

MOVIES MUSIC POP CULTURE

Glory B: Beyoncé, the African Diaspora, and the Baptism of ‘Black Is King’

On her new Disney+ visual album, Beyoncé reinforces the ancestral lineage of Black people as divine beings, connecting the experience of a Black woman from the South to shores of Africa

By [Taylor Crumpton](#) | Aug 4, 2020, 6:30am EDT



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On July 31 at midnight, time stood still. Only Beyoncé Giselle Knowles-Carter's creation of a Black planet could make the world forget about a global pandemic. For a moment, she lifted the veil of white supremacist thought that has dehumanized the African Diaspora. *Black Is King*, her new visual album released on Disney+ on Friday, reinforces the ancestral lineage of Black people as divine beings, born from the natural and spiritual forces of the universe. In the film, Beyoncé plays an omnipresent spirit who prepares the Black body to be born anew through the beliefs and practices of our ancestors who knew that to be Black was to be holy. "Let Black be synonymous with glory," she says in a voiceover early in the film.



Efi Chalikopoulou

The Top 100 Beyoncé Songs, Ranked

Beyoncé’s evolution from entertainer to pop icon truly began with her 2013 visual album *Beyoncé*, a public baptism into heritage and identity that humanized the most powerful woman in the music industry and documented her reclamation of a feminist personality. Her ideological foundation was further developed by womanist philosophies about lineage and reconciliation with her ancestors in *Lemonade*, her 2016 album that explored marital fidelity and forgiveness in the Black South, the birthplace of Black America. On *Black Is King*, she immerses herself in the waters of the Middle Passage and rises on the coasts of Africa, developing a Diasporic ethnicity rooted in the lived experiences of a Black woman from the South yet aligned with a new African identity seeking to return home after centuries of enslavement.

“Men taught me some things, but women taught me a whole lot more”

Beyoncé pays homage to the divinity of women found throughout African Traditional Religions, and

their power in preserving what was destroyed through patriarchal Eurocentricism. Maferefun Yemaya. pic.twitter.com/ze7ddfZDsX

— ✨ (@earftones) August 1, 2020

“You’re swimming back to yourself. You’ll meet yourself at the shore. The coasts belong to our ancestors,” Beyoncé recites in tribute to Yemayá—an *orisa*, or deity, who is the mother of water and all living things in Ifá, a spiritual tradition of the Yoruba people in West Africa. In Diasporic traditional religions, water is the amniotic fluid of nourishment, a channel between the natural and spiritual, a connection to the divine feminine of the universe, a Black woman. Despite the film focusing on Black male ideas of kingship, Beyoncé’s role isn’t rooted in a patriarchal power dynamic of submission. In *Black Is King*, she’s the creator and source of humanity—the genealogy of the cosmos lives within her as she imparts knowledge to the first man throughout his development into king.

The most powerful statement of #BlackIsKing is the fact the Beyoncé with ALL of the favor of the Goddess dedicated her energies to exalting the Divine Masculine. There is this tone of "I, the Goddess, will not submit & you Father, Brother, Lover, Sun of God, don't you either"

— Amen. Asé. Dead Ass (@IzmsHasRisen) July 31, 2020

Beyoncé has referenced orisas throughout her recent work: The appearance of the deities aligned with the reclamation of her Black Southern identity in *Lemonade*, since the spiritual practices of the Yoruban people continued throughout the transatlantic slave trade and found a new home in the Americas. In the accompanying [visuals for “Hold Up,”](#) Beyoncé invoked the anger and jealousy of Oshun—the mother of fertility and sweet things, sister of Yemayá—to channel her

spite at her husband's infidelity. When Beyoncé announced her 2017 pregnancy through a Yemayá-inspired photoshoot, she posted a [Warsan Shire](#) poem on her website, which alluded to Ibeji, an orisa representing the world's first pair of twins, born to Oshun and Changó. Soon after, she paid tribute to Oshun while performing pregnant [at the Grammys](#). "The orisas hold your hand through this journey that began before you were born," Beyoncé whispers on *Black Is King* as a moment of gratitude toward the orisas who guided her not only back into the holiness of herself, but also the restoration of her faith in her husband and through the birth of her twins, Sir and Rumi Carter. (Jay-Z has referenced another orisa—Changó, the father of fire, lightning, and thunder—on several occasions: "My saint's Changó, light a candle / El Gran Santo on the mantle," he raps on Drake's "Pound Cake"; on Jay Electronica's "The Neverending Story," he says, "I'm a page turner, a sage burner, Santeria / Changó, December baby, my orisas.")

"The king is representative of you, is representative of the soul. The king is you."

Black Is King is a reconstruction of the biblical ideals of kingship—power derived from a monolithic God. In *Black Is King's* theology, kingship is achieved through the ritualistic cycles of birth, death, and resurrection, yet the visual album tells it through the story of an individual's destiny, linked to the fate of man. A retelling of Simba's story in *The Lion King*, *Black Is King* is a chronological documentation of the young king's developmental stages: anointed at birth, traumatized in early childhood by the death of his father, his glorification of riches and luxury in his young adulthood as he neglects his responsibilities, his reclamation of his identity and heritage as the "true king," and his restoration of his identity and homeland through his trust of his ancestors. Using songs from *The Lion King: The Gift*—the 2019 soundtrack Beyoncé oversaw that received a deluxe edition, also released this past Friday—the singer and her collaborators are ever-present spirits

accompanying Simba on his journey into his heritage and identity, providing an archetype for a generation of Black boys who aspire to kingship yet are confined by the barriers of racialized patriarchy. Beyoncé is the representative of the polytheistic spirits who don't seek to establish their kingdom on Earth through the Simba character, but guide people toward the acceptance of their destiny.



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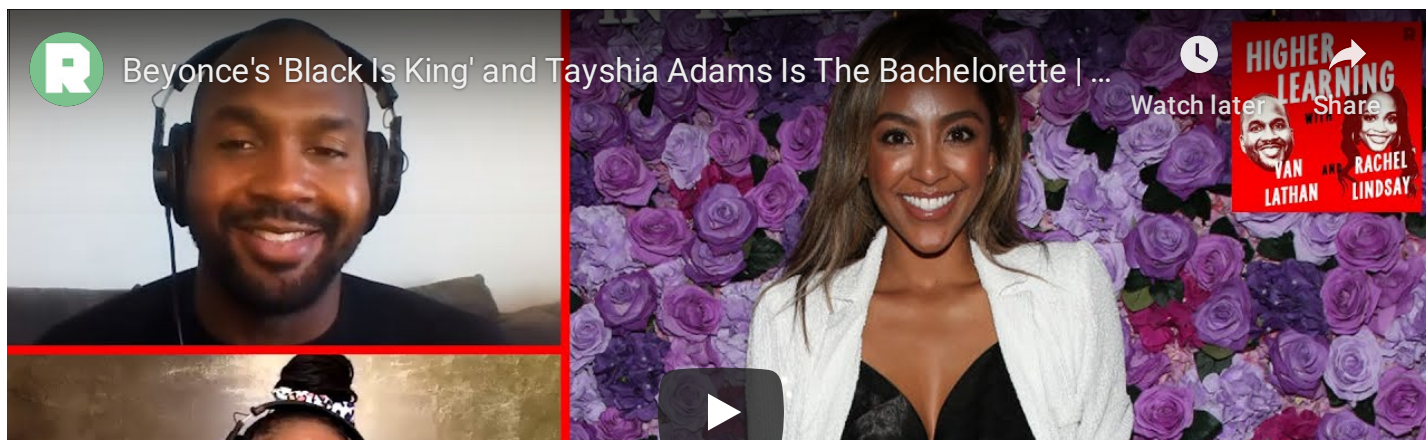
“Being a king is about taking what’s yours, but not just for selfish reasons, but to actually build up the community.”

Black entertainers possess the power to shift cultural and societal perceptions of Blackness in popular culture faster than community-based organizations. Beyoncé, a student of Michael Jackson and Tina Turner, has channeled her resources toward the celebration of a global Black identity with her trilogy of visual albums, which aligned with the ascensions of #BlackLivesMatter into the national consciousness and feminism in pop culture. At the beginning of Beyoncé’s career, her [Creole heritage](#) was used in brand campaigns and sponsorships because it signified a distance from Blackness, an exoticness that was palatable to a predominantly white consumer base, one that ultimately withdrew their support from the singer after her Black Panther Party–inspired Super Bowl performance in February 2016. In her adulthood, Beyoncé has reinvented herself as a Black woman—not only a Black

woman from the South, but one connected to the African Diaspora, who has positioned herself as an entryway for African artists such as Yemi Alade, DJ Lag, and Moonchild Sanelly featured on *Lion King: The Gift* to break into the American market.

“We have always been wonderful. I see us reflected in the world’s most heavenly things. Black is king.”

#BrownSkinGirlChallenge was a social media challenge inspired last year by “Brown Skin Girl” on *Lion King: The Gift*. It was a visceral celebration of dark-skinned women, who are subjected to the violence of colorism, a by-product of white supremacist beauty standards that animalize dark skin and deem it unworthy of femininity. Those same forces are at play in the music world; in 2019, Beyoncé’s father, [Matthew Knowles](#), said: “In the music industry there’s still segregation. Programmers, especially at pop radio, have this imagery of what beauty looks like. ... Because there’s a perception and a colorism: the lighter that you are, the smarter and more economically [advantaged]. ... There’s a perception all around the world about color—even with Black folks, there’s a perception.” Destiny’s Child received worldwide acclaim, yet the solo careers of Beyoncé and Kelly Rowland were influenced by the power structures of colorism in American pop. Internationally, Kelly did exceptionally well, but couldn’t reach the universal success of Beyoncé, partly because of how colorism is used to brand and market artists.





TAYSHIA IS THE NEW BACHELORETTE

Beyoncé, a light-skinned Black woman whose looks share some of the characteristics of Eurocentric beauty, constructed the lyrics and visuals of “Brown Skin Girl” to praise the ethereal beauty of dark-skinned women. “Pose like a trophy when Naomi’s walkin’ / She need an Oscar for that pretty dark skin,” she sings. “Pretty like Lupita when the cameras close in / Drip broke the levee when my Kellys roll in.” In *Black Is King*, as Beyoncé sings “I’d never trade you for anybody else” to Kelly Rowland, viewers are privy to the intimacy shared between two childhood friends. The competitive nature of the music industry has sought to impose a colorist hierarchy on their sisterhood, ignoring Beyoncé’s allyship toward her dark-skin counterparts, a tradition that she’s continued in her mentorship of Normani. In Beyoncé’s vision of the music industry, dark-skinned women are welcomed into the ideals of beauty and femininity that have been withheld from them by men in power.

At the end of *Black Is King*, time begins anew. Beyoncé rebirths Black people as the true inheritors of the Earth. It’s her offering to descendants who lost their kinship to the African Diaspora—those who lost their spiritual connection to the ancestors, who were afraid to uninternalize anti-Blackness. To combat white supremacy, the existence of a global Black identity is needed to establish solidarity among people of the African Diaspora, not only through political and community organizing, but in the spiritual sense. Black people possess the ability to exist outside the constraints of white supremacy, but to disinvest from established power dynamics, one must undergo the internal journey to uncover an identity and heritage lost to them from

centuries of enslavement. One must be baptized to be born again. *Black Is King* is Beyoncé's invitation for Black America to undergo that baptism. ■

Taylor Crumpton is a music, pop culture, and politics writer transplanted in Oakland, originally from Dallas. Taylor's bylines have appeared in a variety of publications, including Pitchfork, Nylon, Playboy, Marie Claire, and others.

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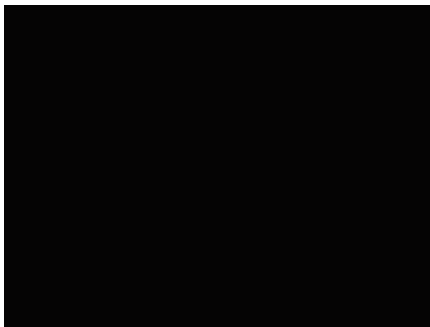
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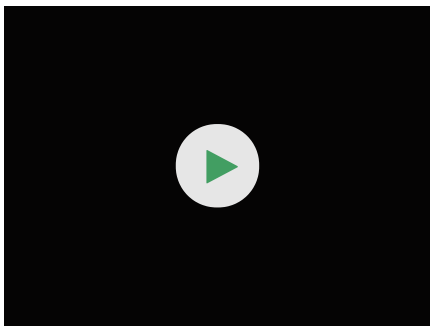
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