals have transgressed the bounds of what can be said and thought in political life" (Balfour 3). Formal politics is impractical for Black artists who wrestle with the ways the politics of our identities rear their heads every day. And on the opposite end of the spectrum, formal artmaking is just as impossible for Black artists. To frame Black art outside of any politic is possible; in fact, any artist should be able to exercise their agency to do so if they wish. But the political potency of Black art -- the way it shows up and combats the pre-existing (white) art in its field -- is undeniable. It is then by that very nature that Black art should be examined as containers and expressions of politics, even if they are that way inadvertently.

The Black Artistic Landscape

Today, politics are heavily intertwined with the work of Black artists from Jordan Peele to Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche; even for the Black artists who did not previously centre their work on their politics, artists such as Beyoncé eventually quickly came to do so. The reason for this, I argue, is the way that Black artists converse with the world is not without politics. Eugenics, a widely accepted pseudo-science in early 20th century United States of America, claimed race differences can be attributed to genetic and chromosome differentiations. Both scientists and policymakers alike at that time accepted this idea and concluded that racism is not only inevitable in a multiracial society but also, more cruelly, that racism is fair due to the inherent superiority of the white race (Lauter). The influence of eugenicists in politics and science, allowed racism to latch itself onto the areas of our lives we deem essential to our modern political infrastructure, namely democracy, governance, law, etc. We may also understand race through racecraft, a term coined by Barbara E. and Karen Fields that understands race relations as a mental terrain that Americans navigate regularly and although it [race] “only exist in human imagination, it is still a framework that that is collective yet individual, day-to-day yet historical, and consequential even though nested in mundane routine” (B. Fields and K. Fields). We may then come to understand that race has been interpolated in politics and the general social consciousness of American culture, familiarizing itself so deeply with human life that it becomes inescapable and essential.

Case Studies

Beyoncé

In conversation with Lucy Robinson, the Huffington Post retraces Beyoncé's career with public politics from early childish trendsetting to rigorous adulthood performance and upset. The world first came to know Beyoncé through her rise to fame at sixteen years old in Destiny's Child. As an adolescent, the politics of Beyoncé's music were in line with her peers (girl groups and young female singers) reclaiming their femininity and agency. In 1999's "Bills, Bills, Bills" and "Hey Ladies" we get very outspoken definitions of what a strong woman should look like: independent, financially free, and wary of men who do not satisfy her needs. The narratives are empowering for their younger female audience and although the band does not legitimately tackle much of the roots of patriarchy, they attempt to challenge the power dynamic supported by the ideology. This trend continues throughout Beyoncé's Destiny's Child career and even shortly afterwards with anthems like "Survivor", "Independent Women", and "Who Run the World (Girls)".

However, it isn't until Beyoncé's 2014 VMA performance, when she stood proudly in front of the word 'feminist' on a global stage, that her politics began to take a more serious turn, even including the definition of feminism voiced by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche in her track "***Flawless". To the public, Beyoncé's once palatable art and image as a light skin woman singing about being sexy and self-reliant begins to shift as she interrogates publicly the system that oppresses women in areas outside of just sexuality i.e., the economic, political, and social as well. And Beyoncé does not back down, in fact, she ups the ante and makes her feminism intersectional- confronting racism, colourism, and anti-Blackness.

In 2016 – the year of Donald Trump's election – Beyoncé responded to police brutality and the Black Lives Matter Movement with imagery from her visual album *Lemonade* including drowning police cars, a young Black boy in a hoodie confronting a line of white police officers

in riot gear, and vivid slave plantation references. Not long after, Beyoncé performed with Bruno Mars at the Super Bowl, one of the biggest global performance stages, wearing a Black Panthers-inspired outfit.

This trend continues in Beyoncé's 2020 film *Black is King*, which takes up the Afro-centric politics in its sound, style, cinematography, dance, and dress of diverse Black cultures with honour and respect. Exploring the multi-faceted nature of African peoples on an epic scale that is hard to ignore, *Black is King* fuels political potency as an artistic statement of revolt in a predominantly white industry.

Suddenly, this 'new' politically charged Beyoncé is the Beyoncé who cannot help but seriously address those systemic issues that affect her and the women like her in her artform and performance. However, many activists have pointed out Beyoncé's convenient political shapeshifting to discuss whichever discourse is the most prominent in the media and social consciousness of Americans, especially with the release of "BREAK MY SOUL," which tackles capitalism and proletariat realities amid a weakening economy and a foreshadowed recession. At the same time, many have also pointed to the fact that we, the masses, should not begin to consider celebrities our allies in any politic because Beyoncé, like many others, still benefit from the systems of oppression we seek to dismantle. Namely, Beyoncé is still a capitalist, owning the means of production of her own business which employs and overworks underprivileged women in South Asia, cashes in millions off her music, and flaunts her wealth and status in various ways such as wearing the Tiffany and Co diamond worth over \$30 million.

Perhaps we might never get to know Beyoncé or her intentions on a truly personal and intimate level, but what is undeniable is how her art today always includes necessary politics. Intentions aside, the effects are noteworthy, consistently stirring conversation and platforming

marginalized voices to educate, upset, and engage. As a young Black girl from Houston, Texas who entered the entertainment industry at such a young age, perhaps we can understand Beyonce's political evolution as inevitable. Her race has shaped her reality and as she matures, so do her artistic concerns.

Kanye West

On the other hand, artists like Kanye West have always been political. Since the inception of his career West has never shied away from political discourse, addressing homophobia in Hip-Hop in 2005 which was largely unheard of at that time, misogynoir, religion, police brutality, and Black wealth, in his chart-topping songs like "All Falls Down", "Jesus Walks", and "Diamonds from Sierra Leone". When West acts rashly in his early days to address a politic such as publicly blurting that "George Bush doesn't care about Black people" (Kornhaber 2020), he engages with political discourse on his own terms- a once favoured trait that is now his Achilles' heel.

While performing at San Jose's SAP Center during his 2016 Saint Pablo Tour run, West announced that even though he didn't vote in the last election, he would have voted for Donald Trump. This marks a pivotal moment for the decline in the African-American community's trust in Kanye West's political ideologies. Only a year prior he had also announced that he would be running for President in the 2020 elections and this blatant support for a man who many deem a racist, hints at what Kanye might support if elected. Since his concert in 2016, Kanye doubled down on his statement by defending himself in his track "Ye vs The People", wearing Trump's infamous dog-whistle 'Make America Great Again' hat, sharing friendly tweets with the politician, and claiming that 'slavery was a choice'.

When coming to terms with the relationship between Black artists and politics West proves two primary things: firstly, the evidence of the Superpublic, which reminds us that traditional politics is outdated and must now be considered as emerging with art and art's influence on the masses. Contemporary artists heavily impact political discourse through various forms of media and performance and initiate change and conversation that influence elections, party leaders, and campaigns. Moreover, when West ran for President he became certified as a musician and politician alike, thereby creating an audience of both consumers and voters, fans and party people in order to reinforce his sway in both endeavours. Even though Kanye has claimed he is 'done with Donald Trump' and rescinds many of his comments, in many ways the damage is done. West's influence as a world-renowned artist, has aided Trump and his followers to grow in numbers, visibility, and power.² And secondly, West proves the necessity for Black artists to discuss politics. There was never a Kanye West without a politic. Though these politics are prone to dangerously shift and change,³ West opens up a conversation about how Black people navigate the world at constant odds with who political power rests with and what they are capable and willing to do with that power.

Lorna Goodison

In her collection of poems, *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (1995), Lorna Goodison tackles themes relating to the Black Caribbean experience: trauma, racial identity, culture, landscape, etc. Her poetry dignifies itself as an authentic expression of Black Caribbean culture and often challenges white hegemonic institutions, including the ideologies that perpetuate

² See Avlon's critique on West c siphoning off key portions of the Black vote despite being unable to win the 2020 elections.

³ See Lane's conversation with West.

distorted perceptions of the Caribbean and its people. For the postcolonial Caribbean author who writes “in the shadow of history's ‘misunderstanding’ of place, literature can be both resistant and restorative by offering a counter-hegemonic representation of the tropics” (Rahim 69).

Caribbean writers such as Goodison, Derek Walcott, and Olive Senior are imbued with a particular politic by way of re-representing a terrain and a people previously not thought of as home and as humane by white institutions, respectively.⁴ As Goodison writes in her title poem, “To Us, All Flowers Are Roses,” which aims to redefine her home and her identity,

Accompong is Ashanti, root, Nyamekopon
appropriate name Accompong,
meaning warrior or lone one. (Goodison 69)

As a Caribbean woman, Goodison traverses geographical, cultural, and linguistic boundaries, part and parcel of any citizen born into a post-colonial territory. But not only does she represent her place of birth, she also represents the histories of her ancestors (mostly women) left out of official records, including the lives of African-Caribbean enslaved workers and domestic servants. In “Annie Pengelly” (a story passed down from Goodison’s own mother) Goodison questions the validity Black women have historically had in court through the story of an enslaved Jamaican girl who receives no justice in the Jamaican court of law because the institution as well as the people who govern it automatically realize her as inferior and disposable.

Overtly, the poem attacks our traditional forms of politics as well as those who have always benefited from said forms to suggest that justice for people like her and her ancestors may never be found in those systems built to her exclusion. This may stand at odds with the how

⁴ I highlight these three poets to extend Rahim’s identification of their poetry as consistently grappling with what it means to be Caribbean given the region’s colonial history and contemporary colonial socio-political reproductions.

West and Iton view politics and the superpublic respectively. To Goodison, the importance of involving her politics with her art is not necessarily to merge the two or draw attention to herself as political player, but rather she intends to criticize – to use her art as a means by which readers can be led to interrogate traditional political powers and means of hegemony for themselves.

Through Goodison’s use of Jamaican patois to describe the experiences of Anne Pengelly, she suggests that traditional political institutions will not understand her subject matter and further demonstrates the necessity of her concerns to be expressed natively - that the colonial tools (language and English courts alike) are not equipped spaces to express Jamaican concerns,

“Sometimes Annie nod off,
 Missus jook her with a pearl-tipped pen.
 Sometimes Annie tumble off the chair
 Felled by sleep.
 Missus slap her awake again.
 Then in order to keep her alert, awake
 She devised the paper torture.” (line 109-115).

Goodison’s “Anne Pengelly” asks readers to re-examine today through the lens of yesterday, which is to say comprehend our reality by familiarizing ourselves with how we got here in the first place all the while remaining critical of white institutions and their participation in inherited tragedies committed against Black folk. The insinuated result, it seems for Goodison, is justice as recompense:

“Annie Pengelly O.
 I say, History owe you.” (31)

Jordan Peele

American racecraft is provoked by Jordan Peele who, since his directorial debut in 2017, has entered the horror genre intent on disrupting what we identify as horrific and for whom. In “Get Out”, Peele recalls America’s history with eugenics, particularly the perspective of Black bodies as stronger and more athletic yet intellectually inferior and sub-human to white bodies (Mbowe), as well as America’s slavery realities which deemed Black people as resources useful insofar as they further white desires, as both integral contexts to the film’s discussion of race. Ultimately, these two closely related American histories are infused with gothic elements⁵ to demonstrate the horror of the film: white folks inserting their consciousness into the physically fitter bodies of African-Americans as a way to extend white life expectancy.

For Peele, the horror of the movie is not wholly paranormal, but rather recalls the very real current and historical oppressions of Black peoples. The film takes real-life horrific instances of Black bodies' significance - as production machines, properties, and non-sentient objects for white exploitative use, and takes it a step further with paranormal elements such as dramatic hypnosis and ‘the sunken place’ to discuss the unsettling and disturbing nature of ongoing racial transgressions. The verisimilitude of Black bodies being at the disposal of white exploitation is critical in understanding and appreciating the film’s discourse, however, it is terrifying for Black audiences in a way it may not be for their white counterparts. Debates surrounding the film during the time of its release sought to challenge its genre as comedy more than horror which, in other words, sought to re-enact the traditional attempt at undermining some of the most horrific events part and parcel to American ancestry and history as ‘not that bad’ (Landsberg 629). In response to limiting the genre of the film, Peele categorized “Get Out” as

⁵ See Landsberg’s 633-634 discussion of Peele’s subversion of popular horror tropes such as the ‘haunted house’ in “Get Out”.

neither horror nor comedy but rather, a documentary(Williams 132). Explicitly, *Get Out*'s politic is concerned with America's racecraft and those beliefs that have propelled it into its inescapable significance in the American psyche, detailing how even self-proclaimed liberal white folks abet, support, and enact racism.

Unsurprisingly, Peele's first film holds racial politics so firmly by the horns since he has been a Black man in digital-age media for decades prior. Peele's most recent film, "Nope", strikes closer to the heart of those origins by tackling exploitation at the hands of modern media industry machines rather than a particular group separated by racial lines. In the film, the stars of shows, movies, and live performances are animals who are trained for widely broadcasted media and capitalistic consumption (merchandising, television, advertisements, etc.). The preoccupation throughout the film with modern acts of digital storytelling is what drives the exploitation of the innocent and is the eventual cause of numerous instances of death, loss, and/or trauma for all the characters. For Peele, the superpublic is complex. Evidently, digital modes of representation and broadcasting are powerful, containing the potential to eliminate the Haywood's family debt and leave decades-long impressions on consumers, but are also rife with problems.

Firstly, the superpublic is dependent on media and art through being portrayed through modern digital technologies which increasingly distort and blur reality for money, entertainment, and personal agendas. When Gordy, the monkey and star of his own television series, attacks his castmates we recognize that Gordy is not a pet nor a performer. Similarly, when Jupe presents a UFO to his audience by sacrificing horses, we understand that the object in the sky is a living, thinking being. Both 'animals' in these cases are victims of an industry that sought to set them on a stage and re-represent them for something they are not.

Secondly, even if authentic, in today's digital age it is nigh impossible for concerns displayed on screens to be critically and seriously viewed. After Gordy's infamous attack on his castmates, the incident becomes a beloved comedy sketch, reproducing tragedy as humour. Even closer to the film's end when word begins to spread about the death and danger haunting the small town where the film takes place, a TMZ cameraman is loaded with the gear and unwavering determination to capture every moment on camera to produce content. Even the protagonists in the film risk their lives countless times to get the 'Oprah Shot' of the extraterrestrial being in the sky for monetary, personal gain, ultimately continuing to exploit a frustrated and abused being:

“[...] there's no remaining part of the galaxy that can't be exploited for entertainment.

TikTok, YouTube and the local news cycle dangle the promise of overnight fame in front of people's eyes, subliminally training us all to view every experience – no matter how traumatic – as potential content” (Laughrie)

Peel does not shy away from discussing politics in neither “Get Out” nor “Nope” and identifies what Iton would otherwise claim to be the beneficial superpublic as a containment for a problematic few, most notably, capitalist exploitation.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche offers a layer to Black politics and art in relation to the superpublic in direct opposite to Peele's take. Adiche identifies current digital storytelling as a display of how the open access internet permits a degree of agency for Black immigrants and the Black diaspora through unique community building and knowledge sharing. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's blog is the opposite of exploitative - this piece of digital media is

owned and governed by its Black creator and allows her a communal textual space in a land that sees her as alien (Butler 288). In the novel, Ifemelu's blog does not necessarily impact formal policymaking or legislation, but it does function as a political refuge, considering a strength of the Superpublic as also its ability to relocate Black folk within a familiar cultural homeland.

Adiche's novel centres on racial and diasporic politics representing Black immigrant communities revising public discourse on intersections of race, culture, and nationality, effectively expanding conceptions of Blackness in America (Duce 250). Whereas more popular and mainstream media platforms have become saturated with businesses, companies, and fast trends, the way Adiche presents blogging as dialogic digital literature enables her protagonist to reclaim her digital footprint and speak to complex social issues.

For Adiche, politics have always been necessary. Similar to West, Adiche's most popular works such as *Purple Hibiscus*⁶ and *Half of a Yellow Sun*⁷ have considered race and nationality as political complexities impossible to ignore:

Race is the major organizing principle of American history, American life, really, and it is the one also that Americans are the most uncomfortable about. It's the subject that they circle around, the subject that they invent codes to talk about. . . . It's the subject that, many Americans think that it has to do with the past, but it's very much the present, and I think also that it's the most misunderstood, the most potentially contentious, social subject in America. (Det Kongelige Bibliotek 2014, 2:32–3:05)

Conclusion

⁶ See Umezurike for an analysis into *Purple Hibiscus*' discussion of politics, specifically masculinity, religion, and class indicators.

⁷ Coffey 66 details at length the geopolitical contexts and subsequent implications present in *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

Despite geography, concern, and genre, Black artmaking sees politics consistently. Alain Locke argues transplanting Black people as slaves in the 19th century from Africa, embedded specific concerns which transcend time and distance to reveal a shared creative process and thematic understanding inherent within Black art (Pardlo 1195) while Gussow credits Black artistic methodologies as necessary cultural resources used to help Black folk come to terms with ubiquitous racism and enhance civic pride (Gussow 35-36). Nevertheless, the result is the same: the Black artistic tradition is to be entangled with politics of resistance. In today's heavily charged political age with an emphasis on superpublic participation and production, the Black artist is granted the opportunity to engage with discourse on one's own terms, in one's own language to the exclusion or inclusion of traditional courses of civic engagement and political institutions.

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