

# The New York Times

*Beyoncé's 'Black Is King': Let's Discuss*

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*Six critics on the visual album rooted in her "Lion King"-inspired record "The Gift," a grand statement of African-diaspora pride and creative power.*



Beyoncé's "Black Is King," a visual album consisting of songs from "The Lion King: The Gift," teamed the pop superstar with directors, choreographers and fashion designers. Credit...Null/Parkwood Entertainment and Disney+, via Associated Press

When Beyoncé took a speaking role as Nala — the eventual queen — in the 2019 remake of "The Lion King," she decided to delve beyond Disney's Hollywood version of Africa. She added a new, gospel-charged song, "Spirit," to the film's soundtrack, and gathered an international coalition, featuring up-and-coming African songwriters and producers, to join her on a full-length album, "The Lion King: The Gift." Now she has turned songs from the album into a film of her own, working with various directors as she did on her visual albums "Beyoncé" and "Lemonade." Here, critics for The New York Times discuss the imagery and implications of "Black Is King."

**Wesley Morris, critic at large**

Let's take a moment, shall we, to appreciate that beauty will make you tolerate anything, including waking up at the crack of dawn to behold it. Very little compares to the rising sun. Often not much tops Beyoncé and the

extremes sometimes required to experience her (canceling an evening, dropping everything, getting filthy at Coachella). “Black Is King” is rather humane. You simply drag yourself from bed, head to Disney+, and the beauty begins.

Well past the halfway point, Beyoncé is just facing Kelly Rowland, serenading her, beaming at her. The sincerity is so intense, Rowland has to avert her eyes. She’s girlishly overcome. The sunrise is too much. Not for me. Most of this film ripples with that kind of love — of people, of bodies, of the elements, of self, of stuff. (Someone involved really loved the death car from the great “Holy Motors”; a tricked-out homage rides here, too.)

My usual qualm with the Beyoncé visual experience applies to this one: The people who’ve edited it don’t allow us to savor a single shot for longer than a few seconds. It adheres to ancient music-video ideas of chaos, incoherence and looks. Steadiness was part of the thrill of her at Coachella. The stagecraft transfixed the cameras; the editing deferred to motion. What if the songs here were wedded to full-blown set pieces, in addition to kaleidoscopic exuberance? That, I suppose, would make the project a musical. And that’s not what this wants to be. But I’m greedy. When I see a handful of dancers and Beyoncé awash in so much whiteness that all the other color comes from skin and flowers, I just want five minutes of that.



Beyoncé is presented as a panoply of archetypes — mother, boss, clubgoer, biker, queen — with an apparently infinite wardrobe. Credit... Null/Parkwood Entertainment and Disney +, via Associated Press



Tableaux do exist here, minced as they are. (That brown-on-white passage is from “Nile.”) The strongest come during “My Power,” and “Mood 4 Eva.” The latter finds itself on somebody’s estate and features the Knowles-Carters a-floss and a-flex. There’s a real Baz Luhrmann zaniness working here, from the synchronized, Esther Williams pool party (everybody side-dives in except our star) to the manic instant grins that Beyoncé, the movie’s wee boy-prince and her mother, Tina Knowles-Lawson, flash. You could sense that those were good afternoons for everybody. It hits the spot.

“Beyoncé” and “Lemonade” were triple-impact shocks (new music, new images, new ideas). “Black Is King” extends more than innovates. It’s playing. Beauty is a reason this film exists. The interstitial language that Beyoncé recites hails, just as it did in “Lemonade,” in part, from the earthen poetry of Warsan Shire. “We were beauty before they knew what beauty was” and “your skin is not only dark” are two of the recital’s most exhilarating lines. They offer the beauty of correction. They approach another of the film’s strengths: rebuke — of, in its title and closing sequence, the gospel opportunism in Kanye West’s film “Jesus Is King.”

And, perhaps, of “The Lion King.” What else is this but a restoration of flesh and blood to cartoon landscapes? There are references to Julie Dash and David Hammons and appearances by the musician Moonchild Sanelly, the model Adut Akech and the dancehall star Shatta Wale: a motherland connection. Many a notable Black American has managed amazement in Africa: Malcolm X, James Brown and Muhammad Ali, Nina Simone, her ashes. Beyoncé’s trip feels like a search for confirmation: a living myth roving terrain where myths were made.

### **Jon Pareles, chief pop critic**

“The Lion King: The Gift,” Beyoncé’s companion album to the “Lion King” soundtrack, was a grand statement of African-diaspora unity, pride and creative power. It presented modern African voices and contemporary African sounds — among the most kinetic productions in pop — not as exotic guests of their American collaborators, but as equals reinforcing each other, an international brotherhood and sisterhood.

“Black Is King,” Beyoncé’s visual album built on that album’s songs, goes even further. The deluxe version of “The Lion King: The Gift” only slightly extends the original album; its major addition is two versions (one with marching band-style horns) of “Black Parade,” a song that addresses current Black Lives Matter protests and much more. The deluxe version also, mercifully, eliminates the original album’s snippets of “Lion King” dialogue.

There’s still some “Lion King” material in the “Black Is King” visual album to detail some of its messages, along with bits of lectures that equate kingship with responsible manhood. Beyoncé also recites Warsan Shire’s poetry to insist on Africa’s ancestral legacies and the glories of Black beauty. Other transitions use African traditional music from Smithsonian Folkways recordings, tacitly suggesting the continuity of old and new. And now and then, there are glimpses within the music, like a magnificent, purple-suited choir joining Beyoncé to sing “Spirit” a cappella.





The fashion in “Black Is King” spans the famous and the little-known, as well as the globe. Credit...Andrew White/Parkwood Entertainment via Disney+, via Associated Press

Beyoncé is unquestionably the star of “Black Is King.” She’s presented as a panoply of archetypes — mother, boss, clubgoer, biker, queen — with an apparently infinite wardrobe that draws on ancient African iconography alongside extravagant haute couture. She places herself in glorious open landscapes, a mansion, a gritty warehouse and a leopard-patterned Rolls-Royce.

But she shares the screen with African and Black American faces: dancers, tribal elders, city hustlers, judges in wigs and robes, hoop-skirted debutantes and their beaus. And she willingly lets herself be upstaged by African collaborators whose faces her American fans may not yet have seen, like Busiswa from South Africa, Salatiel from Cameroon and Yemi Alade and Mr Eazi from Nigeria. It puts her pan-African solidarity incontrovertibly onscreen.

Vanessa Friedman, fashion director and chief fashion critic

To describe the amount of fashion on display in “Black Is King” as an “extravaganza” or a “feast” or any of the other words used generally to convey exciting haute-runway content doesn’t even begin to come close to the reality of the production. “Overwhelming” might be more like it. Beyoncé contains multitudes when it comes to artistic collaboration, and when it comes to designers, too. They span the famous and the little-known, as well as the globe.

An incomplete list of brands represented, for example, would include Valentino couture (cheetah-print bodysuit); Erdem (rose-festooned giant flounce tea dress); Burberry (cowhide cow print); Thierry Mugler (rainbow printed jersey draped minidress); Molly Goddard (explosive fuchsia tulle confection); and Marine Serre (moon-print

bodysuit). Also newish names such as the London-based Michaela Stark (denim corset and puddling jeans), the Ivory Coast-based Loza Maléombho (graphic print gold-buttoned jacket) and the Tel Aviv-based Alon Livné (white crocheted gown). Also — well. You get the idea.

There's not even one look per song; more like dozens. Especially when you include the dancers and special guests like Naomi Campbell and Adut Akech. I started taking notes and then gave up and just abandoned myself to the visual excess.

It's dazzling, but also carefully calculated. Because what so much muchness means is that no single designer ever reaches critical mass; blink and you miss them as one more lavish creation strobes into the next. All of them exist to serve the vision of one woman; to elevate the imagery of Beyoncé, rather than their own.

As a result you are left with fleeting impressions rather than the remembrance of any specific garment past: the tropes of majesty, Africa, the natural world, the power shoulder; and the goddess, stretching from the Nile to Versailles to Vegas.

They tap into our aesthetic memory archive via jewel tones, billowing robes, drapes of diamanté and pearls. Via taffeta, silk and tulle; fringe and cleavage and animal print. Via piles of accessories: rhinestone sunglasses and gleaming, wearable circles of life.

Sorry, bangles and hoop earrings.



Andrew White/Parkwood Entertainment and Disney+, via Associated Press



It's a highly effective strategy in a world where artists tend to link up with a single brand to define and redefine their public styles (Ariana Grande and Versace; Elton John and Gucci), and one Beyoncé has been honing over the last decade. She spreads her beneficence and beauty around, which has the effect of both reinforcing her position as the ultimate cultural tastemaker and rendering her subjects abjectly grateful for her patronage.

It also serves to concentrate all the power in her own hands, making the garments into tools to reinforce her message. Or part of it, anyway.

What the clothes in "Black Is King" do not do, though, unlike the rest of the film, is reimagine or reclaim the narrative of fashion as written by Black designers; many of the brands involved are run by white creatives. Perhaps it's because the movie was made before George Floyd's death transformed the summer; but in her Instagram statement on the work, Beyoncé has directly connected the film to the moment. Which makes the fashion credits, fabulous as they are, seem like the rare oversight on her part and that of her stylist and costume designer, Zerina Akers.

Perhaps that's unfair; she does, after all, amalgamate them into a world of her own making. But while Black may be king, this project and all its trappings position its auteur, as the voice-over says in the film, as the "divine archetype." In that context, she raised the stakes herself.

### **Salamishah Tillet, contributing critic**

A little over an hour into "Black Is King," Beyoncé, with tears in her eyes, places a baby boy, wrapped in a blanket, up a river inside a reed basket. Unlike the mélange of sounds — Afropop, dancehall, hip-hop, and soul — that I'd heard up to this point, the accompanying ballad, "Otherside," was such a sonic break from the high-tempo energy that I paused the stream several times. I was moved by this scene of maternal sacrifice, for even though I knew the plot of "The Lion King," I found myself hoping that this baby would survive the currents of the rushing river.

This is because that baby was never just a baby, and this story was never really simply the human version of Simba's journey into manhood, much less kingship. On the surface, this river bed scene is an update of that Old Testament story in which Jochebed, the mother of Moses, placed him in the Nile River to protect him from being killed. But, the waters here also invoke the Middle Passage, with each ripple break recalling the fateful journey in which New World slavery, and America itself, was born.

Moses has always loomed large among African-Americans seeking freedom. It is why Harriet Tubman sang the spiritual "Go Down, Moses" as a code to identify herself to those enslaved people who wanted to go with her to the Promised Land. And while "Black Is King" shares those 19th-century aspirations of equality and Black dignity, it, in our age of Black Lives Matter, knows it has to resort to mythmaking since racial justice remains as firm as the shifting sands that backdrop so much of this visual album.



Moses has always loomed large among African-Americans seeking freedom. Credit...Robin Harper/Parkwood Entertainment and Disney +, via Associated Press

A few years before he sailed from Brooklyn for West Africa in 1923, the young African-American writer Langston Hughes penned “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” an 11-line poem that traverses the Euphrates, the Nile and the Mississippi River; and ends up in New Orleans. And Beyoncé would one day feature that city in “Lemonade,” her film from 2016.

Much will be debated about whether “Black Is King” is an African-American fantasy of Africa, or a homage to those contemporary artists from Nigeria, Ghana, South Africa, Cameroon and Mali with whom she collaborated, or whether the “other side” is the New World or a prodigal return of the descendants of the enslaved to the Old World. I saw her rivers, like Hughes’s, as somewhere in between. Ancient. Dusky. But also decidedly modern, and fuchsia, teal and gold. An in-between space that is the hyphen, and the Diaspora, one that Black people have had to continually create as resistance, and community. As Beyoncé says in one scene, “This is how we journey — far — and can still find something like home.”

Jason Farago, art critic

It’s been a long road for me and Beyoncé: We’re now 20 years from the day I leached “Bills, Bills, Bills” from Napster. But this new film is the kitschiest thing she’s done in a while, and in “Black Is King” her evident passion for African art keeps getting drowned in an ocean of melodrama.

Ms. Knowles-Carter, and even more her husband, often showcase contemporary art in their videos as markers of their cultural and economic clout, and in the sequence devoted to “Mood 4 Eva,” a Jay-and-Bey duet with samples from the great Malian diva Oumou Sangaré, the walls of a hacienda are hung with a large portrait of



Black models by the American artist Derrick Adams, and another in the manner of the British painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye. I caught multiple direct quotations of the French fashion photographer Jean-Paul Goude — most overtly his cover art for Grace Jones's "Island Life," remade by multiple dancers here in the film's best sequence, for the gqom banger "My Power."

Other sequences seem to channel (to be generous) or crib (to be less so) the work of contemporary African artists. The Ethiopian photographer Aïda Muluneh is a clear influence on several tableaux of African models posing in bright colors with painted faces. The film's recurrent character of a topless, green-painted dancer seems to be borrowed from the Nigerian artist Jelili Atiku, whose 2018 procession "Festival of the Earth" brought performers slicked with green to the streets of Sicily. The cinematography, throughout, is of a notably lower standard than the careful lensing of her self-titled visual album and, especially, "Lemonade." The beachfront posing in "Bigger," the opening number, feels uncannily like a perfume ad.

Traditional African art, or imitations of it, gets screen time too. Backup dancers in "Find Your Way Back" sport kanaga masks topped with crossbars, worn by the Dogon people of Mali; "Ja Ara E" features a spirit in a full-body raffia costume, familiar from Mende masquerades. And there's a knowing flash of a catalog of Yoruba masks and sculpture by Robert Farris Thompson, the influential historian of West African art.

Late in "Black Is King" comes a maudlin apotheosis: The Simba stand-in, sporting a leopard-print dinner jacket, arises to heaven inside Johannesburg's apartheid-era Ponte Tower. It's a sequence stripped of history, and confirms that we are nowhere near any contemporary African city; we are in a cartoon fairyland, still rooted in source material appropriate, per Disney, for children 6 years and older. At least, then, there is Beyoncé's endless string of citations, a rope ladder for those fans of hers ready to graduate into artistic adulthood.

### **Gia Kourlas, dance critic**

The choreographic feat of "Black Is King" isn't in its flashes of dancing, exuberant as they are. Those fleeting infusions of footwork and swirling arms leave behind rich afterimages, but what drives this lavish visual spectacle is its rush of bodies and how the whole thing moves: from swift changes of scenery, which are frequent yet never frenzied, to boldly spare moments of stillness.

One seemingly quiet moment that made me gasp? An overhead shot during "Brown Skin Girl," in which dancers playing debutantes etch a diagonal line across the screen. The angle gives their voluminous ball gowns the look of tutus and turns their white gloves into wings as they slowly arch back. Opening their arms, they are transformed into beautiful Black swans.

Later in the number, they return, reaching their gloved hands into the center of a circle. "Keep dancing/They can't control you," Beyoncé sings. It's simply put, yet so empowering.

In this celebration of the Black body, there is music worthy of a thousand dances (and, judging by the credits, 11 choreographers). In "Already" (performed by Beyoncé, Shatta Wale and Major Lazer), we see the body on a pedestal, with sculptural moments that range from emphatic to dreamy as women stand on wooden crates. Like Beyoncé, they wear unitards that make it seem as if their bodies are covered in scales; finding a hypnotic groove, they shift their weight from side to side with elbows as bent as their knees.





Beyoncé's dancing is luminous throughout "Black Is King." Credit...Null/Parkwood Entertainment via Disney +, via Associated Press

They also pause in arresting, stationary balancing poses, whether kneeling or with a leg extended high to the side; when Beyoncé bends backward, the others wrap around her body like a pile of tangled snakes. In another scene, dancers from the DWP Academy in Ghana perform a driving unison line dance with the intense, passionate Dancegod Lloyd front and center. It points to the mix of African and American that Beyoncé seems intent on getting right.

But she also looks at her own history. In the fantastic and fantastical "Mood 4 Eva," she and Jay-Z stand before a painting, just like they did in their video for "Apes\*\*t," set at the Louvre; here, instead of the Mona Lisa it's a rendering of Beyoncé in Madonna and Child. Within the song's scene is another clever twist: a Busby Berkeley-inspired synchronized swimming number led by Black bodies. In that underwater dance, they slip sideways into the water like jewels. Of course, Beyoncé rises from the center — the most powerful body of all.

Her dancing is luminous throughout "Black Is King." I love the contrast of how peaceful she remains as her hands perform a dazzling dance with one wrist flitting over the other in "Find Your Way Back" and how, seconds later, her body follows, bowing and rippling to the sweeping rhythm. In the majestic "My Power," she pushes with force yet not without freedom. She never holds back, but this time it's different: It's as if she's trying to move beyond her body, and that brings a line from Childish Gambino's bridge in "Mood" to life. She dances with ancestors in her step.

Correction: Aug. 3, 2020

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to Tekno's appearance in "Black Is King." He does not appear in it, though he is featured in its music.