

“You’re. . .#noangel. . . either”: Uneasy Politics and Dissonant Sonics in Beyoncé’s “No Angel”

Sounding Out! Authors

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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

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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. In the coming Mondays, you will hear from Priscilla Peña Ovalle (English, University of Oregon), 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, we #wakeuplikethis with Kevin Allred (Women and Gender Studies, Rutgers), who refuses to let us fast forward past the understated and discomfiting video track “No Angel.”—**Editor-in-Chief Jennifer Stoevers**

Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot to death by white police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014, for no apparent reason [see author’s note below]. While the fact that the death of unarmed black men (and women and trans people) at the hands of those in power is, sadly, no unique occurrence, as [Melissa Harris-Perry](#) – among countless others – have pointed out, Brown’s death has sparked nation-wide outrage and protests about police brutality, racial injustice, and severely decreased resources for impoverished communities.

In the *New York Times*’ reportage on Brown’s death, reporter John Eligon [found it appropriate to characterize the teenager as “no angel,”](#) as if any amount of alleged wrongdoing or possible character flaws on Brown’s part somehow justified his murder. Both Eligon and the *Times* were called out on social media and in traditional publications such as the *Atlantic*, and, while the press quickly [apologized](#), the phrase’s familiar interpellation of victims – especially when they are people of color – as “no angels” lingered: a journalistic gaze born of sympathy with white authority that invalidates an individual’s life, tarnishes their memory, and even rewrites histories.



A powerful counter discourse challenges these racist narratives, however; one we can hear in the dissonant sonics of Beyoncé Knowles-Carter’s “No Angel,” a song that anticipates—and adamantly

refutes—the racist notion that people who live, and quite possibly die as Michael Brown did, are anything but valuable.

Released almost 9 months before Brown was killed, Beyoncé’s “No Angel” cannot explicitly be called a response, but the ghosts of black men—living and dead, unfairly judged and mistreated—haunt the entire song. “No Angel” begins with a slow-burning 4-count beat; a low, synthesized, slightly off-kilter kick drum sets the tone for the song while an eerily-litling high-pitched synthetic warbling noise simultaneously pours out of the speakers. The sound, reminiscent of feedback, drifts between pitches for four painstakingly slow measures before Beyoncé’s vocals kick in. When they do, what we hear is unusual. Her voice reverberates in a breathy, almost too-high falsetto that sounds nothing like the soaring powerhouse vocals of “Halo” or “I Was Here;” nothing like the precise, punctuated staccato of “Single Ladies” or “Run The World (Girls);” and certainly nothing like any of the other songs on *BEYONCÉ*. Sonic and musical contradictions abound. Neither the kind of impressive falsetto showing a wide range, nor necessarily immediately pleasing to the ear, Beyoncé’s voice is forced. . . and it haunts. Further, the vocals seem to cut the time signature of the song in half, effectively doubling its pace. Its tempo, cadence and vocal dynamics signal “No Angel” as a very different kind of Beyoncé song, one forwarding a sonic and political statement over radio-readiness.

Admittedly, “No Angel” was not initially one of my favorite songs on Beyoncé’s new album. In fact, when teaching this song, most of my students – even the hardcore Beyoncé fans – admit sheepishly to skipping through it because of a feeling of discomfort mainly related to Beyoncé’s vocal delivery. But after a few listens, something clicks: “No Angel” is not *supposed* to be pleasant, easy listening, but rather it jars and unsettles, just like the impact of news of another unarmed black person killed by white police. We are neither supposed to immediately identify with the audio of “No Angel,” nor possibly even like it.

All about dissonance, the song’s innovation fuels itself with inconsistency and contradiction. Vocally speaking, there are incongruities between the highs and the lows (the bass and the treble or the bass and the soprano), and the abrupt shifts in pacing—the slow pace both in opposition to and contained within the faster pace of the song. Even the stretched and breathy falsetto Beyoncé puts on for most of the song strikes a dissonant chord. Simply put, dissonance is tension, and neither the sonic nor the political tension ends here.

<https://vimeo.com/88115957>

Here’s the thing: we know Beyoncé’s voice doesn’t usually sound like it does on “No Angel.” It is a conscious manipulation. And when coupled with the refrain:

You’re no angel either baby

her voice even becomes a kind of accusation. If Michael Brown is “no angel;” if Beyoncé herself, as the singer and also as a black woman in a racist U.S. society, is also initially “no angel” then, Eligon in the *NYT* as Brown’s accuser and, by extension, we as the listeners, become “no angel

either.” What’s more, Beyoncé’s delivery is so deliberately overdone that she can be heard taking deep breaths in between each word of the chorus – something most singers would attempt to hide. Beyoncé chooses instead to push it to the forefront of the recording, audibly projecting each word toward the listener; in effect, slapping us in the face with each syllable, driving that message/accusation straight home.

However, while this forum may be dedicated to the sonic qualities of Beyoncé’s work, I don’t believe we can completely divorce the sonic from the visual for “No Angel,” or anything on *BEYONCÉ*, as it was [specifically marketed and publicized as audio and visual album](#). *BEYONCÉ* visual music experience is nothing new to Beyoncé herself. As far back as *Dangerously In Love*, Beyoncé forwarded her belief “that harmonies are colors” on an interlude toward the end of the album. For her latest album, she went so far as to strike an exclusive deal with iTunes in which the album was *only* available as a complete package for the first week of its release – singles could not be purchased separately nor without videos (and vice versa). It would be a disservice to ignore the visual depiction of “No Angel,” directed by [@LilInternet](#) and its synaesthetic fusion of sound and sight.



Image by Flickr User Princess Mousy Cards

Just as the sonic qualities of the song provoke discomfort, unexpected imagery confronts the eye. First, the video is quite simply not about Beyoncé. She is rarely shown. Instead, Houston street culture and its struggles and poverty, represented largely through the faces of people of color, takes center stage. The video features mainly black men, although there are some images of black women throughout; a stark moment showing black women–raced *and* sexualized as “no angels”–working as strippers reveals an industry driven not by the agency/desire of the strippers themselves, but rather by the failures of capitalism that often offer few profitable choices to poor women other than sex work (as evidenced in the highlighting money shots/literal shots of money). But the video celebrates the lives of all these alleged non-angels by showing small moments of happiness – a father smiling with his son; young boys flashing the peace sign with their fingers; sweet glances between lovers, community members proud to show off their jewelry and cars for the camera–redirecting the viewer’s attention to the structural inequality framing many of the images, provoking more voyeuristic viewers to reflect on their own responsibility and complicity in the systems that create poverty and segregation in the first place. Simultaneously, members of the Houston community–as well as diasporic Houstonians–can see themselves represented, even celebrated in the video, as opposed to the usual cinematic vilification and denigration of these very same bodies as “no angels.” Many Houston hop-hop legends appear in the video as well: Bun B, Scarface, Willie D, Z-Ro, and of course Beyoncé herself.



Still from “No Angel” video

When the camera does linger on Beyoncé, it juxtaposes her iconic image–associated with the wealth and power of her celebrity status–with everyday people of her Houston hometown, including its most impoverished. Beyoncé, the residents, and the city itself stare the viewer down – actively challenging us to see both life and death, both living people and memorials to those, such as Michael Brown, who have died too young. The dissonant tension between life and death, encapsulated in Beyoncé’s voice and the video’s mirroring visuals: the high and the low; the rich and the poor; and the fraught gap in between.

Beyoncé tries to bridge this gap, both visually, through her self-representation in Houston, and sonically, particularly the moment when the refrain “you’re no angel, either. . . baby” finishes and she swings her voice down out of falsetto, into her more powerful full-out throat voice. It is assuredly no coincidence that during those moments she repeats the word “no,” over and over again. With that “no,” she objects to mainstream news vilification, anticipating and objecting to Michael Brown’s characterization as “no angel.” Her voice shifts from the high-falsetto – a sound serving the dual purpose of exposing the above dissonance AND acting as a caress to black communities in Houston, and Ferguson, and on and on – and moves into the heavy throat-voiced complaint and objection. “No, you will not treat my people this way. No, you will not treat ANY people this way,” her sound testifies. And, for viewers not represented in the video, that “you” is them—and she means that realization to feel uncomfortable. Beyoncé’s vocal dissonance and visual images force a confrontation with this accusation: it is *not* Michael Brown and those represented and celebrated in the video who are “no angels,” but the rest of us who fall short.



So, if we are “no angels, either” what do we do about it? Do we skip the track? Do we sit in front of our computer with the visual evidence of the failure of the American Dream staring us down as we groove to Beyoncé’s vocals? Do we turn off the news coverage in Ferguson, MO and pretend it’s not happening? Beyoncé’s voice provokes these uncomfortable questions and more: What does inequality sound like? What does hope and/or resolution/reparation sound like? Are they the same sound? This is a Beyoncé more in line with artists such as Nina Simone, who famously used her voice to express political critique, and not always in the most “pleasant” ways. “No Angel” is Beyoncé’s audio-visual “Strange Fruit,” positioning her alongside some of the most political and innovative protest singers of our time.

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Author’s Note: At the time of Brown’s death, I had already been submitted this article. Due to the eerie coincidence between Beyoncé’s song “No Angel” and Eligon’s characterization of Michael Brown in the *New York Times* noted during the review process, I reworked the article to bring the two into conversation – which, in fact, they always were, even though I didn’t know it at the time.

Kevin Allred is a musician, activist, and teacher, currently at Rutgers University, where he teaches a signature course he created: “Politicizing Beyoncé.” He lives in Brooklyn, NY with his boyfriend and two elderly dachshunds. Join the *Politicizing Beyoncé* community at www.facebook.com/politicizingbeyonce. You can also find Kevin at www.kevinallredmusic.com and www.politicizingbeyonce.com.



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