

mayah n. wheeler

The timelessness of black issues

Introduction:

Through the history of black art, there has been continuous representation of the oppression and hardships that we, as black people face. In literature and music, the story is no different. Two artists in particular, Audre Lorde and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter have been pillars within the black community. The two artists selected use their art work to express black collectivity through discussion of their personal, yet relatable experiences. In my opinion, the definition of black collectivity is the space for unity through personal interactions. Through their art, these spaces of discussion are available.

Within this piece, it will be argued that there is a connection between the work of Beyoncé and Audre Lorde through their selection of subject matter. With this being said, it would be plausible to imply that Audre's work served as an inspiration for Beyoncé, whom would be continuing on her legacy. In addition to serving as an inspiration, Lorde creates the layout for discussion of black collectivity, which Beyoncé follows in her work.

Collectivity:

How does a category with such a wide variation in skin tones, hair textures and experiences connect a group of people? What does it mean to be black? These seemingly rhetorical questions can be answered easily with the concept of black collectivity. Due to the enslavement of African peoples, there has been a thread connecting black peoples across countries making descendants of the African diaspora interconnected as well. Black collectivity reiterates this by expressing how our experiences are similar. Black collectivity answers the

questions by saying that we are connected because we have been victims of the similar systematic oppressive systems resulting in similar life experiences.

From this definition, it can be gathered that we need representation. Though our experiences within the community have similarities, they are not reflective in the majority. So it can be easy to think that you are alone in what you are experiencing. But with representation and understanding black collectivity, we can grow together and heal. Specifically, representation is essential for children. As children grow and undertake the difficulties of life, they need to know that they can do this, and they are not alone. When children have role models, it provides an example for how to be. Music and other forms of art such as literature, have the ability to do the same thing. Art can show to children that their experiences are similar to others, in the same way that psychically present role models can, additionally, the artists themselves can serve as role models. These examples can be found today; for example I would consider bell hooks and Nancy Morejón, two black women in literature, as two of my biggest role models, due to the positive impact their literature has had on my life. Due to the collected shared experiences expressed in their literature it reiterated to me that I was not alone and that I could overcome my challenges.

As discussed in class, many black artists were in communication with each other during their eras. But this is not limited to their era. Black scholars, such as Angela Davis and bell hooks, are still being read and taught, though their literature was produced decades ago. The same is true to fictional/poetic literature, with an example being Langston Hughes. Artists work continues to inspire the creation of literature within their era and for generations to come. This is also a part of black collectivity because space is provided for the sharing and critiquing of ideas.

Audre's art:

Audre Lorde is a recognized black lesbian poet who has used her art form to express her familial relationships, exploring concepts ranging in subject matter but primarily about love. Her art form is unique and ranges in structure. A key feature in her literature is use of first-person narration. Though this form is not always used, the three pieces selected share the use of first-person narration as well as similar subject matter.

“And what about the Children” narrates the problem of raising children by imploring narration, subject matter and tone. If this poem is read aloud, it sounds as if a mother is complaining to someone about her current situation with her child- that everyone is telling her what to do but she is not pleased with the advice. In order to create this feeling, first, it is important to note the familial language Audre uses. By starting off the poem with the pronoun “we”, the reader is aware that the poem may be about her personal life, and given the context, her relationship with her husband. She then has the words “negatives” and “relatives” positioned relatively closed to each other. I noted that there may be a connection between the two. This is reiterated in the lines “and how much curl is right for a girl?” These lines are in reference to the “good hair” vs. “bad hair” debate within the black community. Because Audre’s husband is white, it is possible that her relatives would be talking about how “pretty” of hair her child would have. But by the end of the poem, Audre proclaims that her son (after using the “my” pronoun) will not care about his hair or his mother’s marriage. By the end, the reader knows this is a poem about how she wants to do better for her son and leave the negative thought patterns behind. This is all achieved through the tone and narration of the poem.

In this poem, Audre uses a plethora of examples so the reader can understand this poem. The first example she uses is “I am never sure if you are being saucy or experimental...” This example illuminates the idea that there is a state of confusion within their relationship. The

reader is sure that she is talking about her daughter, because she explicitly says, “You are the child of wind and ravens I created (line break) always my daughter”. Another interesting example is the reference to her own rebellion. By mentioning this, it is almost as if she is slightly worried her daughter will rebel or feel the need to as she did. This could be because she is describing the similarities between her and her daughter. Due to this, Audre analyzes her daughter’s actions on a deeper level. The reader can see this analyzation throughout the poem, especially during the lines “I watch the hollows deepen above your hips and wonder if I have taught you Black enough (line break) until I see (line break) all kinds of loving still intrigue you”. This section shows that Audre has been worried about her daughter and if she did a good job with her, but that her daughters receptivity to love shows her that she did show her love which connects to the rhetorical question in the first stanza “when you question me on love shall I recommend a dictionary or myself”. By the end of the poem, the reader understands that Audre is making efforts to respect the transition in their relationship with the lines “even I knock before I enter”. Through the use of examples, the reader can tell that Audre is struggling with how to navigate this phase of the relationship with her daughter but is putting a lot of thought into it.

By creating some sort of a timeline, Audre explores her relationship with her mother. The beginning of the poem starts off in the past, with the recalling of not feeling that her mother was gentle. Then it transitions into a more recent past by using “have become” in reference to Lorde changing into an adult. The second stanza in the poem is still centered around the present. She discusses how when she receives compliments her mother is also receiving the compliments, but this is for her hard work in the past. By the third stanza, the present tense is being used as a means to reflect on the past. She proclaims, “But I have peeled away your anger down to the core of love”. Through the use of time, the reader understands that at first, Audre may not have felt

loved by her mother, but by the end, Audre understands her mother's perspective and is more sympathetic. This is common between relationships with parents- as the children grow into the adults they understand more of their parent's perspective, which the reader can see her.

Audre Lorde's work has served as a pillar in black literature because of her subject matter and her as a woman. While it is known that Lorde was in contact and writing with other black intellectuals during her era, her work still lives on. An important subject matter explored within her work is her queerness. While she narration of her experiences serves as a guide to talking about blackness, it also serves as a guide to talking about queerness. For example, in her poem "Martha" she is literally writing about her lesbian lover. Though at the time these types of pieces were not as widely published it is refreshing as a black queer person to read about a woman in love with another woman. This is why her work is fundamental in black collectivity- because we as black people can related to her work and see ourselves reflected in it.

Beyoncé's art:

Beyoncé Knowles-Carter is a musical icon, whose roots in the music industry began more than a decade ago. A noted feminist and supporter of the black community, her work is internationally acclaimed. Arguably one of the most famous black americans, her work is fundamental in documenting and displaying black people. Her work has served as a representation of a plethora of different emotions, ranging from happiness to depression. Her work is vulnerable and is easy to connect to. Within this section, it will be shown how her vulnerability is a reflection of Audre Lorde's vulnerability.

The song "Formation" was released prior to Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance in 2013. This was in the wake of Black Lives Matter movement as well as the natural hair movement. While it was argued that this video was "anti-police", it's really just pro-black. One of the most

important scenes in the video is a brief clip of a young Blue Ivy. This is the scene right after Beyoncé says, “I like my baby hair, with baby hair and afros”. Her tone for this line, as well as the whole song, was declarative. This was in response to a lot of controversy about Blue Ivy’s hair when she was very young. There was a lot of negative comments made, especially on social media claiming that Beyoncé was wrong for letting her child wear her hair natural. This statement proclaims that she likes Blue’s hair the way it is, implying that this is the natural way black hair looks. In this scene, Blue’s hair is in an afro and she is surrounded by one girl on each side. This physical formation is similar to how her mother is often surrounded by background dancers on each side. Also, Blue is wearing a veil, which is normally worn at weddings. This could mean, that her hair is “good” enough to be worn at ceremonies highly regarded in our society. The three girls are all dressed in traditional New Orleans’s fashion, mostly worn for important events and/or by the upper class. All of this just proves that Blue is fine just the way she is. This message can be translated to young children, who often struggle with learning to love themselves.

The sweet love song, “Blue” is an ode to her daughter Blue Ivy. As her first born after a miscarriage, which Beyoncé mentioned in her first documentary, she writes to Blue describing her love for her. A special scene from the song Blue, is a close up with Beyoncé holding a young Blue Ivy. As mentioned, this song overall is a love song, where she’s telling Blue that she can always hold onto her and expressing her love for her daughter. This scene embodies the point of the song because it physically shows what she is trying to say- that she will support and love her baby. In this scene, there is a close proximity between Blue Ivy and Beyoncé and they both were barefoot. I think the fact that they are barefoot symbolizes that they both are trying to be

grounded; connecting themselves to not only each other but to the earth as well. Additionally, the background is very tropical and even the water is blue, just like Blue's name.

The beginning of the song "Ring Off" carries a steady beat with a smooth melody. This introduced represents the overall sentiment of the song. By addressing her mother at the beginning of the song, the listener knows this is about her mom. This song came out shortly after it was announced that her father was cheating on her mother and got a woman pregnant. After this announcement, there was this consensus that her parents would separate. This song was an ode to her mother, supporting her which Beyoncé also did publicly. It was important to not the use of time in this as well. At the beginning, she is talking about the past and how within their relationship her mom used to feel bad about herself, but then with time she decided to love herself the most and leave the toxic relationship. The rest of the song just reiterates that her mom will get better with time.

Beyoncé's work is important because she is a modern-day representation of the black american dream. She came from humble upbringings and through hard work and grit, has been successful. By discussing real issues as well as giving back to the community, she is a pillar in the black community.

Comparison:

Black collectivity stems from the coming together of people of African descent based off their common experiences. To me, this means that you have others around you that relate to you, so that you can be authentically yourself, without having to explain certain aspects of yourself. The two artists I chose both use their work to talk about their personal familial experiences. This helps to continue black collectivity because they discuss issues that other black people go

through. By doing so, it validates the experiences of others and makes sure that we know that what we are going through is bearable.

To compare the two artists, I selected works of Beyoncé's highlight themes within the *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde*. Within her collection, she examines a plethora of themes, ranging from love, lesbianism, black collectivity, and family. For this, by focusing on familial relationships collectivity is highlighted. This is because everyone has had to have a mother, whether there is a relationship or not, most people do have relationships with their mothers. Additionally, most people do end up having children, or even families making it so they can relate to the topics Audre and Beyoncé discussed.

In each set of three works discusses the relationships these women have their either their child, or their parents. At the time, Beyoncé only had one child, to whom she has mentioned in multiple songs. In this case, she has the song "Blue" which discusses her love for her daughter. As mentioned in my annotation, this ode to her daughter describes the feelings many feel after having a baby. Also, Blue was conceived after Beyoncé had a miscarriage, sadly a common occurrence for women, especially black women. Similarly, in "Progress Report", Audre is talking about her daughter and how there are changes going on in their relationship due to her daughter growing up, but that her love and support for her is still there.

The poem "Black Mother Woman" and the song "Ring Off" both talk about an understanding of their mothers as women, not as a mother figure. While Audre did not have the most positive relationship with her mother and even emancipated herself, she did come to the point as an adult where she understood her mother. Prior to dating Jay-Z Beyoncé dated a man who cheating on her and they broke up. While the relationship was not as long or as deep as her parent's marriage, she can still relate. But in this context, she is viewing her mother as a woman.

Lastly, in “And what about the children” and “Formation” they both discuss how there are negative societal views that impact their children. While these were written in different eras, there are still negative connotations with black hair that they both address and dismiss. All in all, the two artists use their platforms to discuss important familial issues within the black community.

Audre’s work was published before Beyoncé’s, but the two are connected in subject matter. In a sense, it is almost that these three songs could serve as background tracks to the poems. For example, with “Formation” and “And what about the children”, Beyoncé is reiterating the fact that she doesn’t care what others say about her child; Audre says the same and even goes far enough to say her son will not embody these negative values that her family members/society have. The same goes for the other two poems and songs- the subject matter corresponds. This was purposeful- I believe Audre’s subject matter was so important that whether one is familiar with her or not, they are familiar with her ideas. That’s because Audre’s work embodies black collectivism and I believe that Beyoncé tries to do the same thing. Therefore, the two will always be connected.

These works enrich the community because they both have mentions of leaving old patterns behind and healing. This is important because of their audiences. For Beyoncé, she has a younger audience, that can learn from her experiences. In “Formation” saying that she doesn’t care about the European beauty standards, she’s reiterating to young black girls that how they look is okay. For Audre, whose audience is a bit older, saying that she understands why her mother acted the way she did, allows for healing to take place, which could even mend a relationship. By discussing their mothers and children, their audiences understand that life is about loving and healing, and that doing so may be difficult but that they are not alone.

Conclusion:

To conclude black art is central to documenting the black experience. Without art, we have no way to reflect and little way to see ourselves represented. As we grow as a collective, it is important that black art is continuously created and made in retrospect to our unique experiences as well as in response to prior black historical works. These two texts show how artists can comment on literature presented in the past and use the literature of others as inspiration. Within this essay, it has been implied that there is importance in the discussion of black familial relationships, specifically black motherhood. Black motherhood shapes the black collective and allows or diminishes the space we have for discussion. In both the artists work, it is evident that there were challenges in self-expression but by the end there were ways to express themselves. Black motherhood is fundamental to black art, because black women are the creators of black life itself.

Without black art we are nothing.