

Redeeming lemons

by [Beth Felker Jones](#) in the [July 6, 2016](#) issue



FROM HURT TO HOPE: Beyoncé tells a tale of betrayal and redemption. Photo courtesy of HBO.

Beyoncé's "visual album" *Lemonade* is a spectacular piece of visual theology. The 66-minute film leads viewers through her new album, transforming songs that could have been interpreted in many other ways into a clear redemption story. *Lemonade* is allusive and elusive, resisting any effort to wrap it up neatly, but the story arcs through chapters beginning with "Intuition" and ending with "Resurrection." Beyoncé narrates a tale of betrayal leading through anger into healing and reconciliation. The film's words come largely from two sources: Beyoncé's song lyrics and poetry adapted for the project by poet Warsan Shire. Shire was named the first Young Poet Laureate of London and won Brunel University's African Poetry Prize.

In voice-over, Beyoncé reads Shire's poem: "Grandmother, the alchemist. / You spun gold out of this hard life." The film cuts to home movie footage of the 90th birthday party of Beyoncé's grandmother-in-law Hattie. Hattie speaks to her family and friends. "I've had my ups and downs," she says. "But I always find the inner strength to pull myself up. I was served lemons, but I made lemonade." The crowd claps and laughs. This scene is the warm heart of *Lemonade*. It puts the body of an elderly black woman at its center, acknowledging the suffering that the particulars of that embodied life have involved, and it celebrates, without ignoring that suffering, transformation.

While I've heard much commentary about the first part of the story, about the betrayal and anger, the weight of *Lemonade* is on *redemption* and *reconciliation*,

words drawn verbatim from the film. *Lemonade* is striking in its use of Christian language. So striking, in fact, that I'm a bit stunned by the lack of attention to that language in public conversation. Almost the whole theological lexicon is at work here, reinscribed in creative, genre-defying ways.

Visually and verbally, *Lemonade* is unflinching about female embodiment, invoking menstruation and sex, birth and death. It also connects theology to those bodies, creating a vibrant piece of incarnational theology.

The film invokes the failures of Christianity, especially for women and in particular for black women. In the early, most painful part of the film, the words wrap theological language together with specifically female experiences of violence and pain. "I tried to change," says Beyoncé, and then she names ways that women often try to change themselves with rituals of self-discipline that wrestle with the world's misogyny.

The film rebukes the idolatry that would turn men into gods, in their own eyes and in the eyes of those who love them. The words "God is God and I am not" flash on the screen in bold letters. *Lemonade* rejects the kind of theology that would put God on the side of patriarchy or of white supremacy. Beyoncé cries out to be seen, and in the same move she is seen, and she makes certain that other black women—old and young, of many skin tones, of different sizes—are also seen.

Though her work resonates widely, Beyoncé makes it perfectly clear in *Lemonade* that she is not telling the story of "everywoman." She's telling the story of a black woman and of black women. A biting *Saturday Night Live* skit—aired after the release of the single "Formation," in advance of the rest of the album—picks up on this point. The skit has an eerily voiced narrator saying, "for white people, it was just another great week. They never saw it coming. They had no warning." White people are shown panicking in the streets at the realization that "Beyoncé is black." "Maybe," says one white office worker, "this song isn't for us." Another white office worker yells, "But usually everything is!"

Indeed. *Lemonade* clearly and boldly enters into the discussion about race in America. The film quotes a speech from Malcolm X: "The most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman." These words are layered over images of black women's faces, and it's important that these faces

are not just Beyoncé's famously beautiful one. They're the faces of ordinary women.

In creating this visual theology, *Lemonade* enters into a much larger tradition of conversation. In a move that warms my professorial heart, Candice M. Benbow, a Ph.D. student in theology at Princeton, gathered an interdisciplinary list of contributors to put together a syllabus that would invite *Lemonade* viewers further into that conversation. The result recommends far more works than any professor could assign in a semester: a tiny sampling includes fiction by Octavia Butler and Toni Morrison, poems by Lucille Clifton, feminist theory from Angela Davis and bell hooks, theology from Katie Cannon, M. Shawn Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Mignon Jacobs. The *Lemonade* syllabus is available for free online. The existence of this syllabus recognizes *Lemonade* as both womanist theology and political theology.

Lemonade offers soaring hope for healing—not a generic healing, but the healing of black, female bodies in America. We see images of a bowl that has been broken and then repaired with gold so that it shines. A litany of female voices ask how “are we supposed to lead our children to the future?” The answer is “Love. L-O-V-E, love.” Another voice cries out, “Hallelujah. Thank you, Jesus.” In the hands of a lesser artist, this—along with the earlier speech about lemons—might be cliché, but here the deep truth behind cliché is allowed to live and breathe in the visual and verbal and musical poetry of the film.

A gathering of black women join around a banquet table groaning with food, evoking an eschatological feast. Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin, and Lesley McSpadden, the mother of Michael Brown, sit holding photographs of their dead sons. They're posed as queens; their images become icons. It's significant that these icons do not belong to the first part of film, the part given over to hurt, but to the ending, which points forward to hope. Beyoncé's voice rings out, “If we're gonna heal, let it be glorious.” Amen.