

Kim Rooney, Wednesday 11AM

What Beyoncé's Super Bowl 50 performance is trying to Slay

Beyoncé released the video for her new song, "Formation," on Saturday, February 6. The video was a celebration of black pride and culture, which set off alarms for many conservatives, but the spark that turned the fire into a conflagration came the next day when Beyoncé performed part of "Formation" during the Super Bowl 50 halftime show at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, CA. She performed third in the set, following Coldplay and Bruno Mars, and when the camera finally cut away from Bruno Mars, a line of percussionists parted to reveal Beyoncé standing in a black leather jacket with a gold "X" across her chest, a tribute to Michael Jackson's 1993 Super Bowl XXVII halftime show. Her all-black back-up dancers stood behind her in three rows, wearing black costumes, dark lipstick, and natural hair, and they wore black berets in homage to the Black Panther Party for its fifth anniversary.

Although there was never any explicit criticism of the police or of white people, almost immediately, articles, tweets, and reaction videos were posted raging against Beyoncé's use of anti-police, anti-white political propaganda during what should have been wholesome, family entertainment. They accused her of alienating white people and propagating the ideology of the Black Panther Party, which they often referred to as a terrorist and white-hate organization, despite the show's overall theme of "believe in love." These political and social commenters' umbrage raises the question: how did these commenters transform Beyoncé's performance of the black pride speech genre into the speech genre of white hatred?

Many aspects of Beyoncé's performance were noteworthy, but the question of transformation and interpretation is of particular importance because Beyoncé's performance split her audience down racial lines. White commentators typically refused to recognize the

continued existence of racism in American culture, and because there is heavy negative connotation that comes with the label “racist,” they were understandably upset when black people responded to their reactions with such accusations. Alternatively, many black people immediately demonized white commentators as racist without considering why they might not consider themselves racist. However, if white people and black people cannot find a common ground on which to communicate and at least attempt to understand each others’ narratives and perspectives, racism will remain a divisive issue with no productive discourse towards a solution.

To better understand the context in which Beyoncé’s performance was critiqued, I will review information about the Black Panther Party, different forms of racism, white people’s past reactions to racially charged situations, and black beauty in American society. To begin, Civil Rights historian David Garrow’s analysis of the history of the Black Panther Party notes their use of violence and guns, but he also recognizes the influence of the FBI program COINTELPRO, which aimed to dismantle the party, as well as the separation between those at the top of the party hierarchy and the rank-and-file members; while violence and paranoia gripped the higher-ranking members, many at the local level were more focused on helping the black community¹. Garrow’s work is important because it more fully addresses the complex legacy of the Black Panther Party, including recent pop culture references to the party, whereas many commentators on both sides cherry pick information about the Panthers. Garrow attributes the difference to the complexity of the party’s legacy and people’s preference for a simple narrative, but I will explore why this complexity prevents understanding on both sides.

Many black people who replied to or anticipated white commentators’ reactions to Beyoncé’s performance attributed their criticism to racism. However, UCLA professor of

¹ David J. Garrow, “Picking up the books: The new historiography of the Black Panther Party.” *Reviews in American History* 35 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007): 650-670. doi: 10.1353/rah.2007.0068

psychology and political science David Sears identifies symbolic racism as the core for anti-black racism today, defining it as the pervasive negative attitude that underlies white people's resistance to race-based policies despite the general acceptance of legal equality². Symbolic racism plays an important role in the reactions to Beyoncé's performance because it shapes white critics' language when criticizing her. Sears also notes that higher education has little bearing on racist attitudes, which further explains why commenters, many of whom are college educated, maintain their views. However, Sears' work is on symbolic racism's affect on attitudes towards policy, whereas my paper focuses on its affect on pop culture.

Although changing the language surrounding racism without changing the underlying beliefs seems hypocritical, professors of psychology Clara Wilkins and Cheryl Kaiser's study on the relationship between racial progress and anti-white bias offers an explanation. In a series of three studies, Wilkins and Kaiser found that white people who support the current status hierarchy, with white people on top and black people beneath them, also perceive racial progress as racial bias against white people. They found that priming those people with self-affirming thoughts weakened the link between racial progress and anti-white bias. They also hypothesized that it is because racial progress is a threat when privilege is viewed as a zero-sum game, but when white people are assured of themselves via self-affirmation, they are not as disturbed by potential "threats."³ While this may factor into white people's outrage at Beyoncé's success, it does not explain why there is a disproportional outrage at this performance as opposed to her 2013 performance, which I will explore through the context surrounding the event.

² David O. Sears, et al., "Is It Really Racism?: The Origins of White Americans' Opposition to Race-targeted Policies." *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 61.1 (University of Chicago Press, 1997): 16–53. doi:10.1086/297785

³ Clara L. Wilkins and Cheryl R. Kaiser, "Racial Progress as Threat to the Status Hierarchy: Implications for Perceptions of Anti-White Bias." *Psychological Science* 25.2 (SAGE Publications, 2014): 439-46. doi: 10.1177/0956797613508412

Going beyond the reactions to Beyoncé's performance, Shirley Tate's exploration of the history of black beauty in America helps contextualize Beyoncé's intended message of pride in black culture and black beauty. Tate tracks the rise of anti-racist "natural" standards of beauty as a backlash against the white Eurocentric standard, which created a measure of "realness" associated with "natural" beauty in black culture that is alternatively shamed in white culture, and Tate also emphasizes skin and hair as means of performing black beauty⁴. While Tate's article focuses on mixed women's creating a space for themselves in this dichotomy, Beyoncé's use of natural hair and her selection of back-up dancers with a wide variety in skin tone, albeit all black, while also keeping her own hair blonde, rejects this dichotomy altogether and carves out a new space for loving oneself as a black woman outside of the preexisting standards.

Although these sources provide excellent context for Beyoncé's performance and the controversy that ensued, they do not explain why the backlash against Beyoncé was so significant in this instance. I will argue that symbolic racism and the preexisting situation converged to shift the conversation about Beyoncé's performance away from black pride and towards hatred of white people and police. Using conservative political commentator Tomi Lahren's reaction video, I will examine symbolic racism and its connection to white opposition to Beyoncé's performance. Then, I will explore what was different about this specific performance that caused such a backlash. Finally, I will tie in the surrounding context of the performance and draw connections to the criticism of Beyoncé for evoking that context.

For many, Beyoncé's performance embodied black excellence and success, and it rejected any negative attitudes held against black people by unapologetically celebrating blackness. These negative attitudes are not blatantly racist; many white people don't advocate

⁴ Shirley Tate, "Black Beauty: Shade, Hair and Anti-Racist Aesthetics." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30.2 (Taylor & Francis Group, 2007): 300-19. doi: 10.1080/01419870601143992

lynching black people, nor do they bemoan the loss of Jim Crow, but they partake in a more subtle racism of microaggressions and deeply embedded stereotypes and sentiments. They oppose black success, a form of racial progress, not because they wish to re-segregate, but because it opposes their belief in the status quo, which in their minds rightfully places white people on the top of the social hierarchy. However, to avoid being labeled as “racist,” white people use different language and approaches to their arguments.

Lahren exemplifies this in her video when she focuses her attack on Beyoncé’s exclusion of white people rather than the implied dislike of Beyoncé’s inclusion of black people. Lahren’s argument that “white people like [Beyoncé’s] music, too...little white girls want to be like [Beyoncé] just like little black girls do”⁵ suggests that Beyoncé’s performance should have been accessible to white people. The desire to be a part of a celebration of blackness stems from the belief in the current social hierarchy, since letting non-dominant groups have something specifically for themselves suggests that they might be equal to white people, for whom most things are specifically made. This disruption equates black pride to white hate because embedded within it is the belief that white people should not be at the top. Lahren’s argument also brings children into the conversation to artfully gain sympathy while giving herself a layer of protection—these innocent children are now being alienated from something they want to take part in, and how can anyone who advocates for the children be a bad person? Her argument not only offers her a defense against those who criticize her, but it creates a distance between her beliefs and any racist attitudes in her own mind, justifying her arguments since for her, Beyoncé’s performance was never about black pride but about white hate.

⁵ Tomi Lahren. “‘Final Thoughts’: Beyonce and the Black Panthers,” *The Blaze* video, 1:35, February 9, 2016, <http://www.theblaze.com/contributions/final-thoughts-beyonce-and-the-black-panthers/>

However, belief in the status quo cannot solely account for the backlash against Beyoncé. If it did, critics would follow Beyoncé's every moment since her very existence as a black woman makes it impossible for white little girls to be like Beyoncé in the most basic sense. At the very least, it would have created just as much controversy around her Super Bowl XLVII halftime show. Perhaps it's because performing twice in four years is too much, but Bruno Mars performed twice in three years, and critics didn't lambast him for it, and critics ignored her previous performance when constructing their reviews. Instead, Lahren brought up a common criticism: Beyoncé's dancers' outfits. Not only did they wear natural hairstyles, they also wore black berets in homage to the Black Panther Party. Their hair rejected the white, Eurocentric beauty standard that many of the white commentators follow, but the commentators couldn't completely dismiss their hair as inferior because Beyoncé wore her bleached blonde hair—a part of her that fit neatly into the white beauty standard—in a natural style as well, creating dissonance that many commentators could not overcome.

Perhaps to compensate, Lahren focuses on the dancers' Black Panther berets, calling the homage a salute to “a group that used violence and intimidation to advance not racial equality but overthrow white domination.”⁶ For Lahren, white domination is equivalent to racial equality, or at the very least should be the accepted standard, which seems to epitomize Wilkins and Kaiser's findings that those who believe in the status quo view racial progress as discrimination against white people. Beyoncé focused on the Panthers' legacy of black pride without acknowledging their use of violence, but Lahren and other commentators interpreted her use of the Panthers' aesthetic as condoning and promoting the violence that the party elites used. Because modern racism is more symbolic and subtle, Lahren could not criticize Beyoncé for being supportive of black people, since that would directly imply that Lahren was not. Lahren

⁶ Lahren. “‘Final Thoughts’: Beyonce and the Black Panthers,” 0:34

instead framed her criticism with carefully selected information from the Panthers' complex history despite Beyoncé's additional tribute to Michael Jackson's performance, which featured songs such as "We are the World" and "Heal the World," and the overall message of love in the halftime show that made it unlikely that Beyoncé was promoting terrorism.

Although the history of the Black Panther Party helps contextualize the outrage at the dancers' outfits and hair, there is an even more complex context for the performance itself. Even Beyoncé cannot perform inside a vacuum, but in this instance, she didn't try to. Instead, she contributed to the preexisting situation of Black History Month by bringing the celebration of black life to the foreground of her performance. Two days before the Super Bowl, she and her husband donated \$1.5 million to the Black Lives Matter campaign, which was created in response to the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 by a white police officer. That day also would have been the twenty-first birthday of Trayvon Martin, another black boy who was fatally shot by a white police officer. However, commentators like Lahren turn this context against Beyoncé, claiming that by emphasizing this context, Beyoncé "just can't let America heal."⁷

Black Lives Matter is meant to be an attempt to heal by recognizing that the lives of the black people killed matter and that the lives of black people still matter, but for those who believe in the status quo of white domination, mattering is a zero-sum game, and any attempt to make black lives matter is also an attempt to make white lives matter less. Black History Month is also meant to teach people about slavery and the Civil Rights Movement to better understand America today and further the healing process, if healing means actual racial equality rather than white domination. However, the fundamental difference in the interpretation of "healing" America makes the context for Beyoncé's performance an even stronger indictment against her because it primes her white audience with anxieties about their own place in the social hierarchy.

⁷ Lahren. "Final Thoughts': Beyonce and the Black Panthers," *The Blaze* video, 1:25

Although Beyoncé's performance was a celebration black beauty and culture, white anxiety about race and the pre-existing social hierarchy made it difficult for white people to view it as such. The very language used by white commentators prevented an open conversation because it refused to recognize complexity or legitimize the opposing views' perspective. However, perhaps Beyoncé did not only aim to slay by being unapologetically fabulous. Perhaps she purposefully created this moment of kairos to slay symbolic racism by forcing it to show itself on a national stage, where papers such as this one could then analyze why the disparity between black action and white reaction exists.