



Beyoncé Knowles performing "halo" (screenshot from youtube.com)

Seeing Haiti's "Halo"

Tavia Nyong'o | New York University

for Daphne Brooks

Hannah Arendt, it is well known, immediately detected the contradiction in the modern regime of human rights. The rights of man, she noted in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), are intended to be universal, but they are only evoked when some more local source of rights provision, such as the nation-state, has broken down (Arendt 2004). The stateless person, who is the principle object of humanitarian concern, by definition only takes recourse to their human rights when their rights as a citizen of one nation or another have been catastrophically suspended or dissolved. But of course, those very conditions of catastrophic suspension of citizenship rights also ensured that human rights would be purely notional: for who would be there to enforce them? The more recent innovation of that vainglorious euphemism, "humanitarian intervention," only underscores the hard, Hobbesian reality that it is the state, even if it is in the last resort some other state, that enforces these rights that are supposedly immanent to the human. To fall back upon our rights as humans, Arendt worried, is a fall without end (Rancière 2004, 297-310).

The instinctive distrust of human rights discourse on the part of many African Americans—Malcolm X's famous plea to the contrary notwithstanding—was heard again in the days after Hurricane Katrina. Many took offense at the early media

characterization of stranded or fleeing black folk as “refugees.” This designation seemed to reveal an assumption, on the part of those who carelessly used the word, that these were something other than their fellow Americans, that coming to their rescue was to be likened to an act of foreign aid. The insistence on being called *citizens* rather than *refugees*—which may have seemed at the time like terminological hairsplitting—to my mind actually reflected a deeper and more unsettling difference than the casual racism with which the media distinguished between those who were “finding” and those who were “looting” food. While the finding/looting division merely reflected the equation between blackness and criminality, the contestation over the citizen/refugee distinction revealed the fault-lines in the apparatus of rights, which, while historically achieved through the nation-state, still bear the traces of a broader and deeper connection (Masquelier 2006, 735).

This connection is called out in the name chosen by Wyclef Jean, Pras Michel, and Lauryn Hill—Haitian, Haitian-American, and African-American born artists respectively—who formed the incredibly successful hip hop group *The Fugees* in the 1990s. Also known as *Refugee Camp*, *The Fugees* reflected in their name both a specifically Haitian diasporic sensibility and pride, and a hybrid Caribbean/continental African-American youth culture in which citizenship and places of birth are, in the end, less important than the common idiom of hip hop within which a black planetary rock is imagined. In her 1943 essay “We Refugees,” Hannah Arendt had struck a complementary note on the subject of the stateless person or refugee, calling her the avant-garde of her people (Arendt reprinted in Feldman 1978, 55-67). Specifically she notes, the refugee who abandons hope of returning to their former or imagined homeland, but who nonetheless refuses the deceptive lure of assimilation to their current host, will have the courage and creativity to pioneer a new way of being. One of Arendt's recent commentators, Giorgio Agamben, takes the point further:

It is only in a land where the spaces of states will have been perforated and topologically deformed, and the citizen will have learned to acknowledge the refugee that he himself is, that man's political survival today is imaginable (Agamben 2006).

Did not the extraordinary success of the Fugees perform such a perforation and topological deformation of the nation-states of Haiti and the U.S., investing an older concept of diaspora with the pressing youthful energies of the refugee camp? If it did, then it is important to recall this achievement, even as we take tactical recourse to “the original fiction of sovereignty,” as Agamben calls it, with which the rights of man are secured and made visible only through the figure of the citizen.

Black political culture might be furthest along in urging upon the citizen a recognition of the refugee that she herself is. And the contemporary humanitarian appeal, from *We Are the World* to the recent *Hope for Haiti Now*, provides one place where this black improvisation upon the rights of man and of citizen is being performed. It is also a moment of danger. We are only beginning to chart the consequences of the tentative shift from recipients to also the deliverers

of charitable aid. Will our growing commitments to the global charitable enterprise further solidify our attachments to the sovereign fictions of the moneyed humanitarian? Or will we continue to defy the terms upon which the dominance of the West over the rest is perpetually restaged as militarized aid and rescue?

Consider two video versions of the song “Halo,” performed by Beyoncé Knowles and composed by Ryan Tedder and Evan Bogart with Beyoncé herself, released as a single off her third studio album *I Am ... Sasha Fierce* (2008). The first example is the official video for “Halo,” directed by Philip Andelman and co-starring Michael Ealy. And the second is the version Knowles performed, accompanied on the piano by Chris Martin of Coldplay, at the *Hope for Haiti Now: A Global Benefit for Earthquake Relief*, televised live on January 22nd, 2010. In watching these videos, consider too the prescient analysis of Daphne Brooks, who juxtaposed earlier music by Knowles with the performance of Mary J. Blige at the *Shelter From the Storm* benefit for survivors of Katrina held four and half years earlier in the fall of 2005. In her essay, “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe” Brooks argues:

I want to suggest there are ways to listen to [Knowles] on another frequency so as to hear the register of post-Katrina, Blige-esque discontent in pop music culture, as well as the ways in which Beyoncé Knowles reconfigures this sort of dissent as fleet, urgent desire, and aspiration. Listen closely and one can hear the sounds and words of Knowles the artist imagining ways for her character on the album to transcend despair through a sharp attendance to work, her own property, and the attainment of her own version of “control” (Brooks 2007, 192)

In its first version, “Halo” is a love song of hard-earned fulfillment set in perhaps deliberate counterpoint to Knowles’s ubiquitous video for “Single Ladies.” Where “Single Ladies” lamented the inability of her man to commit, in “Halo” he has finally “put a ring on it.” Or, more to the point, a ring on himself, if not an actual marriage ring, then at the very least a ring of light which, Knowles sings, hits her like a ray of sun, a glory that has led her to become, in a line that subtly registers what has come for many to be control’s pharmaceutical price, “addicted to your light.”

Andelman surrounds the couple in a glowing nimbus, employing three-point lighting to both illuminate and periodically drown his subjects in the splendor of their mutually fulfilling love. Noticing the near-whiteness thereby produced on the bodies of the light-complected Knowles and Ealy, we might bring to mind Richard Dyer’s claim that three-point lighting was an important part of the technological reproduction of whiteness in the cinematic era (Dyer 1997). But neither Knowles nor Ealy are passing; rather, “Halo” stages a conjugal route towards what Brooks calls the transcendence of despair, this time not simply through work, property, and control, but through a “risky” loss of control that only the prior attainment of independence makes worthwhile or even possible.

“Halo” might not be worth a commentary in this serious context were it not for the transfiguration of the song since its release from a song of romance into one of diasporic memory, trauma and transcendence. What was so astonishing about the second version was the ease with which, with hardly more than a few lyrical substitutions, Beyonce and Chris Martin were able to transfigure “Halo” from a fantasy of mutual romantic completeness into a fervent prayer for the flourishing of black people amidst devastation. The opening reference to the tumbling of the “walls I built” referred not in any crass way to the earthquake itself, but the emotional and cognitive walls privileged subjects build against those whom Frantz Fanon called “the wretched of the earth.” And unlike most songs performed on such occasions, which tend to direct attention to the brokenness of the object of pity, Knowles’s “Halo” insisted upon the brokenness of the *subject* of pity. It insisted upon the insufficiency of pity in the face of what, with astonishing conviction, Knowles was able to praise as the glory of the Haitian people.

Here, “I’m never gonna shut you out” takes on a new meaning: rather than just opening herself to the closed circle of the companionate couple, Knowles asks her audience to open themselves out to the open and unlimited face of black humanity. The “fall back” into blackness, she reassures herself, “doesn’t even feel like falling,” and gravity brings her back down to the ground again as the refugee that she therefore is. The crack in her voice was thus also a crack in the edifice of the celebrity-humanitarian spectacle, a crack through which she allowed to emanate, as Daphne Brooks has shown Mary J. Blige’s did at the Katrina benefit, an audible reminder that we are one, but we are not the same, when it comes to the claims we must still make upon our common humanity.

Tavia Nyong'o is Associate Professor of Performance Studies at New York University and the author of *The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. 2006. “Hannah Arendt’s ‘We Refugees.’” *Roundtable: Research Architecture*. <http://roundtable.kein.org/node/399> (accessed 23 July 2010).

Arendt, Hannah. 2004. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Schocken Books.

Brooks, Daphne A. 2007. “‘All That You Can’t Leave Behind’: Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe.” *Meridians: feminism, race, transnationalism* vol 8, no. 1. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

EMISFÉRICA

Dyer, Richard. 1997. *White*. New York: Routledge.

Feldman, Ron H., ed. 1978. *The Jew as pariah: Jewish identity and politics in the modern age*. New York: Grove Press.

Masquelier, A. 2006. "Why Katrina's Victims Aren't Refugees: Musings on a 'Dirty' Word." *American Anthropologist* 108, no. 4. Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell.

Rancière, Jacques. 2004. "Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?" *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103, no. 2. Durham: Duke University Press.