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Intimacy, Authenticity and 'Worlding' in Beyoncé's Star Project

Phoebe Macrossan

At the 2014 MTV Video Music Awards, African-American pop star Beyoncé Knowles-Carter (known professionally as Beyoncé) performed a 12-song medley from her self-titled visual album, *Beyoncé* (2013), recreating its imagery across moving stages, treadmills, giant screens and a large troupe of dancers. To open this typically large-scale performance, she said, 'MTV, welcome to my world'. This choice of words is interesting because, as a dominant figure in the popular music scene, Beyoncé hardly need introduce herself. What this moment captures, however, is the increasing personal intimacy of Beyoncé's stardom, and her transition to the active creation and ownership of an identifiable, holistic 'world'. This chapter argues that Beyoncé's stardom extends beyond constructing a star image through media texts (Dyer, 1998, p. 10). I argue that her star project, her ongoing construction and maintenance of her stardom is creating an intimate, identifiable, holistic world: 'Beyoncé World'. I use the term 'star project' because there is no beginning, middle and end as suggested by a term like 'star narrative', and because worlding is more encompassing and widespread than the term 'star image' put forward by Richard Dyer (1998, p. 10), although it is a continuation of it.

Beyoncé World is created and maintained primarily through Beyoncé's music videos and visual albums, but also across her concerts, performances and public appearances, and her social media accounts and website. Therefore, Beyoncé World is primarily created through media images, but, importantly, it also includes public appearances, actions and performances outside these visual images. Worlding includes both the active process of creating a world and the world itself. Creating Beyoncé World is Beyoncé's entire performance of stardom. Beyoncé World has geography, both specific and nondescript, it has 'real' people and characters, a past, present and a future, and it has a political ideology on race, sex and gender that aligns with Beyoncé's outward public statements and past musical career. The 2014 VMA performance is not the first instance of her worlding, but it is a noteworthy public acknowledgement of a strategy that continues today.

Beyoncé is a significant subject for star studies, not only for her huge commercial and artistic achievements.[1] This chapter argues that Beyoncé's worlding represents new articulations of stardom and authenticity previously unaccounted for in the contemporary media landscape. 'Authenticity' is a widely contested term in popular music studies, but it is still relevant to discussions of stardom because of how the concept is actively used by pop stars and their fans. As Su Holmes and Sean Redmond (2006, p. 4) argue, 'fandom, and the construction of stars and celebrities, has always involved the "search" for the "authentic" person that lies behind the manufactured mask of fame'. Other contemporary pop stars construct an 'authentic' star image through sharing intimate details of their lives via social media or semiautobiographical albums and music videos. Beyoncé's construction of Beyoncé World, however, is more extensive, widespread, complex, layered, controlled and consistent, and requires further scrutiny.

This chapter examines the construction of Beyoncé World within her recent artistic output, the one-hour long visual album *Lemonade* (Knowles-Carter 2016a). *Lemonade* is a concept visual album that focuses on a relationship marred by infidelity. Like *Beyoncé* before it, *Lemonade* was a surprise release that caused much discussion of its aesthetics, themes,

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1   At the time of writing, Beyoncé has sold more than 86.1 million albums as a solo artist and 58.6 million with girl group Destiny's Child. She is the most nominated woman in Grammy Awards history with 63 nominations, of which she has won 22. She has also won 24 MTV Video Music Awards, the most of any artist in history. As of June 2017, her net worth was US$350 million. See Jones (2016) and Forbes (2017).

politics and subject matter. *Lemonade* is the most significant example to date of Beyoncé worlding. It is also in conversation with, and adds to the world created through, her past albums, videos, social media accounts and website. As *Lemonade* premiered as a 60-minute film on US cable television network HBO, it is also a prime example of a star using filmic techniques to promote an album. Thus, it is a pertinent example of how film theory can be applied to popular music performance.

To consider Beyoncé World, I use theories of worlding and worldhood developed in film theory. To this end, I borrow V. F. Perkins' (2005) ideas of 'worlding' and 'worldhood', which are constructed by elements of film style (camera angles, editing, acting, etc.). I also borrow from Daniel Yacavone's (2015, p. 9) concept of the 'film world', which is a 'singular, holistic, relational, and fundamentally referential reality' that possesses sensory, symbolic and affective dimensions for the audience. Film (or music video) worlds are identifiable worlds separate from our own, but connected to it through a borrowing process (Yacavone, 2015, p. 20). The audience understands the constructed nature of the world, but can relate it to the so-called 'real' world by extension. This accounts for how Beyoncé's worlding is achieved by both her artistic and professional output (videos, concerts, media images, appearances, etc.) and the audience's knowledge of, immersion and participation in her worlding. While film theory has been usefully employed by popular music studies to concentrate on the formal aspects of music video—to examine their stylistic elements, and narrative or non-narrative status, for example—theories of film worlds have yet to be utilised.[2] As many scholars have noted, music videos are the primary texts for selling a musician and their music. Doing this usually means aligning the music video's imagery with the artist's brand. Most music video scholars argue the form is non-narrative, at least in the classical Hollywood cinematic sense (Vernallis, 2004, p. 3). Instead, Carol Vernallis (2004, p. 13) argues music videos focus on foregrounding the song's form rather than telling a story. While Beyoncé's music videos do display semi-narrative and episodic traits, they are better understood as part of a larger whole that is her star project: constructing and maintaining

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2   Key texts in music video scholarship include E. Ann Kaplan's *Rocking Around the Clock* (1987), Andrew Goodwin's *Dancing in the Distraction Factory* (1992), *Sound and Vision* (1993), edited by Simon Frith, Andrew Goodwin and Lawrence Grossberg, *Medium Cool* (2007), edited by Roger Beebe and Jason Middleton, and *Experiencing Music Video* (2004) by Carol Vernallis. The first wave of discussion was largely spurred by the launch of MTV on cable television in the US in 1981. These texts analyse music videos across a range of areas: their formal properties, genres, stylistic elements, representational politics and practices, and their transmedia status. For a discussion of music video foregrounding song form and performance, see Frith (1996, pp. 224–225) and Vernallis (2004, p. 4).

Beyoncé World. Understanding music videos as part of a star's worlding practices can illuminate how music videos are not isolated performance texts or dreamscapes loosely connected to a star, but form part of a larger universe actively created and inhabited by them.

This chapter will first examine the worlding techniques of film style and audience immersion in *Lemonade*, and the properties that make up Beyoncé World. It will then consider the significance of worlding to Beyoncé's larger star project. It is important to stress here that Yacavone (2008, p. 84) argues that cinematic works create and present *a* world, rather than fictional narratives or representations of *the* world. Beyoncé World is a distinct and separate world from our own, but it is informed and enhanced by its connections to persons and relationships of the real world.

Lemonade

Beyoncé is as yet the only major pop star to release visual albums, and her decision to do so represents her understanding of the contemporary media environment.[3] By premiering *Lemonade* first on HBO on 23 April 2016, and later releasing it for download on Tidal and iTunes, Beyoncé turned her album release into an event, guaranteed to be watched by a captive television audience, then downloaded by dedicated fans both within and outside the US who may have missed the broadcast. The surprise release also generates publicity of its own accord through its unexpectedness, thereby driving sales in a saturated market. By simultaneously releasing the music and visuals, she ensured the interpretation of her music and stardom visually and aurally in one cohesive unit. In a promotional video for her self-titled album, Beyoncé detailed the motivations behind releasing a visual album in one digital drop:

> I see music. It's more than just what I hear … Now people only listen to a few seconds of a song on their iPods. They don't really invest in a whole album … I wanted everyone to see the whole picture, and to see how personal everything is to me … There's so much that gets between the music, the artist, and the fans. I felt like I didn't want anybody to give the message when my record is coming out. I just want this to come out when it's ready and from me to my fans.[4]

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3   While I acknowledge that it is difficult to attribute these business decisions entirely to pop stars themselves, Beyoncé is a special case in that, since 2010, she has been self-managed. See Kennedy (2011).
4   Beyoncé interviewed in Heinzerling (2013).

We can assume these intentions also apply to *Lemonade*, given it was released in a similar way. Releasing a long visual album intended to be watched in one sitting fits the binge-watching culture enabled by digital download and streaming technologies of music, film and television. Beyoncé's statement that fans can 'see how personal everything is to me' and that the album flows 'from me to my fans' also reflects the ethos of the web 2.0 environment. Social media technologies such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube mean that a perceived direct means of communication exists between celebrities and fans. Beyoncé is playing to this idea when she digitally 'drops' her visual albums; the action is like file-sharing between friends.

Aside from its digital visual album format, a large part of the popular discourse on *Lemonade* focused on how it engages with the Black Lives Matter movement and its celebration of black women and black female sexuality.[5] Much scholarship on Beyoncé discusses her negotiation of body, race and gender politics, and how this contributes to her identity as an African-American female pop star.[6] *Lemonade* continues Beyoncé's negotiation of race, sexuality and gender, as it features many references to African-American women and Southern history, particularly black female identity, sexuality, spirituality, as well as witchcraft, menstruation, slavery and African Yoruba culture and religion. Theories of worlding illuminate how the complex interplay between these themes and multi-layered intertextual references make up the stylised world of *Lemonade*. Yacavone (2012, p. 36) argues that fictional representation and narrative, together with film sound and music, account for the created and experienced totality of a film's presentation, or what he terms the 'film world'. These elements then combine with the audience's own experience of the real world:

> To make a film is also to construct a world. As viewers, we are invited to enter into this world, to share it with its maker(s) and with other viewers. When made, experienced, and understood as art, the virtual worlds of films, including all narrative ones, not only provide a form of experience that approaches in many ways our actual, embodied life experience but also mediates it in aesthetic ways, sometimes to powerful cognitive and affective ends. (Yacavone, 2015, p. 9)

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5   See, for example, Clark (2016), Lockett, Weatherford and Peoples (2016) and Oluo (2016).
6   See, for example, James (2008), Griffin (2011), Durham (2012), Weidhase (2015) and Chatman (2015), and the anthology *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism* (2016), edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek.

Using Yacavone's logic, *Lemonade* creates Beyoncé World not just through its camera angles, editing, costuming and staging, or the loose story it narrates of an adulterous marriage, but through extra-narrative elements and the affective qualities that connect to the audience's own lived experience. These include musical choices such as genre, vocal style, pitch, tone, timbre and rhythm, textual intertitles and spoken poetry that frame each song, and the multitude of intertextual references to both Beyoncé World created outside *Lemonade* and the viewer's own 'real' world.[7] *Lemonade*'s representations of black womanhood encourage the audience to make connections to Beyoncé's history of engagement with feminism and black female empowerment.[8] The most public acknowledgements of Beyoncé's politics pre-*Lemonade* are her 2014 VMA performance—in which she sampled a speech from feminist author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie while standing in front of a projection of the word 'FEMINIST'— and her 2016 Superbowl performance of the song 'Formation'—in which she made reference to the Black Lives Matter movement, Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. While one cannot assume every consumer of *Lemonade* would be familiar with these moments, they did generate significant public reporting and commentary in the mainstream press.[9]

Lemonade begins with a montage of seemingly unconnected images: a close-up of Beyoncé kneeling in front of a car; an extreme low-angle black-and-white shot of a chain hanging from the trees above; and a forward-pushing long shot of historic Fort Macomb in Louisiana. The camera cuts to a medium long shot of Beyoncé kneeling in front of a red curtain on a lit stage as she sings the opening lines of the first song, 'Pray You Catch Me'. This is intercut with shots of her walking though the long grass at Fort Macomb. The stage signals the beginning of a representation of Beyoncé's life, her inner thoughts and journeys, her vulnerability of baring herself in the spotlight, but also the theatrical and fictional elements of the film. This artificiality does not negate *Lemonade*'s worldhood;

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7   Somali-British poet Warsan Shire wrote the poetry read by Beyoncé in *Lemonade*.
8   For a discussion of the questions of race, sex, gender and feminism raised by Beyoncé, see Trier-Bierniek (2016).
9   These political statements by Beyoncé were not universally applauded. Pop star Annie Lennox called it 'feminist lite' (Azzopardi, 2014), and feminist activist and scholar bell hooks described Beyoncé as 'anti-feminist' (Sieczkowski, 2014). Others, such as Durham et al. (2013), were more positive and argue Beyoncé is a hip-hop feminist. For some critics, Beyoncé's engagement with black political activism is problematised by her status as mass commercial product. Ajamu Baraka (2016) called 'Formation' a 'commodified caricature of black opposition', while Dianca London (2016) argued 'her brand of feminism … is severely limited, and her latest activism via "Formation" feels more like strategic consumerist dramatism rather than empowerment'.

as Perkins (2005, p. 38) argues, just because 'the world is created in our imaginations it need not suffer damage from any foregrounding of the devices that assist its construction'.

Lemonade's world exists within the Southern US, one that draws on real places and traditions of the area, but also incorporates elements of fantasy and performance common in music video. Much of the film contains images of typically Southern locations and imagery such as Louisiana plantation houses and accompanying slave quarters, bayous, Southern live oak trees with their hanging moss, the New Orleans Mercedes-Benz Superdome and Fort Macomb. Beyoncé and her dancers are often dressed in antebellum style, particularly during the songs 'Freedom' and 'Formation'. This world of the South, then, is at once anachronistic, fantastical and utopian; the plantation houses are largely occupied by black women who sing, dance, climb trees and eat together while white slave owners are nowhere on the scene. Beyoncé's African, Creole and Native American heritage, and Texan upbringing, are frequently referred to in the lyrics and visuals. There are also more urban locations, such as the city streets in the songs 'Hold Up' and '6 Inch', the underground carpark in 'Don't Hurt Yourself', and the images of a flooded New Orleans and a small boy dancing in front of a line of riot police in 'Formation'.

Beyoncé World is built up through the connections between these spaces, by layering on the visual references, lyrical and musical cues and building on her past and present political engagement.[10] This world is a distinctly black female space, where women of Beyoncé's immediate family, but also prominent black women, are celebrated. Her friends and family consistently appear in cameo, as do other notable African-American women: tennis star Serena Williams, musician Zendaya, actresses Quvenzhané Wallis and Amandla Stenberg, and model Winnie Harlow, among others. *Lemonade* also features the mothers of slain black men who have become the face of the Black Lives Matter movement: Sybrina Fulton, mother of Trayvon Martin; Lezley McSpadden, mother of Michael Brown; and Gwen Carr, mother of Eric Garner. This political engagement connects with her statements in support of Black Lives Matter during her concerts and on her website.[11] The connection of these individuals to the 'real' world adds to the worlding practices of *Lemonade*. This connection to reality,

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10   Perrott, Rogers and Vernallis (2016) provide an excellent breakdown of the visual references and connections between sound and image in *Lemonade*.
11   See Knowles-Carter (2016b).

to a 'real' person on the other side of the camera, sharing the space of the viewer, enhances the worldhood of the film through the borrowing process (Yacavone, 2015, p. 20).

Beyoncé's direct address to the camera, a staple of television and music video, but less common in feature-length film, does not detract from the worlding of *Lemonade*. In fact, it enhances it. Perkins (2005, p. 36) states, 'When I respond to the invitation of the outward glance I engage in the fiction in a new way, by imagining contact rather than separation between my world and the screen world'. The implied addressee is at once a character in the film, but also Beyoncé's husband: rapper, producer and businessman Shawn Carter (known professionally as Jay-Z). Jay-Z is a real-life figure who exists both within Beyoncé World in *Lemonade*, as he appears in songs 'Sandcastles' and 'All Night', and outside, in the 'real' world, in his professional life. Worlding 'works for an audience that knows the world always to be larger and larger again than the sector currently in view' (Perkins, 2005, p. 33). The viewer interpolates the boundaries of the *Lemonade* world as enmeshing with Beyoncé's own 'real' world outside the film—that world they see through social media. In fact, Beyoncé's worlding strategies rely on the intimate and personal nature of the content. The next section considers the connections between the world constructed in *Lemonade* and Beyoncé's stardom.

Worlding and Beyoncé's Star Project

This chapter argues that Beyoncé's stardom extends beyond constructing a star image through media texts (Dyer, 1998, p. 10). Instead, I argue, her star project, her ongoing construction and maintenance of her stardom is creating Beyoncé World. Beyoncé's worlding strategy, as I have suggested, relies heavily on incorporating intimate details of her life. However, this has not always been the case. Early in her career, Beyoncé rarely spoke about her personal life and adopted the stage persona 'Sasha Fierce' to perform her more sexually explicit songs.[12] In 2010, Beyoncé became self-managed, splitting from her father who was her manager from when she was a child. From this point, her albums, videos and interviews became more explicit, personal and intimate, and she lost the stage persona Sasha

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12   'Sasha Fierce' was introduced with the release of the *I Am … Sasha Fierce* (2008) album (see Kennedy, 2011).

Fierce. In 2012, she joined Twitter and Instagram and debuted her official website with the tag line 'the official view into my world—by me, for you X B'. In 2013, she released the *Beyoncé* visual album, and a self-directed documentary, *Beyoncé: Life is but a Dream*. Both detailed the split from her father, her marriage, her sexual fantasies, her miscarriage, her relationship with her mother and sister, the birth of her first child and her ambition as an artist. Since 2013, this level of intimacy has remained consistent. Creating Beyoncé World through intimacy now informs her articulation of authenticity.

There has been consistent discourse on the authenticity of rock and the inauthenticity of pop within popular and academic circles since the birth of rock-and-roll. This authentic/inauthentic binary can largely be traced back to Theodor Adorno's (1990) dismissal of popular music and his argument that commodification resulting from commercialisation was in opposition to the essentials of art (Phillips, 1997, p. 144). Simon Frith (1996) is the most vocal in dismissing this authentic/inauthentic binary as redundant, arguing that all genres of music are a performance and can be intended and received as both inauthentic and authentic. David Tetzlaff (1994, p. 111) counters Frith's position by arguing that while a critical stance on the authentic/inauthentic binary is useful, the binary should not be dismissed altogether because of the way it is used by fans. While this chapter follows Frith's assertion that all authenticity is constructed, authenticity still offers a way for fans to evaluate and create meanings around popular music, singing performances and stars, as well as the texts that present them.

Authenticity, and its associated concepts of transparency and intimacy, is also still widely discussed in celebrity studies. Melissa Avdeeff (2016, p. 109), while discussing Beyoncé's Instagram account, argues that 'it is widely accepted that those who engage with celebrities through social media expect a certain degree of authenticity in the form of transparency between the celebrity and their posts'. I would argue this expectation now extends to some degree to music videos, particularly for Beyoncé. Music video audiences automatically search for authenticity or 'truth' in the singer and the image; that is, they search for *Lemonade*'s connection with the 'real' Beyoncé, her life events and her 'real' feelings. This is what Dyer (1986, p. 2) argues cements the whole notion of the star and their appeal: what they 'really are', their inner private self outside their performances. The search for the authentic Beyoncé is futile, but Beyoncé must constantly work to make herself appear authentic in a variety of ways. Jaap Kooijman

(2014, p. 2) argues that the authenticity of African-American female pop stars as saleable commodities is 'doubly questioned, in relation to the predominantly white rock aesthetic as well as music genres such as soul, R&B, and hip-hop that are connoted as "black"'. Beyoncé's strategy for this is the ongoing construction and maintenance of a world that is informed by intimate details of her life and, more so recently, explicitly connected to her gender and racial politics. The more intimate, personal and connected to her real biography, the more authentic the world and, by extension, our view of Beyoncé becomes.

Therefore, elements of Beyoncé's biography lend authenticity to *Lemonade*. Documentary home footage of Beyoncé and Jay-Z's wedding, her pregnancy, her daughter Blue Ivy, her mother's wedding and her interactions with her father when she was a child all infuse *Lemonade* with intimacy and subsequent authenticity. These mirror the images uploaded to her Instagram, Facebook and website, and this level of intimacy is standard practice for social media users. There is a growing area of research into how the presentation of the self on social media has influenced celebrity practice, particularly in reference to Erving Goffman's (1959) book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. P. David Marshall (2010, p. 44) argues that celebrities use social media to produce the 'public private self', or an intimate yet controlled version of themselves for consumption and apparent social networking. That is, Beyoncé and her team attempt to remain authentic, intimate, personal and offhand, while in fact actively curating and constructing Beyoncé World. It is interesting how much Beyoncé's worlding involves incorporating practices of intimacy common on social media into her professional music videos and visual albums. This blurring between social media and music video reflects the cross-content flows of the contemporary convergent media environment in which boundaries between media forms, aesthetics, genres and technologies are largely breaking down.

A large part of the popular discussion of *Lemonade* focused on the way it addresses ongoing rumours about Jay-Z's infidelity.[13] Whether Jay-Z did or did not cheat on Beyoncé is irrelevant; the way the couple deals with rumours indirectly through their music, rather than any magazine interview or official statement, is testament to their business acumen and their strategies of worlding.[14] Perkins (2005, p. 20) argues that although

13 See, for example, Miller (2016), Morris (2016) and Roschke (2016).
14 Jay-Z has now released a response album to *Lemonade*, title *4:44* (2017).

some elements of a film world may mark it as fictional, such as the embodiment of characters by Beyoncé and Jay-Z in *Lemonade*, they 'do not thereby negate its worldhood'. Simon Frith (1996) outlines the different levels of characterisation and narrative in popular song performance:

> There is, first of all, the character presented as the protagonist of the song, its singer and narrator, the implied person controlling the plot, with an attitude and tone of voice; but there may also be a 'quoted' character, the person whom the song is about … On top of this there is the character of the singer as star, what we know about them, or are led to believe about them through their packaging and publicity, and then, further, an understanding of the singer as a person, what we like to imagine they are really like, what is revealed, *in the end*, by their voice. (pp. 198–199, emphasis in original)

Therefore, this layering of characterisation common to pop music performance enhances the worldhood of *Lemonade* and Beyoncé World. *Lemonade* teases the promise of intimacy through its construction of Beyoncé World; it is meant to feel like we are really watching Beyoncé lose her temper at Jay-Z. Because of multiple authorship and address positions in popular song and video, however, *Lemonade* is also a universal statement about all women with cheating husbands, and so the album reveals nothing concrete. The delicate relationship between autobiography and fantasy in *Lemonade*, and Beyoncé's control of this balance to create Beyoncé World, is what makes her star project so interesting in the contemporary moment.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Beyoncé's negotiation of stardom is now a strategy of constructing, maintaining and occupying Beyoncé World. Through examining the worlding processes in *Lemonade*, I have outlined the ways in which Beyoncé World is connected to Beyoncé's stardom and articulation of authenticity. Beyoncé World is achieved by both her artistic and professional output and the audience's knowledge of, immersion and participation in her worlding. The audience is aware of the processes of presentation of Beyoncé World, and is actively involved in that world creation through borrowing from the 'real' world. I am in no way suggesting that Beyoncé World is a factual representation of the world or her life. In fact, Beyoncé is well known to have one of the most

tightly controlled media strategies in the industry.[15] Instead, this chapter argues that Beyoncé's articulation of authenticity and intimacy, values that have long been critical to celebrity and fame, occurs in a more widespread, encompassing and complex manner than has previously been accounted for. As the lines blur between television, music video, film and music, and if Beyoncé continues to release visual albums, research in pop stardom using theories of film worlds and worlding can only be more productive.

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15   In an interview with GQ magazine, Beyoncé revealed she has a personal digital storage archive of her media images, and a visual director who records every moment of her life (see Wallace, 2013).

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