

“Beychella:” Beyoncé’s Homecoming to A Futuristic Queer Utopian

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ABSTRACT. Beyoncé’s 2018 Coachella performance and 2019 Homecoming film set the stage for a radical Black queer reimagining. Yet, how can Beyoncé—who is cis/straight—be located within a queer critique? In this paper, I argue that through a radical and political expansion of queer, the creative deployment of dis/identification, and the unapologetic expression of the erotic, Beyoncé performs an embodiment of queer of color critique. These creative gestures within “Beychella” invite viewers into a queer futuristic utopian and provide new creative modes to politically inhabit, resist, and reimagine interlocking systems of oppression.

“Coachella, you ready?! Let’s go get ‘em!” Beyoncé exclaims while embarking on her stage entrance, hailed high upon the top rung of her pyramid of marching band performers, vocalists, and background dancers. With over two hundred stage performers, including surprise guests of Destiny’s Child, her husband Jay Z, and sister Solange, Beyoncé produces a larger-than-life performance themed on Black culture, excellence, history, pain, pleasure, and celebration. Complementing her *homecoming* back to the stage, Beyoncé also directed and produced her film *Homecoming* to pay homage to her twenty-two-year career: what she’s learned, how she’s grown, and what inspired her along the way. It is this performance (as documented through the film) that this paper turns to. Here, I locate Beyoncé’s performance in the *queer* radical imaginary. More specifically, I analyze how her performance embodies a Queer of Color Critique (QoCC). In the end, it is through Beyoncé’s choice of music lyrics, choreography, and intensions in her *Homecoming* Performance—as an extension of her Black feminine sexuality—that enables her performance’s embodiment of Cathy Cohen’s *queer*, Audre Lorde’s *erotic*, and José Muñoz’s *dis/identification* and *futuristic utopian*.

First, I must answer the obvious question—call it the elephant in the room—of how one can locate Beyoncé’s performance in theories of QoCC, if Beyoncé herself is not understood to be queer? It is true that Beyoncé, at least by public knowledge, is “straight.” However, this question garners an incomplete understanding of what queer means and what it *can* mean. Over the years, the word queer has had different meanings, mainly negative and derogatory. Today, queer is an accepted umbrella term to refer to the LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, gender nonconforming, etc.) community. Yet, what if “there [were] more than one (or two or three) [ways] to be ‘queer’” (Johnson, 2010, p. 5). Many theorists have argued for a more inclusive meaning for *queer* (versus a traditional LGBT queer), a *queer* that transcends a self-labeled identity into a more political position in relation to (and against) power (Johnson, 2010; Cohen, 1997). Moreover, some ask, “Who is left out of the conversation when we only focus on ‘gay vs. straight?’” (Cohen, 1997, p. 457). Answering that, one should instead understand *queer* to mean *all* those who are marked as deviant (whether be it by their sexuality, gender, race, class, etc.) and are therefore

marginalized by the systems of “heteronormative power” (Cohen, 1997, p. 457). That way, then, one may realize that “maybe *most* of us” are some way or another *queer* (Cohen, 1997, p. 457). It is in this radically inclusive and politicized *queer* that one can locate Beyoncé’s performance within QoCC. Even while experiencing class privilege and arguably “straight” privilege, Beyoncé’s intersections of Black and feminine sexuality *deviate* her from heteronormativity and, therefore, mark her body as *queer*.

As the first African American woman to headline Coachella, Beyoncé intentionally centered her performance on “Blackness, Black Power, and Black” to bring a ton of Blackness to a historically white space (Carter, 2019). “Instead of me pulling out my flower crown, it was more important to bring our culture to Coachella,” explains Beyoncé, admitting that she and her crew did things that “were very unconventional for a festival show” (Carter, 2019). However, her *Homecoming* performance is just as feminine as it is Black. Beyoncé also voices in her film how she “wanted everyone to feel grateful for their curves, their sass, their honesty” (Carter, 2019). Yet, “everyone” here explicitly refers to Black women as they have historically been dehumanized for their racialized and gendered bodies (Collins, 2000; Zevallos, 2017). The pairing together of Beyoncé’s race and gender is important here, as it speaks to the marginalized experiences of Black women who are only legible through the intersection of both identities (Crenshaw, 2004). In this way, one can understand Beyoncé’s entire *Homecoming* performance as a marriage of her Blackness and femininity.

Beyoncé’s release of her music video “Formation” is by far the *queerest* song she has come out with. With a full onset of Black male femininity, Black gay twerking, and flamboyant Black *queerness* (in the traditional sense), she sets a stage for much social and political commentary on current and historical issues of racism, police brutality, and oppression. Arguably, though, what is just as present in Beyoncé’s inclusion and use of traditional LGBT queer, is her use of her body, her *queerness* through her Black feminine sexuality. In “Formation,” Beyoncé’s homage to her Blackness, her flamboyant, sexy outfits, her ass-shaking, twerking dance moves, and her written lyrics pairing the political with her sexuality, do work that is just as *queer*, or even more *queer* than traditional LGBT queer studies. For this reason, this analysis centers around Beyoncé’s Black feminine sexuality and expands out to her embodiment of QoCC theories. Now, I turn to her *Homecoming* film and performance.

Out of all Beyoncé’s performed songs for *Homecoming*, “Don’t Hurt Yourself” and “I Care,” especially call attention to this *intersectional* Black/female *marginalized* mode of existence (Crenshaw, 2004; Collins, 2000). For example, in the song “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” she ends the song with inserts of Malcolm X’s famous speech from the civil rights era. The pairing of lyrics and quotes are as follows:

[Malcolm X:] “The most disrespected person in America is the Black Woman.”

[Beyoncé:] I am the dragon breathing fire,

[Malcolm X] “The most unprotected person in America is the Black Woman.”

[Beyoncé:] Beautiful mane, I’m the lion

[Malcolm X] “The Most neglected person in America is the Black Woman”

[Beyoncé:] Beautiful man, I know you lying
This is your final warning (don't hurt yourself)
You know I give you life (don't hurt yourself)
If you do this shit again, you gon' lose your wife. (Carter, 2019)

Here, Beyoncé pairs her song's lyrics focused on her pains and frustrations with her husband's infidelity with the pains and frustrations of what it means to be a Black woman in "America" (Carter, 2019). For it is the social construction of racism and sexism that has resulted in systems of oppression that "disrespect," "neglect," and do not "protect" the lives of Black women (Carter, 2019; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2004). This song, in tandem with "I Care," can be read as Beyoncé using her sad love songs—an extension of her Black feminine sexuality—as a creative space for political commentary on the marginalized, *queer*, lives of Black women (Cohen, 1997; Carter, 2019). In this way, Beyoncé's performance can be understood as *queer* or racially and sexually deviant and non-heteronormative, despite her heterosexuality and heterosexual love songs.

Now, having read Beyoncé's *Homecoming* performance, through her Black feminine sexuality, as *queer*, I pivot to locate her and her work within another QoCC theory: *the erotic*. Audre Lorde is known for redefining the term *erotic*. Put simply, the *erotic* is saying "yes" to the "yes within ourselves" (Lorde, 1978, p. 57). Placing Beyoncé's Black feminine sexuality beside Audre Lorde's *erotic* enables new readings of how Beyoncé's *queerness* "puts a middle finger up" to sexist racism (Carter, 2019). Beyoncé's *Homecoming* performance is very sexual, filled with love songs, sexy and revealing costumes, twerking, and seductive dancing. Still, this sexual expression, may to some viewers, be critiqued as the embodiment of what Audre Lord defines as the *pornographic* (Lorde, 1978, p. 54). To Lorde, "pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling" (1978, p. 54). However, the very reading of Beyoncé's performance as pornographic relies upon the sexist and racist reading that the sexual expression of Black women is solely based in physical "sensation" without "feeling" (Lorde, 1978, p. 54; Collins, 2000). This reading parallels the narrative tropes of "hypersexuality," which has historically justified the dehumanization, rape, and violence of Black women (Collins, 2000). Consequently, from this racist and sexist discourse emerges another narrative; that the only way a Black woman can re-dignify or humanize herself is to become a prude or not engage in anything sexual (Collins, 2000).

Beyoncé rejects both of these tropes with every swerve of her hips, thrust, and popping of her ass. Beyoncé owning her sexuality is a big "F. U." to the hyper-sexualization of Black women (Carter, 2019). For, it is the very "daring" of Beyoncé to "perform that which has already come to define her" that enables her embodiment of the *erotic* (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 143). Within a system of racism and sexism, any and all "racialized women's claims to sexualized pleasure function as a refusal of shame" (Rodriguez, 2014, p. 140). This refusal of shame and of self-denial is the "*erotic*" (Lorde, 1978). Therefore, by being sexual and dancing seductively, Beyoncé is saying "yes" to what has been systematically denied to her. She is saying "yes" to her sexuality, "yes" to her Black feminine power, and therefore, fully embodying the *erotic*. Therefore, claiming Beyoncé's

performance as pornographic erases the very real ways in which her refusal to self-deny sexual pleasure embodies Audre Lorde's use of the *erotic*.

There are many *erotic* examples within Beyoncé's *Homecoming* performance. The sexy leotard costumes to the twerking, grinding, throwing it back, and dancing are all *erotic*. Moreover, Beyoncé's songs "Drunk in love," and "Feeling Myself" also lyrically embody the *erotic* (Carter, 2019). The specific lyrics, "Can't keep your eyes off my fatty, daddy, I want you," and "'Feelin' myself, back off, 'cause I'm feelin' myself, jack off" point to moments of heterosexual but deviant and *queer* intimacy (Carter, 2019; Cohen, 1997). Therefore, Beyoncé's demand for pleasure and her reveling in her own Black feminine sexuality—her *queerness*—is the source of her *erotic*. Surely Beyoncé's fans are grateful that she's "serving" them all this "*good-good*" (Carter, 2019, emphasis added).

The last *erotic* example I want to point out in the *Homecoming* film is not of Beyoncé but of her eldest daughter, Blue Ivy. Towards the end of the film, Beyoncé inserts a short clip of her helping Blue sing the Black National Anthem. Once they conclude, Blue exclaims that she wants to "do it again" (Carter, 2019). When Beyoncé asks her why, Blue responds, "cause it feels good" (Carter, 2019). While this example is non-sexual and youthful, Blue's response also exemplifies the *erotic*. Lorde explains herself; it is the simple phrase of "'it feels right to me," that "acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge" (Lorde, 1978, p. 56). It is this youthful untarnished *erotic*, found in a young Black girl, that Lorde calls women to reclaim. It is this *erotic* power that Beyoncé hopes her audience works to "feel what we feel" and use in instilling positive changes (Carter, 2019).

Now I turn to read Beyoncé's *Homecoming* performance within José Muñoz's *dis/identification* and *queer futuristic utopian*. José Muñoz, another QoCC theorist, coined the term *dis/identification* to be understood as a *queer* mode of seeing and understanding. Specifically, he defines *dis/identification* as "reading oneself [or] inserting oneself into spaces where they are not meant to belong" (Muñoz, 2009). This *dis/identification* goes hand-in-hand with the radical argument for uprooting systems of oppression and working towards creating a *futuristic utopia*—or the existence of a thriving diversity of racialized genders and sexualities without marginalization (Muñoz, 2009). Muñoz's *dis/identification* is a powerful revaluing of the creative as a tangible tool for revisioning what is possible.

Beyoncé's performance deploys the creative mode of *dis/identification* as an expression of social commentary and to re-imagine and recreate a world of liberated Blackness. One of the main ways Beyoncé does this is through her celebration of her own accumulated wealth. One of the first songs she performs is "Formation," referred to above. While filled with Black culture and Black LGBT queer celebration, this song also holds lyrics that celebrate her Black wealth. The wealth-related lyrics read as follows:

When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster,
If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper,
Drop him off at the mall and let him buy some J's, let him shop up.
... might be a black Bill Gates in the making

I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow bone it,
I dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it,
I twirl on my haters...
Sometimes I go off, I go hard,
takes what's mine, I'm a star, cause I slay
... Best revenge is your paper. (Carter, 2019)

Through lyrically celebrating her wealth, she is literally and physically doing *dis/identification*, re-inscribing her Black womanhood, her *queerness*, into a system of capitalism purposefully created to perpetually exploit her racialized and gendered body for profit (Collins, 2000). While some may question her “celebration” of an oppressive and racist system of capitalism, it is her embodiment of white maleness that is key here. Calling herself the next “Bill Gates,” is lyrically inscribing herself into rich white male privilege, something illegible within a system of white supremacy (Carter, 2019). Beyoncé’s celebration of her economic privilege, while arguably contradictory to the anti-capitalist investments of radical *queer* politics, can also lead one to ask a different question: *what could a futuristic utopia of Black queer abundance look like in a non-capitalist framework?* Of course, answering such a question entails a larger project of collective reimagination. Yet, by further engaging this question, one may posit how Beyoncé’s performance and embodiment (through *dis/identification*) of abundance—her Black *queer* abundance—has begun to gesture towards the *futuristic utopian*.

A second performed song that reflects the work of Muñoz’s *dis/identification* is entitled; “Run the World (Girls)” (Carter, 2019). The repetitive lyric of “who run the world? girls!” are accompanied by the lyrics below:

How we’re smart enough
To make these millions
Strong enough to bear the children
Then get back to business
See, you better not play me
Don’t come here baby
Hope you still like me
“F” you pay me
My persuasion can build a nation
Endless power
Our love we can devour
You’ll do anything for me. (Carter, 2019)

This song, performed by Beyoncé with an entire stage of Black backup dancers, also motions toward *dis/identification*. Celebrating her womanhood, she tears through modes of devaluation, such as the feminine role of “bare[ing] the children” (Carter, 2019). She similarly, celebrates her Blackness and again writes herself into Black wealth to “make these millions” (Carter, 2019). However, this time she primarily reads herself and her *queerness* into ‘worldly’ power, predominantly reserved for white heteronormative men. To solidify this move to recognize her ‘worldly’ power, Beyoncé renames Coachella to “Beychella” (Carter, 2019). This moment comes right after she sings the lyrics “world stop,” the lights shut off, and the entire structure of Coachella is renamed. Writing her own name—and by extension of herself, all *queers*—into the very structure of Coachella and its

historical negligence of showcasing Black artists is beyond iconic; it is one of *Homecoming's* grandest gestures of utopian *dis/identification*.

Beyoncé's entire *Homecoming* performance can be read as a creative and tangible embodiment of what Muñoz's *queer futuristic utopian* can look like. Through the film, one learns that one of the moving questions for Beyoncé as she created 'Beychella' was "how do we look united, but still have these different characters that stand out?" (Carter, 2019). In other words, how does one create a work that unites while still acknowledging and celebrating our differences? Beyoncé's performance does this by breaking away from "rules" (or heteronormativity). She explains how "there were no rules, and we were able to *create a free, safe space where none of us were marginalized*" (Carter, 2019, emphasis added). Through this, Beyoncé and her performers were able to feel "connected" and "unified," and create an exemplary *queer futuristic utopian* performance. This performance would "live beyond me" as Beyoncé hoped for (Carter, 2019).

What does Beyoncé's *queer futuristic utopian* look like? It looks like her *Homecoming* performance: the celebration of Blackness, of sexual Blackness, of feminine sexual Blackness - in its entire essence. All the performance's themes of Black culture, excellence, history, pain, pleasure, and celebration—rooted in Beyoncé's Black feminine sexuality—is what Beyoncé envisions as a future that looks, feels, and is better for all deviant and marginalized *queers* like her. Beyoncé reflects this by explaining how "lucky and grateful" she felt, being able to "take all these crazy ideas and actually make it into something that heals people and that may spark vision in people" (Carter, 2019). Elsewhere in the film, she expands on this and explains her hope of "creating something that will make people feel open and like they're watching magic, like they're living in a time that's super special, and it's a day that they will never relive. That's what I want" (Carter, 2019). Nevertheless, here, I push and challenge Beyoncé's "never relive," and invite her to "keep going, no matter what" in creating a radical world that reflects the *queer futuristic utopian* that "existed in [her] performance" (Carter, 2019; Muñoz, 2009).

Beyoncé's ability to create a larger-than-life *Homecoming* performance centered on Blackness, pleasure, and justice gave her audience a taste of what a *queer, erotic, dis/identifying, and utopian* world can look like. Locating Beyoncé's performance within theories of Queer of Color Critique, we can disrupt anti-Black white supremacy and cis-heteropatriarchy in ways that can be understood as *queer*, or as *queering* existing stereotypes of Black cis-heterosexual femininity. Additionally, the analysis of Beyoncé's performance through these QoCC theories—albeit not perfect—has shown creativity as a potential method for stirring new ways of thinking. Expanding on this, then, how else can creativity be used as a mechanism of survival or as a mode of *dis/identifying* oneself into the places they are systematically locked out of? Furthermore, in what ways can we use the *erotic yes* of creativity "as a means to describe, inhabit, embody, critique, violate, and resist" systems of oppression such as patriarchy, racism, and capitalism (Rodriguez, 2014, p.144)? Lastly, how else can creativity become politically deployed in formulating new modes of existence, new forms of abundance, and new liberating *futures* for everyone?

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