

The Day Beyoncé Turned Black: Minority Representation in the Media as a Form of Resistance

Sonji Hargrove

The infamous Saturday Night Live skit “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black” pokes fun at the white, widespread reaction to Beyoncé’s music video for her song *Formation* and the subsequent controversial Superbowl performance. The skit, although satirical, holds many truths about how Black people are viewed in the media. In one instance, a man makes the connection that the music video, uplifting Black heritage and highlighting social movements like Black Lives Matter, is “not for him,” to which another white person responds by saying, “But everything is for us!” (Saturday Night Live 2016). This commentary will work to examine how Beyoncé’s musical transition in early 2016 marked an era where Black artists used their art as a form of resistance and explore the reaction that manifests itself in the media when artists decide to cater to a Black audience instead of a white one.

To deeply understand this subject, it is essential to understand the relationship between music and culture. In her textbook, Kathleen Fitzgerald distinguishes that “music is a reflection of culture” (Fitzgerald, 2020, 372). Specifically, Fitzgerald points out the relationship between Black perspectives and Black music, positing that the two are almost inseparable. Music has always had an intimate connection to the Black community. Enslaved individuals sang to each other while they worked the fields to remain in solidarity and carry out acts of resistance. Jazz and blues music told stories of early sharecroppers dealing with their lives and lynching, and modern rap tells the stories of individuals leading a life in America under the presence of police brutality, poverty, and mass incarceration. This representation can be seen in Ma Rainey’s *Farewell Daddy*, Muddy Water’s *Country Blues*, and Slick Rick’s *Children’s Story*, which all tell stories that represent their lives and what they saw others going through. These songs are often

relatable because the culture is embedded into the music, making music the culture. Someone like Beyoncé has always been ‘Black.’ However, Beyoncé has not always emulated Blackness through her music in a way that is not palatable to white individuals. The outrage surrounding the release of *Formation* and its debut performance at the 50th Superbowl is deeply rooted in the fact that white people were no longer Beyoncé’s intended audience—and arguably never were. This speaks to the subliminal white supremacy that continues to thrive within the media and music industry. Here is a global superstar, singing on one of America’s most prominent stages about the injustices Black people face, wearing Jordans, natural hair, and other actions to which only Black Americans can relate. This is outrageous to many because it tarnishes the perception of Beyoncé as “one of the good ones.”

In a journal article by Marquita Gammage, she analyzes the phenomenon of placing famous Black artists into race-neutral categories and the artists' reactions when they disregard these categories. Gammage argues that Beyoncé’s performance made white Americans uncomfortable, forcing them to ask questions about the Black Panther Party and Malcolm X (Gammage, 2017, 716). Instead of answering these questions, white Americans focused on the “breaking of trust” committed by Beyoncé in her departure from palatability. The 50th Superbowl performance was deemed racist, provocative, and anti-American simply because it disrupted the bubble of white comfort that many Americans are so accustomed to.

Gammage also takes the time to focus on the dilemma of the Black artist. She makes the argument that when Black artists use media to socialize the public away from Africanness, they face heavy ridicule. When Black artists try to use the media to highlight Africanness, they face the same, if not even harsher, ridicule. This hatred of Black culture, especially hip-hop music, is explored in an article by Derek Conrad Murray. In this article, Murray argues that “...for many Americans, hip-hop has overstayed its welcome; it's a rude guest who refuses to leave” (Murray, 2004, 5). Murray explores how hip-hop serves as a financial accelerant for many

artists. This financial success can be seen in Sean Combs' (P Diddy) attainment of businesses, Beyoncé and Jay-Z's attainment of wealth, and the multi-billion-dollar industry that credits its success to hip-hop. Murray's arguments make it easy to propose the argument that white people's discomfort with hip-hop is rooted in the idea that Black people can become financially successful without the approval of white supremacy.

This stamp of approval is something that often dictates how Black Americans and other minorities in America navigate fame. It is the reason Candice Owens continues to side with rhetoric that often does not align with her cultural background. It is why artists like Sexyy Red are cherished within the Black community but face heavy scrutiny when introduced to non-Black spaces. It is also why artists like Lizzo tend to have a whiter and more female fanbase. The nuances of these women's places in the media are strong indicators of how white supremacy and artists themselves have a relationship that dictates who their demographic is and how much they can achieve. Even Beyoncé, who has been in the industry for thirty years and has more Grammys than anyone, has yet to receive Album of the Year. However, artists like Taylor Swift, an All-American woman representative of White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, continue to sweep at these award ceremonies, leaving Black artists unrecognized when they do not cater to a specific demographic of consumers.

Beyoncé's pivot to Blackness is a form of resistance to the media. The media, alongside white supremacy, claims that artists can only be successful when their art is palatable to white individuals. When artists choose to be unapologetically Black, white supremacy and the media work to slander, defame, and delegitimize these artists; however, these systems disregard the fact that other Black people can relate to this media. It also disregards the profound relationship between Black heritage and music. The disgusted reaction white Americans had to the 50th Superbowl performance was a perfect example of what happens when the ideals and standards of whiteness are challenged. However, Black artists like Beyoncé continue to persist

despite being punished because, for most Black people, music is more than the awards.

Works Cited

- Fitzgerald, K. J. (2020). *Recognizing Race and Ethnicity: Power, privilege, and inequality*. (pp. 372–417). Routledge.
- Gammage, M. (2017). Pop Culture Without Culture: Examining the Public Backlash to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl 50 Performance. *Journal of Black Studies*, 48(8), 715–731.
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26574534.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A2d1930af46d44a1f360df79b268ee3d6&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1
- Murray, D. C. (2004). Hip-Hop vs. High Art: Notes on Race as Spectacle. *Art Journal*, 63(2), 4.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/4134516>
- Rick, S. (1988). *Children’s Story*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjNTu8jdukA>
 Saturday Night Live. (2016). “The Day Beyoncé Turned Black” - SNL [YouTube Video]. In *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ociMBfkDG1w>
- Trope, A. (2017, August 23). *the day beyoncé turned black - Critical Media Project*. Critical Media Project. <https://criticalmediaproject.org/the-day-beyonce-turned-black-2/>
 Beyoncé. (2016). Beyoncé - Formation [Youtube]. In *YouTube*.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__bQ