

Resounding Silence and Soundless Surveillance, From TMZ Elevator to Beyoncé and Back Again

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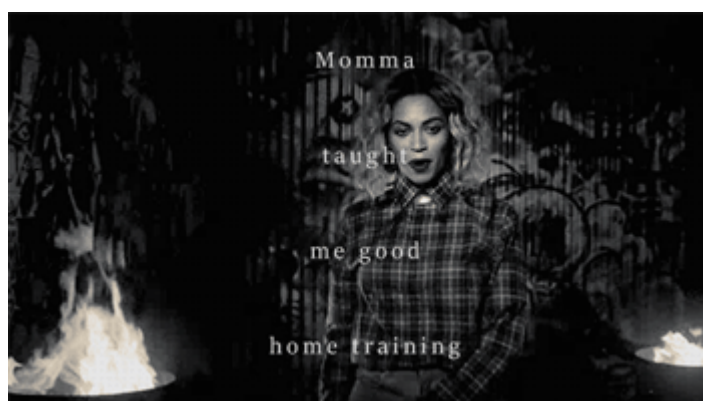
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Abstract

This September, *Sounding Out!* challenged a #flawless group of scholars and critics to give Beyoncé Knowles-Carter a close listen, re-examining the complex relationship between her audio and visuals and amplifying what goes unheard, even as her every move—whether on MTV or in that damn elevator—faces intense scrutiny.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Black Studies, Cultural Studies, Dance/Movement



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This September, *Sounding Out!* challenged a #flawless group of scholars and critics to give Beyoncé Knowles-Carter a close listen, re-examining the complex relationship between her audio and visuals and amplifying what goes unheard, even as her every move—whether on MTV or in that damn elevator—faces intense scrutiny. Last Monday, you heard from Kevin Allred (Women and Gender Studies, Rutgers) who read Beyoncé’s track “No Angel” against the *New York Times*’ [reference to Michael Brown as #noangel](#). You will also hear from Liana Silva (Editor, *Women in Higher Education*, Managing Editor, *Sounding Out!*), Regina Bradley (writer, scholar, and freelance researcher of African American Life and Culture), and Madison Moore (Research Associate in the Department of English at King’s College, University of London and author of [How to Be Beyoncé](#)). Today, Priscilla Peña Ovalle (English, University of Oregon) gives us full Beyoncé realness, from TMZ Elevator to Beyoncé and Back Again,—**Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Stoever**

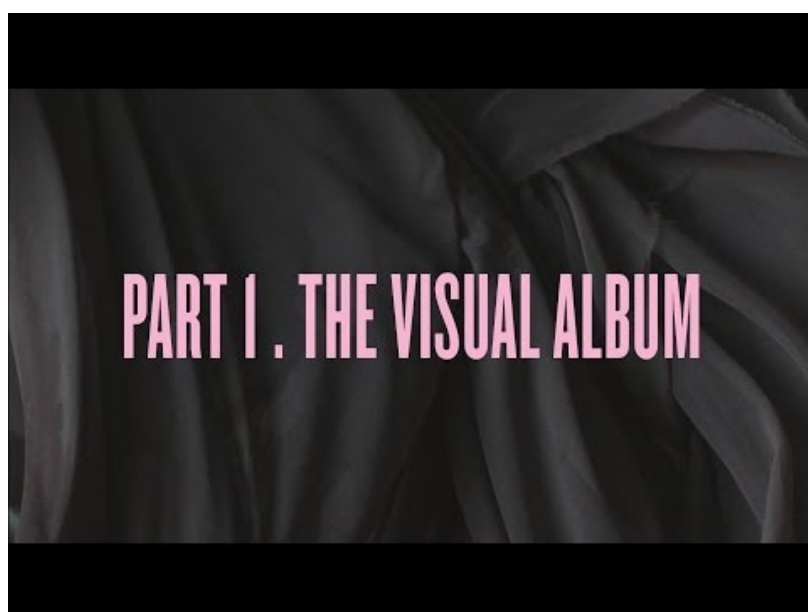
Less than six months after Beyoncé released *Beyoncé*, she was [momentarily silenced](#) on the small screen when the gossip site TMZ released [silent elevator security footage of a fight](#) between her famous husband and sister. Doubly framed by the black and white of a surveillance video screen surreptitiously captured on a security guard’s camera-phone, the video’s silence left plenty of room for [speculation](#). But the footage also revealed a woman conscious that her life is on record: Beyoncé’s body seemed to elude the camera’s full view and she emerged from the elevator with a [camera-ready smile](#).

Like [Kevin Allred](#) in his powerful reading of “No Angel,” I could not help but rethink *Beyoncé* in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder. I already read *Beyoncé* as a sophisticated response to the visual and aural policing of black female bodies, but the closed-circuit images of Beyoncé on TMZ (and in *Beyoncé*) made me reconsider silence as a damning convention of video surveillance; like [Aaron Trammell](#) in “[Video Gaming and the Sonic Feedback of Surveillance](#),” I questioned (the lack of)

sound as a technique of control. When [the camera-phone recording](#) of Kajieme Powell's murder, photographed and narrated by a community member in real-time, was released with silent surveillance footage of the alleged theft, my appreciation of *Beyoncé*—as a response to those silent damnations—took a new turn.



“Resounding Silence and Surveillance” argues that *Beyoncé* returns the media’s visual-aural gaze. Because of its pop package, the album’s artistic composition and socio-cultural merit are often underestimated. Like the silence of surveillance footage, omitting any one sensory element from *Beyoncé* distorts the holistic meaning. To untangle this critically complex interplay of audio and video, I analyze the visualized song “Haunted” and briefly address the single “***Flawless” to show how the artist’s triple consciousness anchors *Beyoncé*. She is on to us: *Beyoncé* is the culmination of an artist who has spent her career watching us watch her. Temporarily silenced by footage that she could not control, Beyoncé resounds that [“elevator incident”](#)—and our sonic/optic perceptions of her feminism—with a flawless remix.



<https://youtu.be/lcN6Ke2V-rQ>

"I see music. It's more than just what I hear," declares Beyoncé. Her voiceover runs over the black screen that opens the promotional video "Self-Titled." Released the same day *Beyoncé* premiered on iTunes, "Self-Titled" directs audiences to "see the whole vision of the album." By design, *Beyoncé* is an immersive experience—like watching Michael Jackson's "Thriller" as a television event on MTV.

Because Beyoncé was born the same year the cable music channel MTV premiered, she has never known a world without the ability to "see music." In many ways, her visual album reinvigorates the early spirit of MTV: after *Beyoncé*, we will "[never look at music the same way again.](#)" Though music videos exacerbate the pop single obsession that Beyoncé explicitly resists with *Beyoncé*, they also produce a unique kinetic connection with the listener-viewer, whose experience of sound is visually registered by the body as it processes shots and edits. This is especially true when strong imagery, rhythmic editing, and dance movements are expertly employed, as in *Beyoncé*.

Beyoncé deftly critiques the beauty and music/media industries that have been central to her pop success. If taken piecemeal, these critiques can be easily dismissed: the sustained gloss of her image works all too well. There is much to say on a video-by-video basis, but I focus here on the specific aural elements of "Haunted" that articulate Beyoncé's refusal of the music industry's status quo. This visualized rejection reveals the layers of racism and sexism that nonwhite female artists (even Beyoncé, even today) must negotiate.



Because of my personal and professional [interest in music videos](#), I consumed *Beyoncé* as she intended: a sequence of MPEG-4 videos rather than AAC audio files. But it was not until I solely *listened* to the album that I could discern Beyoncé's maturation as a black female multimedia pop/culture artist. One refrain from "Haunted" was especially effective:

I *I know if I'm onto you, I'm onto you/ Onto you, you must be on to me*

The song's ethereal quality is amplified by Boots (**Jordy Asher**), one of Beyoncé's ([then-unknown](#)) [collaborators](#) **with whom** she shares "Haunted"'s writing and producing credit. The track builds slowly, supporting Beyoncé's "[stream of consciousness](#)" delivery with layers of reverberation and waves of synth sounds like "[Soundtrack](#)" or the Roland TR-808 kick drum. Punches of bass

accelerate the beat until Beyoncé riffs her explicit desire to create something more than a product:

Soul not for sale

Probably won't make no money off this, oh well

Reap what you sow

Perfection is so, mmm

The music winds to a halt, but the song is not over. Breathy, reverberating vocals transition the track and a piano is delicately introduced:

It's what you do, it's what you see

I know if I'm haunting you, you must be haunting me

It's where we go, it's where we'll be

I know if I'm onto you, I'm onto you

Onto you, you must be on to me



At this point, the song “Haunted” is split into two videos: “Ghost” (directed by Pierre Debusschere) and “Haunted” (directed by Jonas Åkerlund). The videos’ visual differences exemplify the various points of view—from active subject to object of desire and back again—employed across *Beyoncé*. “Ghost”’s hypnotic visuals underscore the song’s sentiments: close-ups of Beyoncé’s immaculately lit visage soberly mouthing lyrics are intercut with medium shots of her still body swathed in floating fabric and wide shots of her athletic movements against sparse backgrounds. The ar/rhythmic cuts of “Ghost” enunciate an artistic dissatisfaction with the industry: visuals build against/with the synthetic beat, mixing Beyoncé’s kinetically intense movements with her deadpan delivery.



The fiery agency of “Ghost” sets up the chill of “Haunted,” a voyeuristic tour in which Beyoncé watches and is watched. The “knowing-ness” of her breathy refrain (“I know if I’m haunting you”) is heightened when the tempo accelerates in the song’s second half. There is much to say about “Haunted”—from the interracial family of atomic bomb mannequins to Beyoncé’s writhing boudoir choreography. Most significantly, she is the video’s voyeur and object of surveillance: her face appears on multiple television screens and her voyeur-character is regularly captured on closed-circuit footage. The “Haunted” video soundtrack features the [foley](#) and [stinger sounds](#) of a horror film, but these surveillance shots feature the low whirr of a film projector rather than silence. The silence of a moving image is so jarring that it compels us to watch

differently, so much so that “silent” film scenes utilize a recorded sound of “nothing” (“[room tone](#)”) to focus the audience.



When Beyoncé finally resounded the silence of the “elevator incident,” she chose to do it through “***Flawless,” her explicit response to anti-feminist accusations. While the multifaceted anthem gained attention because of [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#)’s audio, the song is uniquely infused with a kind of docu-visuality thanks to Ed McMahon’s well-known voice and the Star Search jingle. These bookends cite a young Beyoncé losing to an all-male rock band, the kind heavily programmed during MTV’s early days. The clips reinforce the album’s [critique of racial and gender hierarchies](#) while questioning the double-edged “work ethic” required to surpass them. Of course, [Beyoncé pre-emptively frames this discussion for us in “Self-Titled,”](#) a necessary step that helps audiences appreciate the many moving parts of her tour de force, including her creative business mind. So when Beyoncé swapped the audio of Adichie and McMahon for Nicki Minaj, it was no less of a feminist move. Instead, Beyoncé silences TMZ gawkers:

[Of course sometimes shit go down/
When it’s a billion dollars on an elevator](#)

She then offers herself as a medium of empowerment. Beyoncé may be part of a billion-dollar empire, but she willingly shares that pleasure with us:

[I wake up looking this good
And I wouldn’t change it if I could
\(If I could, if I, if I, could\)
And you can say what you want, I’m the shit
\(What you want I’m the shit, I’m the shit\)
\(I’m the shit, I’m the shit, I’m the shit\)
I want everyone to feel like this tonight
God damn, God damn, God damn!](#)

Beyoncé's last word is an image. She and her creative team remixed the visuals of the "elevator incident": the [remix single website](#) features black and white photos of Beyoncé and Minaj, simultaneously evoking surveillance footage and the photo booth images of a girls' night out. *Beyoncé* is the work of an artist who has spent her career watching us watch her: this minor moment exemplifies Beyoncé's multimedia resonance as an artist whose power is visible and audible across iTunes and TMZ screens alike.



Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj mugging for the camera

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Priscilla Peña Ovalle is the Associate Director of the Cinema Studies Program at the University of Oregon. After studying film and interactive media production at Emerson College, she received her PhD from the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television while collaborating with the [Labyrinth Project](#) at the Annenberg Center for Communication. She has written on MTV, Jennifer Lopez, and *Beyoncé*. Her book, [Dance and the Hollywood Latina: Race, Sex, and Stardom](#) (Rutgers University Press, 2011), addresses the symbolic connection between dance and the racialized sexuality of Latinas in popular culture. Her next research project explores the historical, industrial, and cultural function of hair in mainstream film and television. You can find her work in *American Quarterly*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Women & Performance*.

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