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# How Beyoncé's 'Black Is King' Honors the Black Experience

Co-director Kwasi Fordjour and costume designer Zerina Akers of Beyoncé's new film for Disney+ explain how they hope the project will influence a generation of Black children.



PHOTO: TRAVIS MATTHEWS//PARKWOOD ENTERTAINMENT

*By Taylor Crumpton*

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*Black Is King*, Beyoncé's third visual album, which was released on Disney+ on July 31, reinvents the coming of age story of *The Lion King*. The film's narrative mirrors Simba's journey from young prince to king. But *Black Is King*, which was directed and produced by and stars Beyoncé, tells an altogether different story that cements ancestral connections between Black Americans and the people of the African diaspora.

Two of Beyoncé's longtime collaborators played pivotal roles in the film's creation. Kwasi Fordjour, a creative director for Beyoncé's Parkwood Entertainment who has worked

alongside her for almost a decade, was the project's co-director, and Zerina Akers, who has styled Beyoncé for years, organized the fashion for the film. Fordjour and Akers emphasized a pan-African identity by selecting both Black American and African designers and directors, including filmmakers Joshua Kissi, who is Ghanaian-American and Jenn Nkiru, who is Nigerian-British.

Here, Fordjour and Akers discuss the film, what they hope it will inspire and how their imagery they helped create was put together.

### **Kwasi, how did your Ghanaian heritage influence your choices for Black Is King?**

KF: For me, my part is a dedication to my father, an Ashanti man. It was a love letter to him. Three or four years ago, he passed away. We didn't have the strongest relationship, but, as you evolve as a man, you become a representation of the men that came before you. That's what inspired my curation because I pray that I am a representation of the man he was.

### **How difficult was it to produce a film that was inherently African but displayed the vastness of the diaspora at the same time?**

KF: It wasn't difficult. Beyoncé made it very easy. When we merged, we curated a group of directors who spoke to what we were trying to do. We collaborate with people whose authenticity is the core of their work. That was important. We had frequent collaborators that we worked with like Pierre Debusschere, who did the *Mine* video [for Beyoncé in 2013], and [choreographer] JaQuel Knight, who did a lot of the visuals for *On the Run* and the OTR tour. We had a diverse group of collaborators and directors from multiple races. For all of us to come together and put our best efforts into a creative that centered around Blackness and uplifted Blackness—[it]was really powerful.



Kwasi Fordjour

PHOTO: KADEEM JOHNSON

**In the film, we hear James Earl Jones narrate “As king, I was most proud of one thing, having you as my son,” and see the American flag in pan-African colors. Was that an intentional reference about the ancestral lineage of Black Americans to the motherland?**

KF: Yes, that’s exactly what that was. For me, that voice sounded like the voice of God... telling the Black man in his plight, “You’re going to be OK. You are my son. You are going to make this. We are going to be alright.” As men, I feel like sometimes we walk through this world aimlessly and sometimes we just need to be embraced.

**In response to the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and others, Black Lives Matter actions mobilized all over the world. Did those uprisings inspire any edits of *Black Is King* before it came out?**

KF: Honestly, that was divine intervention because the answer is no. Before the pandemic, we were getting ready to head back to South Africa to shoot more visuals because we felt

like there was more ground to be covered. But when we weren't able to travel, it forced us to stop and revamp and we realized we had all the core elements and messaging there.

This wasn't inspired by [the events of the past few months]. The film was inspired by something bigger than that. We didn't want to limit it to where we are currently. The culture and what we need as a people is bigger than what we've endured for the past couple of months. We wanted to give a cultural hub and messaging through saluting the Black man, Blackness or Africaness, if you will. That was always the idea.

**Zerina, how did you ensure that *Black Is King* has a diverse representation of Black designers?**

ZA: Working with Black designers, especially [for] Beyoncé, is something that we've tried to do consistently. When it came to this particular project, I knew that, "OK, there's going to have to be [clothes from] some larger couture houses. We're going to need some really grand moments." But what are some opportunities [for smaller Black designers]?

We started in New York, actually. I brought on stylist Beoncia Dunn as an assistant. I loved how in her work she utilizes this community of designers [who] may be making their clothes out of their grandmother's house and creates these really beautiful images. I've been trying to get a look from Jerome LaMaar and Loza Maléombho on Beyoncé for quite some time, and it hadn't quite landed yet. So I'm happy that this was the moment where their looks landed.

**In [the part of the film] *Find Your Way Back*, the celestial-inspired costumes reminded me of the North Star and how some enslaved Africans used that as a compass to find freedom and also of the astrology and the cosmology of the Dogon people who utilized the stars in their religious belief system. Were those references intentional?**

ZA: They absolutely were intentional. Kwasi implemented the reference of the Dogon people. As we built these looks, it was all based on the constellations and creating these atmospheric elements between Beyoncé and the dancers. How do we take that and make it whimsical and play a bit more with fantasy? In the first look, we took these chokers and stacked them, welded them together to mimic Ndebele neck stretching. We also welded together small bangles to create these two huge cuffs to land on the same tribal reference. When we made it rain [in the scene], Lace by Tanaya made this raindrop cape and then it was followed by a rainbow look from Area. They all played quite well together in the end.

I also had become a bit obsessed with the stories of Harriet Tubman. In a lot of what she did she was able to guide slaves into freedom by following this spiritual voice. At one point, she talked about, “Yes, I followed the North Star when it was visible.” At times, the stars aren’t visible, so where do you go? It’s about following that voice.



Zerina Akers

PHOTO: JULIEN COZZOLINO

**In the film’s narrative, the placement of Beyoncé’s white dresses are reflective of her presence as a spiritual deity. In *Bigger*, she resembles a Black Venus. Later in the film, she is reminiscent of a God-like mother when she picks up a child from the river. What cultural references did you pull for that look?**

ZA: When we designed the Alon Livné look, I referenced a few things but specifically gele, Nigerian head wraps. The Wendy Nichol look wasn’t necessarily a tribal reference. I wanted her to be stripped down, [like] things were falling away, they exist but don’t exist. In a way, it’s a clean slate. We took a sheer base, which actually is the same dress from [Beyoncé’s 2013 video] *Drunk in Love*. It was a nude version of that, built on with silks and organzas.

## In what ways did you use color as a guiding light? How did you play with elements of African diasporic religious elements through these costumes?

ZA: This is something that is very near and dear to my heart, the colors of the Seven African Powers. What a lot of people don't know is: whether you're in the Carribean, West Africa, Cuba or Brazil, many people are serving the same spiritual entities. They're represented by certain colors. I carry that with me always.

Specifically in *My Power* [section of the film], I dressed [singer] Nija in all yellow. I was inspired by how mild her presence was in the room. It reminded me of Saint Anne and how delicate she is as a spiritual entity. Then going onto [South African musician] Moonchild [Sanelly], who wears the all-teal [look] and the way she wears her hair in this yarn. Designer Timothy White created this fringe [look], and I wanted all of them to represent different entities in a way. When Moonchild arrived on set, she was ready to party.

It allows for the people who follow this religion or spiritual practice to get excited and feel that. When there are people writing these think pieces about [the film], I hope it at least motivates many people to do the research and look into these things. At the end of the day, whether we believe in them or not, they are there to serve us, to guide and protect us. Whether we know about them or not, whether we choose to follow them or not, they are a part of our bloodline and birthright. They're with us, always.





PHOTO: ANDREW WHITE/PARKWOOD ENTERTAINMENT

KF: That is a lot of what *The Lion King* speaks on but [we wanted] to focus and personify it in a way that is relevant to Blackness or Africaness. To put an accessible face on that for Black kids was very important because growing up within Western education you're not taught about Black saviors, you're not taught about Black God. You're not taught that your lineage extends to the stars and beyond. So, it was important, even in reference to those entities, being able to reimagine that in a way that is relevant to culture. It's also the reason to really dig into your roots in Africa and your ancestors because there is nuance with different levels and classes of representation that we need to understand and know about.

ZA: To speak specifically about *Water*: Another thing that I appreciate is the notion of collecting water and that this is a reality and necessity for a lot of people today. To go and

collect their bathing water, their drinking water, their cooking water from a source and carry it back home.

KF: There's this current theme in Beyoncé's work— this idea of the calabash. The calabash is a powerful symbol of health, fertility and rebirth. At a time, it was used by women to collect water. For those women standing at the shore when Beyoncé says, "the coast belongs to our ancestors," they serve as a monument of mothers. It's speaking to those day-to-day things that a mother has to do to constantly take care of her family and the sacrifices that she has to make to keep this world turning. And, that's ultimately what that represents because that calabash is the shape of her womb.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

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