



Beyonce and the Politics of Cultural Dominance

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Mondialisation.ca, 11 février 2016

[Black Agenda Report](#) 10 février 2016

Région : [USA](#)

Thème: [Police State & Civil Rights](#), [Poverty & Social Inequality](#)

I confess, I am a culturally alienated, old, disconnected 1960s and '70s radical trying to live and struggle for revolutionary change in a world that might have passed me by, because I cannot for the life of me understand how Beyonce's commodified caricature of black opposition was in any way progressive. Instead what I saw was the cultural power of neoliberal capitalism to co-opt opposition, monetize it and provide some mindless entertainment all at the same time. I didn't see opposition; I saw the imagery and symbols of authentic black radicalism grotesquely transformed into a de-politicized spectacle by gyrating, light-skinned booty-short-clad sisters.

I am told that I am being too harsh. That there were positive messages encoded into Beyonce's performance. In their rebuke of my interpretation, my friends return to that old canard that "we got to meet the people where they are at" and take every opportunity within the domain of popular culture to push positive messages.

This sad and reactionary position only reflects the deep cynicism and alienation of black radical politics that has never recovered from the systematic assault on our movement from the '70s onward. An assault that was not only military, but as a centerpiece of its strategy, pushed for a cultural and ideological assimilation of the Black/African working class and the artificially created middle-class. Understanding the power of ideas to shape consciousness, the objective was to "Americanize" the African American. Saner people would call that process genocide, but in the U.S. it is called racial progress.

The success of that strategy - the elimination of the "us," an emerging "people" committed to radical transformational politics with a healthy psychological and emotional distance from "them," the U.S. state, its racist and colonialist/imperialist history - was on display in Selma at the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the march. In Selma, Barack Obama, the living personification of that strategy, delivered a version of the American narrative that was infused with all of the racist jingoism of bold settlers and the marginalization of genocide and slavery. But instead of Obama being run off the stage and out of town, his rendering of the story of white manifest destiny, U.S. exceptionalism and black advancement within the context of capitalism, was warmly embraced and praised by the new Negroes of empire.

In an era where the image is dominant and meaning fluid, what is still real, concrete and observable is the operation of power. Situated and controlled by an elite that bell hooks refers to as the White Male, capitalist Patriarchy, it's a power that exercises with devastating efficiency its ability to shape consciousness through its control of the major means of communication and cultural production. It was those white men and their representatives that placed Beyoncé on that stage at the Super Bowl. It is incredibly naive

to think that anything subversive or even remotely oppositional to the interests of the capitalist oligarchy would be allowed expression on a stage that it controlled.

Beyonce's performance and her video is as conservative and accommodationist as the demand for justice for ..., fill in the blank, after one of the defenders of the capitalist order executes one of our folks. Everyone can give lip service to the demand for racial justice or oppose the "bad apples" in the police forces that abuse their power, and most people, (except the most rabid racists) can and do get behind the idea that black lives should matter. That is why the movement has not been shut down, at least not yet!

No folks, real opposition to this white supremacist, colonialist/imperialist order is not cool, or sexy. Being a black revolutionary means the possibility of death, it can mean facing decades of incarceration as a political prisoner, it can mean exile or the inability to make a living because your liberal friends consider you dangerous. It is facing the naked power of the national security state with its power to engage in extra-judicial murder with impunity, surveillance and infiltration.

Those who claim that Assata taught them should have been outraged by the brazen, commodified blackness being pushed by capitalist marketers. Didn't Assata say that we could never be free while the American government and American capitalism remain intact? That is a call for total resistance that can't be co-opted by bourgeois culture.

I recognize that we are in a new era. Structural and ideological changes have profoundly altered the U.S. social formation. Even in the period of the most serious crisis of the capitalist order, the ethical framework of liberal capitalist individualism is still dominant. And within the black community, post-modernism is in open competition for hegemony with our ever-developing radical tradition.

In this period of media-driven pseudo-opposition in the form of Ta-Nehisi Coates, Beyoncé or even Bernie Sanders, it is increasingly difficult to make the distinction between image and reality, especially when the production of images and symbols is controlled by dominant forces with an interest in keeping us all stupid.

It is only through ruthless criticism and a commitment to struggling beyond the accepted paradigms that we can penetrate the BS and engage in a politics that is truly subversive. And that kind of politics will not be brought to you in living color in the safety of your homes while you stuff yourself with poison foods and spirits to dull the mind.

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