

Sebastian Conrad

The Making of a Global Icon

Nefertiti's Twentieth-Century Career

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Introduction

When singer Beyoncé selected a dress for her appearance at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in April, 2018, she opted for an impersonation of Nefertiti, the famous Egyptian queen of antiquity who had long since become a global icon. Beyoncé, one of today's most successful pop artists, was the first black woman ever to headline the festival, and her choice of outfit was fitting: with a bodysuit, long cape, and the iconic headdress, she placed herself in the tradition of the ancient queen for all to see. Beyoncé conjured up the image of the ancient queen as a symbol of African regal power and black beauty.¹

The response was overwhelming. Millions followed Beyoncé's enactment in what was the most-watched live performance on YouTube in history. The singer accompanied her performance with the release of a clothes collection, likewise inspired by Nefertiti. Later that same year, she traveled to Berlin, together with her husband, the rapper Jay-Z, to visit the New Museum and see the icon first hand. For this occasion, the room was closed for ordinary visitors while Beyoncé was photographed in front of Nefertiti's famous bust. On Instagram, she posted an image morphing her own picture with Nefertiti, adding the title "NefertiBey:" the symbolic fusion of two global celebrities.

Posing as Nefertiti reincarnate was not coincidental. Already in the previous year, the artist Awol Erizku photographed Beyoncé as a pregnant Venus, with a Nefertiti statue by her side. For many years, Beyoncé had linked her stage personality both to symbols of ancient Egypt and of Black Power. In the celebrated halftime show on Super Bowl Sunday in 2016, she urged black women to rebel, made reference to the Black Lives Matter movement, and in her choreography paid homage to the Black Panthers, the legendary black socialist organization in the late 1960s.² In 2020, she released the musical film and album *Black Is King* that aimed,

¹ For the recruitment of women from antiquity for present-day purposes, see Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Anja Wieber (eds.), *Orientalism and the Reception of Powerful Women from the Ancient World*, London (Bloomsbury) 2020.

² Inna Arzumanova, "The Culture Industry and Beyoncé's Proprietary Blackness," *Celebrity Studies* 7 (2016), 421-424; Crystal LaVouille and Tisha L. Ellison, "The Bad Bitch Barbie Craze and Beyoncé: African American Women's Bodies as Commodities in Hip-Hop Culture, Images, and Media," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* vol. 16, no. 2 (2017), 65-84; E. B. Edwards, J. Esposito & V. Evans-Winters, "Does Beyoncé's Lemonade Really Teach Us How to Turn Lemons into Lemonade?: Exploring the Limits and Possibilities Through Black Feminism," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* vol. 16, no. 2 (2017), 85-96; Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, ed., *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race and Feminism* (Jefferson, N.C., 2016); Sarah Olutola, "I Ain't Sorry: Beyoncé, Serena, and Hegemonic Hierarchies in Lemonade," *Popular Music and Society* 42, no. 1 (2019), 99-117. For critical perspectives on music celebrities selling out, see Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (New York, 2016).

as the singer explained, to shift "the global perception of the word 'Black'," explicitly linking it to "beauty."³ To her fans, Beyoncé's active embrace of black culture and black womanhood made her a symbol of black female empowerment.⁴

Nine years before Coachella, Beyoncé had visited the ancient sites in Egypt herself. At the time, she was led around by Zahi Hawass, then director of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, and thus responsible for the ancient collections and excavation sites. The charismatic if controversial archaeologist had campaigned for the restitution of the bust of Nefertiti to Cairo for decades and is the best-known representative of the Egyptian state's efforts to secure control over an ancient heritage previously dominated by Europeans. Both Hawass and Beyoncé shared a fascination with the ancient Egyptian queen, and their agendas partly overlapped. They both departed fundamentally from a European tradition that had conscripted ancient Egypt, and Nefertiti herself, as origins of Western modernity. For the archaeologist and the singer, Nefertiti promised not only to challenge and undermine Western standards of beauty, but also the hierarchies of the art world, and the patterns of ownership bequeathed by the imperialist age.

In the event, however, the encounter between the two was not at all harmonious. Angered by what he perceived as Beyoncé's "rude behavior," Hawass banned the American celebrity from further exploring the Pharaonic remains. He more or less kicked her out of Egypt. However, the conflict was about more than just the disintegration of their personal relationship. Instead, it mirrored the fact that their claims on ancient Egypt and Nefertiti ultimately diverged, notwithstanding their shared anti-Eurocentrism. Beyoncé's sartorial politics invoked Nefertiti as African, and as a source of inspiration for the black diaspora. For Hawass, by contrast, Nefertiti was a product of Pharaonic civilization and a unique symbol of the Egyptian nation.

³ Quoted in "Beyoncé's 'Black Is King' on Disney+: What to Know and How to Stream," *Good Morning America* (accessed Aug 24, 2022). See also Darnell-Jamal Lisby, "'Black Is King' References Various African Traditions Through Fashion," *teen Vogue* (August 3, 2020); Rading Biko, "Is Beyoncé Rooting for Pan Africanist Movement with her Film Black Is King?," *The Standard* (2020).

⁴ Travis M. Andrews and Maber Ferguson, "Beyoncé's Father Takes on 'Colorism': He Dated Her Mother because He Thought She Was White," *The Washington Post*, February 5, 2018. On colorism, see JeffriAnne Wilder, *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century* (Santa Barbara, 2015). See also Kimberly Jade Norwood, "'If You Is White, You's Alright': Stories about Colorism in America," *Washington University Global Studies Law Review* 14, no. 4 (2015), 585-608; Cienna Davis, "From Colorism to Conjurings: Tracing the Dust in Beyoncé's Lemonade," *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 16, no. 2 (2017).



Left: Beyoncé at Coachella, 2018; right: Zahi Hawass and Beyoncé at the pyramids, 2009

In their overlapping and at the same time competing claims, both Hawass and Beyoncé tapped into Nefertiti's prominence as a global icon, an image easily recognizable around the world. Since her discovery in 1912, Europeans had regularly portrayed her as a timeless beauty, effortlessly bridging the millennia and speaking to a contemporary public. In the imperialist age, this notion – merged with the discourse of civilization – was disseminated beyond Europe's borders, and has remained influential ever since. From the Bengali Rabindranath Tagore in 1913 ("O Beauty, carved in stone ... O Immovable Beauty!")⁵ to the German Minister of Culture Bernd Neumann a full century later ("We should acknowledge" the bust as "part of a universal world heritage"),⁶ commentators consistently championed Nefertiti as an emblem of the cultural achievements of humanity.

How can we explain this worldwide resonance? Usually, just her silhouette is enough, and everyone knows who is meant and what she stands for. What is the reason that Nefertiti is understood today in very different places – not only in Cairo or Berlin, but also in Rio de Janeiro, in Houston or in Calcutta – as a symbol of female beauty? How did an ancient queen turn into a global icon in the present? And connected to this: How is it that Nefertiti's magic has survived more than three millennia apparently unscathed? After all, it is now a

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Gardener*, 1913.

⁶ Bernd Neumann, December 5, 2012. See also the critical response by Fatima El-Tayeb, "Reclaiming Nefertiti," <http://amlatina.contemporaryand.com/editorial/fatima-el-tayeb-reclaiming-nefertiti/>.

commonplace that beauty is not objectively given, and that aesthetic ideas have differed significantly over the centuries. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.⁷

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant has expressed this modern insight in theoretical terms. For a long time, many cultures assumed that beauty was a quality of people or things, and referred to underlying values: truth, virtue, love, or divine inspiration. Many traditional societies, whether in ancient Greece, Pharaonic Egypt, or Confucian China, viewed beauty as an expression of a moral personality, an ethical life; in Muslim thought, beauty was primarily a sign, pointing to Allah in whom all beauty ultimately resided; similarly, Christian tradition too, interpreted beautiful things as the creations of a beautiful God.⁸

In the late eighteenth century, Kant turned all these notions on their heads. Building on works by Edmund Burke or David Hume, Kant now held that things and people were not by themselves pretty, but perceived and experienced as pleasing by humans. In his view, beauty was subjective, not something that was given objectively. This did not mean, however, that what was considered beautiful was entirely arbitrary. Instead, Kant spoke of "subjective universality," implying that every individual judgment had to appeal to others and could possibly be shared by a larger community.⁹

Against the background of these developments, the question of how Nefertiti could be perceived as the embodiment of an aesthetic standard across space and time poses itself with particular urgency. This question is all the more pressing since different viewers – as we have already seen with the example of Beyoncé and Hawass – could have very different aesthetic ideas in mind when praising Nefertiti's beauty. But even if it may sound paradoxical at first: these two opposing aspects – standardization, and aesthetic differences – are closely connected. For the more widespread the image of Nefertiti became, the easier it was to

⁷ On the question of "the global", see also the contributions to Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*; Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago, 2008); Rebecca Karl, "What is World History? A Critique of Pure Ideology," in: Tina Mai Chen (ed.), *The Material of World History* (London, 2015), 18-32; Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, 2016), 62-89.

⁸ Władysław Tatarkiewicz, *History of Aesthetics, Vol. 1: Ancient Aesthetics*, The Hague (Mouton) 1970; Christian Meier, *Politik und Anmut*, Berlin (Siedler) 1985; Andrews Stewart, *Art, Desire, and the Body in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge (Cambridge University Press) 1997; Eva Kit Wah Man, *Bodies in China: Philosophy, Aesthetics, and Politics*, Hong Kong (The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press) 2016, 119-120. Valérie Gonzales, *Beauty and Islam: Aesthetics in Islamic Art and Architecture*, London (I.B. Tauris) 2001; Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Search for Beauty in Islam: A Conference of the Books*, Lanham, MD (Rowman & Littlefield) 2005.

⁹ Albert Hofstadter, "Kant's Aesthetic Revolution," *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 3, No. 2 (1975), 171-191; Jane Kneller, "Kant's Concept of Beauty," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 3, No. 3 (1986), 311-324; David Berger, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory: The Beautiful and Agreeable*, London (Bloomsbury) 2009.

mobilize her for very different agendas; conversely, the more diverse the causes for which she was harnessed actually were, the more obvious it seemed that she actually found resonance everywhere.

Many scholars see the globalization of aesthetic ideals as the product of a relentless process of Westernization, a form of cultural imperialism that propelled whitening cream and blond, blue-eyed barbie dolls to the remotest corners of the world.¹⁰ By contrast, both Beyoncé and Zahi Hawass staged Nefertiti as a counterpoise, as an icon of non-Western beauty. As others before them, they mobilized her image as an important corrective to the dominance of Western norms in the beauty industry, and in the public sphere. But contradictory as they may appear, both propositions ultimately complemented each other: the benefits of enlisting Nefertiti in the service of a specific group hinged on her reputation as a global icon, while her alleged universality in turn fed off her appropriation in vastly different contexts.

Nefertiti's modern career takes us to unexpected settings in Asia, Africa and both Americas. Although she has a special significance in Germany, Egypt and the African diaspora in the United States, her image also plays a role in Mexico and Brazil, in Nigeria, China or India. She is part of the erudite enthusiasm for all things Egyptian among the educated middle classes worldwide, and at the same time an icon of popular culture. The story of Nefertiti's global presence therefore produces surprising insights and is fascinating in its own right.

At the same time, Nefertiti's career allows us insights into much larger questions. Her modern trajectory enables us to understand how cultural globalization works.¹¹ In the initial

¹⁰ On globalization and Westernization of beauty standards, see Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, MN, 1996); Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York, 1997); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette M. Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, N.C., 2005); Laura Miller, *Beauty Up: Exploring Contemporary Japanese Body Aesthetics* (Berkeley, Calif., 2006); Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton, N.J., 2007); The Modern Girl Around the World Research Group, *The Modern Girl Around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization* (Durham, N.C., 2008); Geoffrey Jones, *Beauty Imagined: A History of the Global Beauty Industry* (Oxford, 2010); Mimi Thi Nguyen, "The Biopower of Beauty: Humanitarian Imperialism and Global Feminism in an Age of Terror," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 2 (2011), 359-383; Meeta Jha, *The Global Beauty Industry: Colorism, Racism, and the National Body* (London, 2015); Alvaro Jarrin, *The Biopolitics of Beauty: Cosmetic Citizenship and Affective Capital in Brazil* (Berkeley, Calif., 2017); Erin Kenny and Elizabeth G. Nichols, *Beauty Around the World: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, 2017); Lynn M. Thomas, *Beneath the Surface: A Transnational History of Skin Lighteners* (Durham, N.C., 2020).

¹¹ There is a growing literature on different aspects of cultural globalization, e.g. Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time, 1870–1950* (Cambridge, Mass, 2015); Sebastian Conrad, "A Cultural History of Global Transformation," in: *An Emerging Modern World, 1750-1870* (A History of the World, vol. 4), eds. Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel (Cambridge, Mass., 2018), 411-659; Harry Liebersohn, *Music and the New Global Culture: From the Great Exhibitions to the Jazz Age* (Chicago, 2019); Sebastian Conrad, "Greek in Their

globalization euphoria of the 1990s, many commentators assumed that the cultural convergence of different societies would only be a matter of time. In the meantime, it has become clear that while the economic integration of the world continues to progress, cultural integration has very different effects and also produces new fractures and conflicts. Her career is a model case of the dialectical process by which global points of reference were produced and challenged simultaneously.

Her broad reception was facilitated by the media revolution that made her image – through replicas, photographs, and in film – available around the world. Walter Benjamin famously diagnosed that the meaning of a work of art changes as a result of its mechanical reproduction. He concluded that the aura of authenticity necessarily suffers from the image's multiplication. Nefertiti's fame, however, adds nuances to this analysis, as series of replicas have not only enhanced her appeal, but have, ironically, multiplied the claims on her authenticity – a German, Egyptian, African Nefertiti.¹² Through the resonance to her myriad images, she expressed what Durkheim called "collective consciousness," representing the ideals, emotions, and aspirations of different communities. Disseminated across space, she emerged as an icon that was legible transnationally, while at the same time being mobilized for divergent agendas.¹³

Scholars today are attentive to the ways in which different communities make claims to historical authenticity, and forge their relationship to the past. But by systematically occluding the global context in which such competing versions of "Nefertiti" emerged, many people in the North Atlantic have long taken the Eurocentric narrative of the Egyptian roots of modernity for granted. As a scholar based in Berlin where the Nefertiti bust is (controversially) housed, I find the underlying narrative on which claims to Western modernity, and to possession of the bust, rest, particularly troubling, as they tend to excise hierarchies of race

Own Way: Writing India and Japan into the World History of Architecture at the Turn of the Twentieth Century," *American Historical Review* 125, No. 1 (2020), 19-53; Christopher Laing Hill, *Figures of the World: The Naturalist Novel and Transnational Form* (Evanston, IL., 2020).

¹² Walter Benjamin, „Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit,“ in: Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band I*, ed. By Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt, 1980), 431-469. See also Katja Lembke, „Nofretete – Tutanchamun – Alexander der Große Drei mehr oder weniger erfolgreiche Versuche der Ikonisierung von Grabungsfunden,“ *Aegyptiaca. Journal of the History of Reception of Ancient Egypt* 5 (2020), 143-165.

¹³ Lydia Haustein, *Global Icons: Globale Bildinszenierung und kulturelle Identität* (Göttingen, 2008); Bishnupriya Ghosh, *Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular* (Berkeley, Calif., 2011); Jeffrey C. Alexander, Dominik Bartmanski and Bernhard Giesen (eds.), *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life* (New York, 2012); Dianna C. Niebylski and Patrick O'Connor (eds.), *Latin American Icons: Fame Across Borders* (Nashville, TN, 2014); W.J.T. Mitchell, *Image Science: Iconology, Visual Culture, and Media Aesthetics* (Chicago, 2015).

and imperial power. For me, writing from the physical space that claims ownership of Nefertiti presents an opportunity to critically confront such views. In this way, my global perspective seeks to upend the imperial hierarchies of knowledge production that have dominated the interpretation of Nefertiti for more than a century. By reconstructing her global career, my goal is to better anchor the challenge to this master narrative, and to the legalistic claims to ownership – both inheritances from the imperial age that continue to underwrite the West’s self-fashioning to this day.

The Berlin Museum, like all German governments, has consistently taken the position that the bust of Nefertiti is inalienable German property. This was – and is – first and foremost a legal position, referring to “the letter of the law.” In plain language, this means referring to the regulations that had been established between Egypt and the European powers in the heyday of imperialism. These regulations – to which no Egyptian government would agree today – were the product of very unequal power relations. Those who unreflectively invoke them today are basically perpetuating this inglorious history.

The legal argument is thus the one support that supposedly legitimizes ownership of the bust. The other support are cultural claims. For many people in Europe, Nefertiti has become part of the cultural heritage of the Occident. In this interpretation, the Egyptian queen stands at the origin of Western modernity. As we will see in the following, this double appropriation – legal and cultural – was only possible because the colonial and imperial context in which this narrative emerged was systematically ignored. In this way, both the Eurocentric notion of the Egyptian roots of modernity and Berlin's right to material possession of the Nefertiti bust were long taken for granted.



In 1964, the cover of the fashion magazine *Vogue* featured Audrey Hepburn, a quintessential white beauty icon, “with the winged eyebrows and Nefertiti head and throat,” who had “established a new standard of beauty.”¹⁴ In 2017, singer and actress Rihanna posed for *Vogue Arabia*. She had long identified with Nefertiti, sporting a tattoo of Nefertiti on her ribcage. Rihanna explicitly embraced Nefertiti as a black ruler, and as a model of black empowerment. And different from an earlier focus on Nefertiti as a standard, she was now used to represent particularity. The editors praised Rihanna not only as one of the “strong and dynamic women who are changing the world,” but also, in words revealing the market logic of the global age, as “an advocate for diversity.”¹⁵

As writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie vividly demonstrated in a TED Talk that has been viewed millions of times, the dominance of a “single story” can lead to dangerous misunderstandings, as the present is not the result of a linear and uniform development, but the product of overlapping stories and narratives that are in exchange with one another.¹⁶ It is this diversity that needs to be reconstructed again. This book, therefore, aims to trace Nefertiti's global career, a career made up of many stories that ultimately turned Nefertiti into the icon we recognize today.

This plurality of stories also means that many actors had quite different associations when referring to Nefertiti. This could be the case even if they used similar words and terms, whose

¹⁴ Quoted in Barry Paris, *Audrey Hepburn* (London, 1997), 108, 107.

¹⁵ <https://en.vogue.me/fashion/rihanna-vogue-arabia-november-cover/>

¹⁶ Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, “The Danger of a Single Story”, TED talk, 2009; El-Tayeb, “Reclaiming Nefertiti”.

meaning, however, differed according to time and place. For example, when talking about Nefertiti's beauty, not everyone meant the same thing: descriptions varied between cool and provocative, regal and submissive. Nefertiti's iconic status made it possible to project very different aesthetic ideals onto her.

This applies not least to attempts to link Nefertiti to certain categories of race. Time and again, actors have referred to her as Black, *white*, or specifically Egyptian, and thus appropriated her for different groups and political projects. Today, the consensus is that a scientific basis for assuming different “races” does not exist. When people call themselves Black, it is not because of biological similarities, but because of similar experiences of racial discrimination. This also means that terms like Black and *white* do not refer to skin color, but to affiliation with social groups – irrespective of the fact that people continue to experience discrimination and racism because of their skin color. Put simply, there are not different “races” that trigger racist reactions; rather, it is racist ideologies and practices that give rise to the idea that there are different “races” in the first place.¹⁷

In what follows, therefore, Black – as a social category – will be capitalized. Italicizing *white*, in turn, indicates that I refer to an ideology on which the dominant culture is based. Thus, it does not describe skin color or descent, but social positions associated with power and the ability to set standards. Although racism is usually discussed within societies, these attributions always operate within the framework of a global order.¹⁸

However, this understanding is a result of the debates of our time – and it has not yet gained universal acceptance even today. Throughout the twentieth century and into the present, actors employed the terms “black” and “white” in different ways.¹⁹ Often, they were used to refer to differences of origin, skin color, or ethnicity. In particular, the equation of “black” with skin color and pigmentation was widespread; in these cases, I have retained the lowercase spelling. We will continue to encounter such different usage in the quotations on the following pages. As the conflict between Beyoncé and Zahi Hawass already illustrated, propagating or rejecting the designation of Nefertiti as “black” could mean different things. And yet it is precisely this multiplicity (and contradictoriness) of appropriations that has made Nefertiti the global icon we know today.

¹⁷ Hall, „Race, the Floating Signifier”; Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking*; Kelly, *Rassismus*.

¹⁸ Aikins et al., *Afrozensus 2020*; Derbew, *Untangling Blackness*.

¹⁹ El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche*; Wright, *Becoming Black*.