

On Beyoncé

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Beyoncé Knowles-Carter released *Renaissance Act I*, her seventh studio album, on 29 July 2022. Later that same day, @ThatAfricanGurl tweeted:

Beyoncé is rewarding me personally for rocking with her for years. There's no other explanation for Pure/Honey. This is a reward for ME, INDIVIDUALLY

Twitter encourages hyperbole, but I'm not sure that's what's going on here. The album feels uniquely personal to me too – so much so that, when my cousin happened to casually mention during a family dinner that he thought Beyoncé was 'a bit overrated', he looked across at me and felt moved to hide the carving knife.

None of us will ever really know Beyoncé, any more than we will know the other remote millionaires and billionaires who dominate our conversations on social media. But there is something special happening on *Renaissance*, something personal. *Lemonade*, her previous album, may have allowed us a rare glimpse into the musician's private life, but *Renaissance* feels like part of a broader conversation, an engagement with the Black queer community that draws deeply on its expansive culture, and engages more directly than ever before in a dialogue with Black queer people, those who are still with us today and those who are not.

There are multiple levels to this exchange. On the surface, Beyoncé incorporates some of the most well-known and celebrated elements of Black queer culture. The album is fluent in the language of Black queer culture, its signature beats, its references and its icons: the song 'Cozy' features Black trans actress and activist TS Madison; 'Pure/Honey' incorporates flamboyant, vogue-able rhythms, sampling work by Black queer artists Moi Renee and Kevin Aviance; 'Break My Soul', samples the song 'Explode' by Black non-binary rapper Big Freedia.

Naturally, this kind of borrowing has led listeners more cautious than @ThatAfricanGurl to ask whether the album is appropriating the Black queer culture it claims to celebrate.

Beyoncé is not queer, or not openly so, and the references she draws on, which have been

important to the Black queer community for decades, have been increasingly popularised in recent years by figures like RuPaul (who, for all his flaws, is an openly queer artist who does not have a non-queer persona to turn to if his queerness doesn't pay the bills).

It is reasonable to examine the nature of Beyoncé's exchange with Black queer culture, especially given the amount of money and cachet to be gained from drawing on that culture at this time. If she *were* appropriating Black queer culture – that is, if she were misrepresenting it, or using it in a manner that felt dismissive or contemptuous, if she were trivialising it, especially for the sake of financial gain – that would be painful for fans like me, who have, in a sense, grown up with Beyoncé since her time in Destiny's Child, and who see her as one of the great artists of her generation.

But *Renaissance* is not a shallow engagement with Black queer culture. It's true that the album draws on the more recognisable symbols of ballroom culture, but on a deeper level it is also drawing on some of the most profound elements of Black queer culture: its rejection of reductive categorisation espoused on 'Pure/Honey' ('Bad bitches to the left / money bitches to the right / You can be both, meet in the middle, dance all night') and also through one of the album's more personal resonances. Beyoncé has spoken of her Uncle Jonny, her mother's nephew, who died from complications caused by AIDS, as someone who 'helped raise me and my sister'. Her mother has described him a profound influence on Beyoncé's taste in music and sense of style. She pays tribute to him on the song 'Heated', celebrating his creativity and flaunting her pride in the dress he made for her high school prom.

Far from being grasping or appropriative, *Renaissance* gives back, by reminding Black queer people what it's like to be in our most sacred spaces. The album reminds me of the first time I went to a ball, a queer subculture originated by Black and brown people in 1970s New York, in which LGBTQ+ people compete by taking the stage and demonstrating their greatness in fashion, body or dance categories (think FX's *POSE*). That evening feels like another lifetime, but it wasn't so long ago. I was in my late twenties, and had been estranged from my parents for a few years by that point. During that time, I went to the Academy, a medium-sized gig venue in Manchester for the UK Black Pride Vogue Ball. I realised, when I walked into that room, just how lonely I had been, and just how much I needed to be there.

By that time, I had great friendships with queer people of colour, and I'd been to plenty of queer bars before then, but this was different. *The space was ours*. Despite media representation of the queer community being dominated (then, as now) by images of able-bodied white cisgender men, the room was filled with Black and brown queer people with all kinds of bodies. It wasn't just that I saw performances from people of colour from across the queer spectrum – dancers, models, and people in between and beyond – it was that I felt a part of the ball, just as much as if I had been on stage. I didn't need to be seen in the sense of being the centre of attention; my joy was in our shared queerness and Blackness being known, recognised and celebrated.

This experience of being seen is precious to me and to other Black queer people not only because we often have to wait for it, but because, having been deprived of it, we give it to ourselves, and to each other. Every time the audience cheered that night, it was a gift. Every time we gave applause to someone on stage, we emboldened someone to express their gender or sexuality in a way that might not feel safe to do elsewhere, and thereby created a space in which we felt empowered to do the same. The queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz argues that 'queer performance . . . is about transformation, about the powerful and charged transformation of the world, about the world that is born through performance'. Onto the stage walked dominatrices, CEOs, men, women, non-binary people whose lives outside the ballroom might be (or seem) very different. Someone might have transformed their appearance dramatically to play a role for the night; or they might otherwise be living in an identity not publicly recognised or affirmed, dressing more conservatively in the outside world, living according to constraining gender norms – but in the ballroom, their identities were theirs to express how they wanted. It's a form of performance that Beyoncé understands, and channels, in *Renaissance*, which sees the artist explore multiple personas, from church girl to billionaire to ordinary person 'low on cash'. On the album's final song, 'Summer Renaissance', she celebrates the magnetism of this ability to metamorphose: 'Know you're loving the roleplay, who am I now?'

That night in Manchester, all identities, no matter how deep they sat or how transient they might be, were uplifted, celebrated, validated. Ballroom culture is not without its unkindness (it is essentially competitive in nature) but its central strength, and perhaps its most central purpose, is that in the ballroom, *you are who you say you are, because we all agree, you can be whoever you want*. And, in witnessing that transformative power at work in the ballroom, I

felt empowered. In the ballroom, the permission we give to others to be themselves, we are encouraged to extend to ourselves. By the time I left, I felt changed. I felt nourished by what I had seen, and by the act of seeing it. I felt less alone.

There is a tremendous power in this: if our identities are not recognised by the communities in which we live (or worse, not recognised even by ourselves), the result is struggle, trauma, even death. When a community chooses to uphold that identity, the community has the opportunity to participate in profound joy. Judith Butler argued, famously, that gender is performative and, on a collective level, only fully constituted through a shared recognition of that performance under a given label (such as ‘woman’). If gender is partly constructed by a community’s recognition of it, then is observing as passive as we usually think it is? Suddenly, the act of spectating – or the act of listening, or the state of fandom – is much more active.

Renaissance’s engagement with Black queer culture is successful because its lyrics celebrate freedom, self-expression, self-belief, and the power of love – in the context of music that draws heavily on a ballroom culture that encourages spectators to take on an affirming, producing role in their lives. It feels generous – the very opposite of appropriative. When I listen to Beyoncé sing about the love of her life on ‘Virgo’s Groove’, or when I listen to ‘Church Girl’, with the echo of a chorus singing ‘free’ ringing out behind the words ‘drop it like a thotty’, there’s a kind of second-hand freedom made available, even to those of us who have never experienced love or freedom in those exact forms, and to those of us who have never felt those things sorely missing. We may never know what it is like to be in love with Jay-Z, or to be able to twerk, but Beyoncé invites us to celebrate her life and her engagement with Black queer culture with her, and the album’s grounding in ballroom culture allows us to draw on its ability to take sublime joy in the affirmation of someone else’s experience and identity, and to extend that delight to ourselves. She does not need our affirmation in the same way that a vulnerable queer person at a ballroom might need affirmation, but the ballroom atmosphere she is celebrating and perpetuating means that to be in her presence, even figuratively, is to feel powerful and free.

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Shortly after *Renaissance* was released, I was walking the dog and happened to see a kingfisher by the river. I've always lived in cities and I'd never seen these birds before and I recalled Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire', and went home and looked it up.

Hopkins was as different from Beyoncé as it is possible to be (what *would* a nineteenth-century Jesuit who feared masturbation have made of Beyoncé's artistry?) but he was nevertheless one of the most moving chroniclers of queer experience. You could say that his work shares something with ballroom culture: the joy of watching, and the power of celebrating.

I stress the word 'power' because we tend to think of fandom as essentially impotent. Even those more outspoken fans (or stans) are funnier because their outspokenness belies what we take to be a fundamental powerlessness. @ThatAfricanGurl's tweet about 'Pure/Honey', that it was meant for her individually, made me laugh partly because I was pretty certain Beyoncé would never see it. Celebrities need our money, yes, but many of them do not need our fandom; in fact, they would often be better off with our indifference. But there is a power in observing, in bearing witness to beauty. Every writer knows this, and none more so than Hopkins, that incorrigible lover of beautiful things. His poems are characterised more than anything else by his sense of wonder at the world his God made, and at his glimpses of God within it.

In a number of letters and poems, Gerard Manley Hopkins developed the concept of 'selving', the idea that a thing – any element of creation, including human beings – most powerfully manifests God when it is most itself. In other words, we become ourselves when we do what is most in accordance with our nature as divinely given. For Hopkins, all of nature partakes in this, merely by being – when creation does what it was made to do, it does not merely excel, it fulfils. And there is something profound in this: Hopkins saw selving as living one's best life and thereby allowing the divine to live and shine through. In 'As Kingfishers Catch Fire' he writes:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves — goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,

Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is —
Chríst — for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

For Hopkins, selving means that when we human beings most purely express ourselves, we express God. He was spot on, and I can't help but feel Hopkins has recognised something essential about the human condition. What strikes me most is not the idea of God manifest in humanity – I cannot believe that God exists, either in us or anywhere else – but the idea of Hopkins the observer. Hopkins the participant-observer. Look at the way he *dwells* on things (he could, if pressed, have expressed himself much more succinctly, but he chose not to); look at his use of prosody; look at the use of the lyric 'I' among God-in-creation. For me, the most important thing about this poem is not just that God is there in us to be seen, but that Hopkins has seen Him, and is burning with awe. This is what ballroom does to us. Even outside of a religious context, it teaches us the value of watching, leads us to see glory in each other that might otherwise go unseen.

Renaissance takes up this torch too, encouraging us to see the divine in the human. In 'Church Girl', Beyoncé celebrates those women who can be their full, sexual selves and practice religion at the same time. In this song, twerking is described as an act self-love; more than this, it's 'doing God's work', a form of selving: bringing the divine to show through the human at its most *self*.

When I hear Beyoncé sing about her own excellence, about love, about sex, about Blackness and dancing and freedom, it is true that I feel as though I am in the presence of something beyond what is human in any ordinary sense; but it is also true that the feeling of witnessing that is a phenomenon in itself. Whether I watch Beyoncé perform, or I watch queer people proudly take the stage, or I simply allow myself to be who I am, the same thing happens. And it's not just about the technical elements of the music, although her singing, the instrumentation, the harmonies, the mixing, they're all remarkable. What I feel on this more

profound level is that I am able to witness someone existing at their most *self*. What is missing from Hopkins's work and life, however, is the extension of that awe to his own life: fearing that his poetry (let alone his sexuality) was not compatible with a life in the priesthood, he burned his poems when he became a Jesuit.

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So, what about those who didn't make it to the ball? There's a whole world outside those four walls; there are many people who will never know that joy, who will never experience the power of Black queerness uplifting itself. I can't help but be sensitive to the responses of those other people who perhaps aren't queer, or aren't Black. Is *Renaissance* of value only in as much as it is of value to our community? And does that matter? What, to the straight white man, is the 29th of July?

Zadie Smith, a Black woman working in a different industry, has explored this same question from a literary perspective. In an essay introducing Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Smith describes, with characteristic insight and generosity, her journey of understanding with the novel. Smith recalls the moment her mother first recommended the book, and her fourteen-year-old scepticism as to her mother's motives ('Why, because she's *black?*'), only to acknowledge that the novel nevertheless went on to develop her ideas of 'good writing'; how she came to see new value in mythic imagery, aphorism and colloquial dialogue.

Smith describes her arrival at a new understanding of the value of 'extra-literary' elements of writing, the non-technical elements of the work that are thought to exist outside craft. She writes:

After that first reading of the novel, I wept ... and not simply for the perfection of the writing, nor even the real loss I felt upon leaving the world contained in its pages. It meant something more than all that to me, something I could not, or would not, articulate.

Smith explains how, at fourteen, she 'disliked the idea of "identifying"' with the fiction she read, and admits that this discomfort has followed her into adult life. There is a

reasonableness to this discomfort: Zora Neale Hurston and her work have become, she argues, ‘avatars of black woman-ness’. Instead of serving as a symbol of excellent writing, as she should be, she’s on a pedestal, and like the protagonist of Hurston’s novel, ‘far from the people and things she really cared about, representing only the ideas and beliefs of her admirers, distorted by their gaze.’ Smith argues that Hurston’s readership, however good its intentions might be, has transformed her into something untrue and unfair. Sometimes, the act of fandom, of watching, can be unseeing. We see this in popular culture every day, when ordinary people invent whole mythologies surrounding billionaires they have never met and who do not care for them; or when newspapers and Twitter accounts pick sides in phony wars. As Hilary Mantel once said of Princess Diana: ‘she no longer exists as herself, only as what we made of her.’ We identify with people whom we cannot know, and replace them with figures who do not exist.

But Smith acknowledges that there is no getting away from these feelings of identification with Hurston’s work, whatever their power to transform or to distort. She concludes that she must reconcile her emotional response to the book, and acknowledges that the way the novel speaks to her as a Black woman is worthy of attention, even if this quality is perhaps ‘extra-literary’:

though it is, to me, a mistake to say, ‘unless you are a black woman you will never fully comprehend this novel’, it is also disingenuous to claim that many black women do not respond to this book in a particularly powerful manner that would seem ‘extra-literary’.

At the heart of this passage is a question that still dogs us today: who can comprehend a work of art ‘fully’? Is it only the people who most identify with the artist or their subject? To whom do works of art belong?

There is an argument that great art can only be great if it is universally recognised as such, but I have no trouble dismissing this, along with the idea of the ‘neutral universal’ tone of the literary critic – as Smith recognises, there is nothing universal or neutral about the people or systems who peddle the idea that there are rules that all good writing must obey. In a world filled with prejudices of all kinds, it seems to me bizarre that art criticism would see itself as the one haven of egalitarianism.

At the same time, Smith argues rightly that one's melanin count is no reliable arbiter of one's response to an artist's work or identity: Black women are not incapable of misunderstanding or misrepresenting Black women; Black people are not incapable of misunderstanding or underappreciating Black music; nor are we incapable of profound understanding of art outside our own experience. It does not seem possible, therefore, that Black queer music belongs only to Black queer audiences. And I am untroubled by the idea of people outside the Black queer community engaging with things like *Renaissance*: the politics of appropriation aside, art can be special to one community and available to others at the same time. It is not necessary that art be ring-fenced by the people for whom it was most obviously intended. Instead, the relationship between art and the people who are nourished by it should be respected.

What I feel with *Renaissance*, what I felt on the ballroom floor, what Smith felt after reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, what Hopkins felt observing the world he believed God made are all different things – what connects these experiences is the sense that being able to witness someone or something be most *itself*, and to refract that act of witnessing through the prism our own experience and selfhood is one of the most profound joys of life. As with so many things in life, the fact that this experience has the potential to be problematic does not make its joy any less real.

If I take it a little personally when I hear Beyoncé's musical abilities underestimated, it is because the politics of the world make it so difficult for Black women to achieve her level and longevity of success. Imagine: of all things, a Black woman who is synonymous with perfection. We can never really know Beyoncé but, for Black people everywhere, being your purest, most excellent self represents a triumph over struggle, and that triumph should be celebrated wherever it is found. The act of affirming and celebrating someone in the midst of their selfhood is an invitation to see ourselves and each other more humanely, and I am grateful for that.