

REFLECTIONS ON 'BLACK IS KING' BY BEYONCÉ

The Context:

It seems significantly ironic, significant enough to name, that Black is King is showing on Disney+. I am unsure how to feel about it. Do we trust and dignify Disney's evolution to see, name, know, and support Black narratives? It is, after all, a Parkwood production. For me, though, the challenge is in all the harm they have done to us, my generation, our children, by way of conditioning throughout the years, that makes it hard for me to embrace their efforts as genuine, authentic. And while I am not sure that I see this as a negative reflection on the art, nor Beyonce, I do think it important to name the ironic tension that tuning in here to watch causes for me. I would also note that in the summary of the depiction, Black is King is called "A Visual Album." I love this because it takes into account the many senses that diverse people groups engage when they experience art--when they learn. Simply calling it a visual album feels like an invitation to more people to experience Black is King--to learn and grow from it. I am always wrestling with the question, "What is literacy for Black learners and knowledge seekers?" Who has historically defined literacy? Who gets to define it now, and how does that impact how we learn and seek knowledge? What gets excluded when it is NOT US defining it for ourselves? Creating a visual album makes room for more of the diaspora to find their way on the journey that is Black is King.

And while I am busying myself with the conundrums--the tensions that we must hold to journey through to the beautiful place that Beyonce has invited us to--it causes me to take on the question that the panel invitation invited us to consider: "How and why does Beyonce's art strike such a visceral chord?" For those of you who are familiar with the Enneagram, I would say that it is because I suspect that she is an 8 like me, and this is just what we do! (LOL!) But honestly, I think that she is inviting us to be more fully present to the discords that are already ready already. Ready and waiting for us to get curious about them--to reimagine a world that we must first dissect in order to build it justly for the first time, ever, since creation!

This discord that Beyonce invites us to is always there--she simply slows us down enough to feel the invitation, and she gives us language and emotion that equips us to be present with the discord. She invites us to the tensions:

How do we hold and honor elders and hold our own by way of a healthy examination of where the people, the system, the past, has fallen short? How do we hold honor for wisdom and a battle against ageism?

How do we hold Black excellence, and denounce the grind? How do we preserve the traditions and renounce the traumas of the Black church? How do we manage the contention between protecting our vulnerable Black Woman bodies and celebrate the naked freedom of our sexuality unapologetically? How do we honor Black men in a way that they understand and receive, while still holding the line on the toxic masculinity that they sometimes unknowingly offer us out of a broken and disjointed love?

This is what Beyonce invites us into, and holding all of this at once, well, that is a lot to hold and it is wrapped in a discord that our homogenous, monochromatic conditioning will rail against, even if we want to be fully enveloped in it.

In full disclosure, there are a few pieces of art that I have had to experience and then re-experience because my own whiteness and euro conditioning shrouded my lens frustratingly the first time through. This was one of those pieces, along with Black AF, Lovecraft Country, and at one point, even Get Out made the list of titles that catapulted me into the "teacup stirring abyss" that film illustrates, begging the suffocating delusion that resides between an untainted self I have never known and my deep desire to get to know her. To get to know who she really is, what she really likes, who she might have been, had she not been oceanically engulfed in whiteness.

With Bey, we have an invite to get curious about the in between in stark and revelatory ways. The good news? She gives us symphonic melodies for the journey, so at minimum, we can dance on the dischord toward greater harmonies within ourselves. Selah.