

# Beyoncé's “break my soul”: An anthem of courage, resistance, peace, and community

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## Abstract

In 2023, Beyoncé became the artist with the most Grammys in music history. Her dance track, “Break My Soul,” from her *Renaissance* album,\* is a radical statement about community and self-affirmation grounded in Black and queer cultural specificity. This article explores “Break My Soul” as an anthem of uplift, advice, and unity that offers hope and reprieve to a world emerging from a global pandemic and a “racial reckoning” galvanized by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd.

To become ...human and to ...know truth, people [are] discovering the value of summoning up all of our mental and spiritual resources, constantly expanding our imaginations, sensitivities, and capacity for wonder and love, for hope rather than despair.

Grace Lee Boggs, “These Are the Times that Grow Our Souls,” *Americans for the Arts* (2003)

## INTRODUCTION

Beyoncé's “Break My Soul,” from *Renaissance* (2022a, 2022c), is not just another dance tune. It is Beyoncé's radical message of self-care, self-empowerment, self-love, and community-building. This song is not millionaire Beyoncé telling people literally to quit their jobs. Considering the song's messages only through her celebrity status and wealth—Beyoncé's net worth of “\$450 million ranking her on *Forbes'* list of America's Richest Self-Made Women” (Dellatto)—is shortsighted. While people did rethink their career paths amid the COVID-19 pandemic, “Break My Soul” urged deeper resistance and self-empowerment for marginalized individuals and communities.<sup>1</sup>

Some Beyoncé critics consider the song an irresponsible message to those who cannot afford to quit their jobs should keep in mind that money, power, and status have never absolved anyone of spiritual vulnerability, pain, disappointment, sexism, racism, or other systemic oppressions. In fact, Beyoncé and mogul husband Jay-Z's public infidelities (see Baquet) and Beyoncé's sister Solange's 2014 elevator attack on Jay-Z (Sykes) underscore that their personal lives are far from perfect and not exempt from public scrutiny and critique. *Lemonade* aired their marital dirty laundry as healing and reconciliation personally, politically, and professionally. Delilah

Pope (2018) considers the blurring in *Lemonade* as “an affirmation of the necessity of black resilience” amid personal and social injustices (2):

Through *Lemonade*, as [Beyoncé] engages with deeply personal aspects of her ... private life, she displays a matured artistic and sociopolitical consciousness, one which she uses to redefine her cultural image as a mere performer and sex symbol and construct an image and artistic persona fully engaged with issues of black womanhood and womanism, artistry, and the complexities of ... personal and communal selves. (1)

Celebrities have immense social capital, but it is naïve to think that Beyoncé fans are quitting jobs *because* Beyoncé told them to. While Mako Fitts Ward asserts that “Beyoncé’s fetishized Black feminist radicalism has transformed the politics of social movements into a set of commodities that ultimately sustain her personal empire” (148), Sasitharan Gaiatri counters that Beyoncé navigates her mega-success while subverting white patriarchal capitalism and defining her career on her own cultural and gendered terms:

[In her early career, Beyoncé] initially follows a pre-written script of wealth and capitalism constituting a mode of post-colonial substantive mimicry. This mimicry enables her work to evolve such that she can reject the conventional script for success. She rewrites this script by subverting White capitalism and appropriating the tools of capital in favour of glorifying and elevating Black excellence. With her rewritten script, Beyoncé ... affect[s] future generations of artists and enable[s] further disruptions in the master's house as she builds her own space to empower her community.... Beyoncé’s performance of radical and transgressive politics begins first as a mode of radical self-acceptance for Black women before advancing into a revolutionary, widespread form of Black protest music. Her work ... represent[s] ... a shift in attitudes and perspectives around Blackness ... in mainstream pop media. (Abstract)

Acknowledging that Beyoncé operates in a capitalistic society, this article situates “Break My Soul” within cultural and racial historical contexts of US slavery, Jim Crow, and present-day racism. Relative to US Supreme Court decisions that limit reproductive rights and remove considerations or applicants’ race from college admissions, “Break My Soul” asks listeners to look for “something that lives inside” and rests on their “own foundation” of self-love and peace (Beyoncé, “[Break My Soul Lyrics](#)”).

## “TOXIC” JOBS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Beyoncé released “Break My Soul” during a global pandemic, signaling a message of self-empowerment from literally or figuratively leaving a job, relationship, or other spiritually unsatisfying situations. In the United States, COVID-19 prompted the “Great Resignation”:

In 2021, ... over 47 million Americans voluntarily quit their jobs—an unprecedented mass [workplace] exit, spurred on by Covid-19, [and] now ...called the Great Resignation.... The Great Resignation did not appear out of nowhere. [It] was a natural consequence of ... five factors ...: retirement, relocation, reconsideration, reshuffling, and reluctance. (Fuller and Kerr)

Social media stories and other news headlines showed people leaving their unsatisfying jobs in search of more fulfilling pursuits. For example, having just completed a master's degree

in education, Facebook user Kaari responded to Facebook comments in [Angeline Taylor's](#) "Employees Would Rather Quit than Break Their Soul":

Beyoncé's timing never fails. I just spoke with a journalist from *Bloomberg* ... about my decision to leave the classroom. It's been an odd season, grieving the [teaching] career I love and thought I would have for at least another decade. ... [M]any educators like myself, brimming with talent and passion, are ... trying not to let capitalism & greed break us. Actively seeking healthier work in the present, and I look forward to seeing what we create from this moment of uncertainty. ([Aubrey, 14 July 2022](#))

In another Facebook post, Kaari elaborated on her uncertain career:

We're on earth to be alive.... Telling your story on the ... healthy side IS the achievement. ... [W]e can't learn/work when we're sick & scared of the very environment. I'm looking forward to contributing my skills & talents in ways that recharge ... us. Octavia Butler said "There Is nothing new under the sun, but there are [other] suns." And I founded the Other Suns Arts Collective to keep my commitment to education alive in healthy ways. ([Aubrey, 23 July 2022](#))

Another Facebook user, Angie, responded similarly to Taylor's article:

I, too, quit my job in 2021 due to a lack of advancement opportunities, overwhelming stress to cover myself in the midst [of] illegal work behaviors by colleagues, a lack of respect for my insight, knowledge and expertise. ... I literally sent an email that I had written 2 years prior and had it saved until I was sure. ... I prayed one more time, sent the email, then felt the heaviest load lift from my body, mind, and spirit. I started a new business, have up to 20 workers and make more gross income than I ever have with a master's degree working for someone else. I sleep well at night now. ([Brooks, 14 July 2022](#))

Kaari's and Angie's actions may not have been direct responses to Beyoncé's song, which resonated with employees who were devalued in their workplaces. Headlines in *The Cut* and *Elle* (UK), respectively, attest: "Beyoncé Wants You to Release Your Job" ([Cohen](#)) and "Beyoncé's 'Break My Soul' Signals the End of Grind Culture" ([Bird](#)). While these headlines signaled a kind of ideal for those with the luxury of leaving jobs and other unsatisfying circumstances behind, everyone cannot change their workplaces or relationship circumstances, yet everyone can exercise their agency and decide how to respond to their circumstances:

I just fell in love /...I just quit my job.

I'm gonna find new drive.

Damn, they work me so damn hard.

Work by nine / Then off past five.

... [T]hey work my nerves.

That's why I cannot sleep at night ("Break My Soul" Lyrics)

Falling in love with oneself is a prelude to leaving something familiar and stable in pursuit of something potentially more fulfilling. Beyoncé calls for proactive actions that might mean “sleepin’ real good at night” (“Break My Soul’ Lyrics”). A popular meme captures Beyoncé’s figurative “workplace memo”: [T]ake your lunch break, your evenings, your weekends, your holidays, and your PTO. You agreed to a job in exchange for pay & benefits. You did not sign up to sell your soul & every moment of your personal time (Covert). Setting boundaries, practicing self-care, and knowing one’s self-worth can yield peace amid challenging circumstances. Here, Beyoncé attempts to connect with everyday people and a broad humanity beyond her celebrity circle, further highlighting that wealth and fame do not guarantee inner peace or self-affirmation.

## TIES TO PAST AND PRESENT

Beyoncé enthusiasts simultaneously adore and critique Beyoncé as a well-packaged social commodity and a celebrity navigating capitalist trappings. While she and Jay-Z have the cultural capital and funds to shut down public spaces for video shoots, they are not above public scrutiny (Duncan). Extreme wealth comes with no obligation to comment on politics or current affairs, yet Beyoncé and Jay-Z speak out about US racism and police brutality. For example, on *Lemonade*, she references her Creole past, ancestral connections to Louisiana, and racial violence, while Jay-Z discusses Blackness as a prison in “The Story of O.J. (JAY-Z 2017a),” on his album, *4:44* (2017). Neither their collective nor their individual star power renders their social commentaries any less relevant. That they both use their wealth and celebrity platforms for social justice causes speaks to their status as influencers.

In “Break My Soul,” self-empowerment within restrictions and constrictions harkens to US slavery and liberation. During slavery, enslavers physically brutalized their chattel to break their spirits, a point elucidated in Alex Haley’s novel, *Roots: The Saga of the American Family* (1976) and its 1977 TV miniseries adaptation, when Kunta Kinte endures a beating for refusing to accept his slave name. Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) also underscore what Douglass describes as the “soul-killing effects of slavery” (657).

In his autobiography, Douglass refers to “nig\*\*r-breakers” (681) and “negro-breakers” (690, 692), whose job entailed crushing an enslaved person’s “restless spirit” (650) to deter their hunger for “virtuous freedom” (691) and “the blessedness of freedom” (709). Arguably, his testimonial is an historical foundation for Beyoncé’s message about releasing the soul to its own fulfillment. Douglass notes, “I resolved to fight” because “[t]he silver trump of freedom had roused my soul to eternal wakefulness” (688, 671). Even in his escape from enslavement and he faces blatant racism when trying to get a job as a caulker, he knows that he is more than a second-class citizen.

Providing different insight than Douglass, Harriet Jacobs addresses her experiences with gender oppression as well as racial. Within the context of enslavement and her family’s privileged position within that system, Jacobs demonstrates how difficult it was to achieve sexual autonomy. To avoid escalating her enslaver Dr. Flint’s sexual violence, she consents to a sexual relationship with a different white man in hopes that he will buy her from Dr. Flint. She conceives two children this way, and while she temporarily avoids his wrath, she does not succeed fully until she escapes from Dr. Flint. In comparison, Douglass resists by engaging in a physical fight with an overseer: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (685). Demonstrating intersectional resistances, Jacobs reclaims ownership of her body when she consents to a sexual relationship elsewhere, though is only able to fully achieve this outside of her enslavement, and further cements her self-emancipation through publishing her work as an appeal for abolition. Throughout her story, she consistently

demonstrates resolve despite her circumstances. Jacobs writes: "I had a determined will" (Jacobs 85) as "[m]y heart rebelled" (10), "I resolved in my heart" (80) ... "to stand up for my rights" (177); adding, "I resolved that out of the darkness of this hour a brighter dawn should rise" (85). The specific circumstances of each of these declarations are less important than the persistent and consistent resolve Jacobs demonstrates. This pattern of responses and her actions reveal her character and steadfast resistance. Indeed, this defiant resolve is self-affirmation and self-care. [Audre Lorde](#) further contends that this personal agency is self-care, and that self-care is resistance and radical: "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (130). People who refuse to let others break their souls are ultimately resisting and engaging in self-affirmation.

## A SINGING AND DANCING CAGED BIRD

Kaitlyn Greenidge's [2021 Harper's Bazaar](#) interview with Beyoncé summarizes the artist's global influence: "After more than two decades in the spotlight, Beyoncé has become much more than a pop icon. She's a cultural force who has routinely defied expectations and transformed the way we understand the power of art to change how we see ourselves and each other." Focus on "how we see ourselves and each other" is at the heart of "Break My Soul." The lyric, "quit your job," is a metaphor for disconnecting from problematic people, commitments, and circumstances. While "quit your job" reframes how an individual can feel empowered when external forces seek to steal one's peace, humanity, and joy, Beyoncé reminds listeners:

We go 'round in circles, 'round in circles /Searchin' for love ('Round in circles)

We go up and down, lost and found/ Searchin' for love ...

Looking for something that lives inside me ("Break My Soul' Lyrics")

It is possible to find "new salvation" and a "new foundation" ("Break My Soul' Lyrics") even in circumstances that require performative conformity that affirms the status quo. Beyoncé applauds people's courage to step "outside" of "outside"—"You said you outside, but you ain't that outside/... In case you forgot how we act outside"—to "build [one's] own foundation" ("Break My Soul' Lyrics"). People do not always welcome or value outsiders. Author Toni Morrison embraces this perspective, as she achieved personal and creative self-empowerment: "I stood at the border .... claimed it as central... and let the rest of the world move over to where I was."<sup>2</sup>

Beyoncé's message also aligns with [W.E.B. Du Bois](#), who in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), posits that rising rise above the veil of systemic racism meant that people needed "the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty, —all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal" (220) of humanity and justice. Sometimes rising above the Veil meant acknowledging one's own individual and communal righteous Black anger that results from mistreatment and a denial of one's fundamental humanity. To these denials, Big Freedia, Beyoncé's Black New Orleans drag queen collaborator on this song, advises that one's intellect, creativity, community, and imagination can remain intact if one follows this spiritual prescription: "Release ya anger, release ya mind/Release ya job, release the time/Release ya trade, release the stress/Release the love, forget the rest" ("[Explode' Lyrics](#)") to make space to build that "new foundation" (Beyoncé, "Break My Soul' Lyrics"). Collaborating with Big Freedia, Beyoncé acknowledges her substantial queer fan base, thereby validating members of LGBTQIA+

communities on a world stage. She explains that in *Renaissance*, she intentionally centers “fallen angels,” those who are systematically and systemically marginalized and invisibilized:

Creating this album allowed me ... to dream and to find escape during a scary time for the world. It allowed me to feel free and adventurous in a time when little else was moving. My intention was to create a safe space, a place without judgment. A place to be free of perfectionism and overthinking. A place to scream, release, feel freedom. ... [The album is dedicated] to her children, her husband, her family, her Godmother Uncle Johnny, and to the LGBTQ+ community and all of the pioneers who originated the culture and the fallen angels whose contributions have gone unrecognized. (Betancourt)

“Break My Soul” is an anthem for people who resist the social and political status quo. Refusing to be erased and declaring one's own voice amid social, political, and historical oppression connects with the Negro National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing Ring” (Johnson and Johnson) as both songs call for rebellion and creating community with Other disruptors. Big Freedia's “Explode” (2014), also about self-reclamation and not losing one's soul in material or social success, made for a creative fit: “I'm 'bout to explode, take off this load” (Big Freedia, “Explode” Lyrics).<sup>3</sup> Big Freedia and Beyoncé are “telling everybody/Everybody/Everybody” that people have more power and agency than they realize in manifesting their own peace (Beyoncé, “Break My Soul” Lyrics). They encourage listeners to abandon cautious “what ifs” that keep folks in unsatisfying circumstances. They challenge listeners to respond to their most authentic selves, calling for a spiritual insurrection that might lead to better opportunities and inner peace:

If you don't seek it, you won't see it / That, we all know (Can't break my soul)

If you don't think it, you won't be it/ That love ain't yours (Can't break my soul)

Tryin' to fake it, never makes it / That, we all know (Can't break my soul) (Beyoncé, “Break My Soul” Lyrics)

Both artists embrace possibility as a prelude to true self-determination and social transformation. Activist artist Grace Lee Boggs explains humans' need for self-affirmation:

These are the times that try our souls. Each of us needs to undergo a tremendous philosophical and spiritual transformation. Each of us needs to be awakened to a personal and compassionate recognition of the inseparable interconnection between our minds, hearts, and bodies, between our physical and psychical well-being, and between our selves and all the other selves in our country and in the world. ... Each of us has to be true to and enhance our own humanity by embracing and practicing the conviction that as human beings we have free will; that despite the powers and principalities ... bent on objectifying and commodifying us and all our human relationships, the interlocking crises of our time require that we exercise the power within us to make principled choices in our ... daily and political lives, choices that will eventually, although not inevitably ... make a difference. (2)

Among the many Black folks making TikTok posts responding to this song when it first dropped was comedian Judi Love who described “Break My Soul” as a blueprint to “rebuild, redefine, and respirit” (Boggs 6) oneself:

I'm telling you a lot of people are releasing right now. They are stepping into that workplace and saying “You know what?” They are having that conversation with their partner that they have been putting off for a long time because they know that person is not for them.... You made a tune that we want to dance to, do aerobics to, and walk and march to all at the same time. ([Ijudilove](#))

Beyoncé released “Break My Soul” during Juneteenth and PRIDE month and dedicates *Renaissance* to her queer uncle, further validating family, community, and intersectional identities.

## CONTINUING LEGACY OF BLACK WOMEN CREATING COMMUNITY

Anthems galvanize and empower individually and collectively. With “Break My Soul,” Beyoncé continues a tradition, joining the ranks of Black women singers such as Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Dionne Warwick, and others whose voices and messages legitimized righteous Black anger as a response to social injustice, while at the same time offering hope for new possibilities. Similar to her songs, “Run the World (Girls)” (2011) and “Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)” (2008), which advance personal and social liberation, “Break My Soul” challenges white supremacy and aligns politics, humanity, and justice with self-affirmation.

During Reconstruction, racist white people intimidated and violently resisted newly freed Black people. Written by Jewish high school teacher Abel Meeropol, Billie Holiday's anti-lynching song, “Strange Fruit” (1939) called out Jim Crow segregation, Christian hypocrisy, and racism. The song is so powerful that at the time of its release, jazz writer Leonard Feather described it as “the first significant protest in words and music, the first unmuted cry against racism” ([Margolick 4](#)). Furthermore, singer Bobby Short believed “Strange Fruit” was “a way of moving the tragedy of lynching out of the black press and into the white consciousness” ([Margolick 4](#)). The song's lynching imagery and social critique lamented those people who upheld and perpetrated vigilante (in)justice.

Nina Simone's “raucously energetic” Civil Rights tirade, “Mississippi Goddam” (1964), also amplified racial injustice in Mississippi where white people continually lynched and employed violence against Black people (“Mississippi Goddam” n.d.). A protest anthem ([T. Taylor 2021](#)), “Mississippi Goddam” underscores [Frantz Fanon's](#) “combat breathing” metaphor for Black folks haunted by the omnipresent white patriarchal gaze. Simone's “stunning and scathing 1963 protest-song” ([Rathore](#)) responds to the murders of Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers and 14-year-old Chicago teen, Emmett Till, and to the Ku Klux Klan's bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church that left four Black girls—Denise McNair (age 11), Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Carole Robertson (age 14), and Cynthia Wesley (age 14)—dead.

NPR's *American Anthem* series (2018–19) features Simone's “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” (1969), a pro-Black liberation anthem based on [Lorraine Hansberry's](#) autobiographical play, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (1968). The song is about Black self-love and questions whiteness as the global ideal. Simone wanted it to “make black children all over the world feel good about themselves, forever” ([King and Watson](#)). The influential singer achieved her goal, a point evidenced by Noel King and Walter Ray Watson, who contend that “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” “capture[d] that [1968 Black Power Movement] moment of joy in black identity—and though the song she wrote was addressed to children, it became an anthem for adults, too...” ([King and Watson](#)).

During a time of US national unrest, some 1960s protest songs reminded listeners that peace and social harmony were possible. Dionne Warwick's rendition of “What the World

Needs Now” (1966) (DeShannon, 1965) does not mention violence or war; rather, the song offers agape “love” as an alternative to war and conflict. Diana Ross’s “Reach Out and Touch (Somebody’s Hand)” (1970) also called for human compassion and social responsibility.

Beyond songs that amplified Black communal liberty, such anthems also responded to race and gender intersectional identities, especially as Black women fought for the same human dignity as Black men (Lang); thus, Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” (1967) deemed a Black womanist anthem. Her message of self-affirming defiance in domestic partnerships extended to social relationships wherein Black women’s partners devalued them. In her memoir, *Aretha: From These Roots* (1998), Franklin explains that “Respect” reflected “the need of a nation, the need of the average man and woman in the street, the businessman, the mother, the fireman, the teacher—everyone wanted respect” (Franklin and Ritz 112).

As the 1970s in the US brought about a social and sexual revolution of inclusivity and self-affirmation, Diana Ross’s “I’m Coming Out” (1980) encouraged closeted queer folks to liberate themselves from the shame of social taboo. Part of NPR’s *American Anthem* series, this song encouraged rebirth into a more authentic identity. Further championing women’s and gay liberation, Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” (1978) is a song of resilience and verve<sup>4</sup> that aligns with “Break My Soul.” It challenges listeners to realize their inner strength, and as Jamieson Cox posits, “‘I Will Survive’ probably would’ve become a *gay anthem* even without ... AIDS. ... [W]hen a generation of queer people was ravaged by a disease dismissed as ‘the gay plague,’ ‘I Will Survive’ [was a] ... rallying cry [of] ... righteous indignation and ... resilience, [asserting one’s] basic humanity [as] ... an act of defiance.”

“Break My Soul” sustains Black women vocalists’ legacy of calling for justice and self-empowerment amid personal and systemic injustices, thus situating Beyoncé within a culturally-specific music tradition.

## BEYONCÉ, A CONSCIOUS DISRUPTOR

Even with the persistent allegations of cultural appropriation that complicate Beyoncé’s music and performance oeuvre,<sup>5</sup> “Break My Soul” criticizes soul-stealing corporate cultures and relationships that drain one’s self-dignity. Beyoncé explains that her peace and agency come largely through maintaining personal and professional boundaries as her own empowerment:

Throughout my career, I’ve been intentional about setting boundaries between my stage persona and my personal life. ... *It can be easy to lose yourself very quickly in this industry. It takes your spirit and light, then spits you out. I’ve seen it countless times, not only with celebrities but also producers, directors, executives, etc. It’s not for everyone. Before I started, I decided that I’d only pursue this career if my self-worth was dependent on more than celebrity success.* I’ve surrounded myself with honest people who I admire, who have their own lives and dreams and are not dependent on me. ... *In this business, so much of your life does not belong to you unless you fight for it. I’ve fought to protect my sanity and my privacy because the quality of my life depended on it. A lot of who I am is reserved for the people I love and trust.* ... [T]he reason those folks don’t see certain things about me is because my Virgo ass does not want them to see it. ... It’s not because it doesn’t exist! (emphasis added) (Greenridge)

For some, that Beyoncé is part of the corporate status quo complicates her songs’ messages about systemic racism. Being rich and famous, though, does not shield her from public scrutiny, scandal, personal heartache and loss, sexism, racism, and personal attacks.<sup>6</sup> If anything, speaking from her celebrity platform about self-empowerment potentially connects Beyoncé



with everyday people manifesting their agency, too. Based on Beyoncé's Netflix documentary *Homecoming* (2019), Afttene Taylor and Caralena Peterson articulate the complexities of her celebrity persona:

Beyoncé is as close to perfection as one can ever hope to become. She is the face of #iwokeuplikethis. ... Using her own language to counter Malcolm X's sobering truths [that “The most disrespected person in America is the black woman,” and “The most neglected person in America is the black woman”—she both acknowledges the oppressive forces [Black women] are up against while providing an empowering denouncement of those who deny their power, beauty, and humanity. (Taylor and Peterson)

Without question, Beyoncé challenges and disrupts systemic racism and sexism (Hongzheng 2024). In *Lemonade*, she calls out police brutality against unarmed Black people, and in 2017, she joined Alicia Keys, Pink, Janelle Monáe, Pharrell Williams, Lenny Kravitz, and others in the PSA, “23 Ways You Could Be Killed If You Are Black in America,” to protest racial murders.<sup>7</sup> In 2020, she contributed to ongoing discourses, helping increase awareness about how COVID-19 was disproportionately killing Black people, and explained that Black people on the front lines were at higher risks than other racial and ethnic groups. Further, Beyoncé reminded Black folks to take care of themselves, especially given their historical health inequities.<sup>8</sup> Those who respect, follow, or otherwise care about celebrities find solidarity in their political stances.

Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl halftime show was one of her most disruptive pro-Black performances. She paid homage to 1968 Olympians Tommie Smith and John Carlos who, in receiving their medals at the Mexico City games, gave Black Power salutes to protest systemic racism against Black people in the US. Beyoncé and her dancers donned Black Panthers costumes, a powerful signal about Black resistance in a predominantly white NFL space. Backstage, her dancers took photographs with their fists held high while holding a sign that read “Justice 4 Mario Woods,” a Black man police officers killed 2 months prior in the Super Bowl hosting city, San Francisco (Elgot). This pro-Black politic was not lost on Beyoncé's Black fans who tweeted: “SHE GETS BLACKER AND MORE RECKLESS WITH EVERY DROP I LOVE IT”; “So much blackness in this. So, so much. And no apologies for any of it. Thank you, @Beyoncé” (Elgot).

Later, Beyoncé's Coachella performance also struck a politically and culturally specific note. Rachel Chang acknowledges that “as the first Black woman to headline Coachella [2018], [Beyoncé] ... showcase[d] African American culture in a way that had never been done before” in that predominantly white space.<sup>9</sup> Damon Young also recognized the historical implications of her performance: “I think that you're hard-pressed to find that demonstrative an example of performative blackness on stage, on such a high-profile stage. Between the dancers coming out dressed as Black Panthers to the lyrics to the song, again... I can't recall another time you saw that unambiguousness with a performance on a large scale.”<sup>10</sup>

That Beyoncé sang “The Negro National Anthem” at Coachella was radical. Reportedly, young white audience members unfamiliar with “Lift Every Voice and Sing” thought it was a new track. Her performance also amplified Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) marching bands' high-energy performances, another disruption that in this predominantly white space, challenged expectations and tradition. Eileen Reslen describes Beyoncé's Coachella performance as a pro-Black history lesson for white attendees: “Beyoncé's April 2018 Coachella performance was a joyful celebration of black culture for many reasons, including her use of drum lines, step dancing, and aesthetic tributes to historically black colleges. [H]er inclusion of ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing,’ also known as the black national anthem, resonated most with many members of the black community” (Reslen). While most white

attendees did not know the song or its history, she hoped that the song's message signaled a vulnerability about humanity, commenting, "I swear I felt pure joy shining down on us. I know that most of the young people on the stage and in the audience did not know the history of the black national anthem before Coachella. But they understood the feeling it gave them" (Reslen). [Gerrick Kennedy](#) contextualized this bold de-centering of Coachella whiteness:

Beyoncé played ... to her black audience, ... every element of her show steeped in cultural meaning that showed a singer not just elevating her craft but ... pay[ing] homage to those that came before her—a bold approach from a performer whose every move dominates the pop cultural conversation. ... Beyoncé's steadfast determination to bolster her own audience rather than extend a hand to a new one has elevated her to mythic status.<sup>11</sup>

With the US police killings of unarmed Black people on the rise, "Beyoncé became the first black woman to headline the Coachella music festival in Indio, California. Her entire set ... was an ode to Black culture and historically Black colleges" (Reslen).<sup>12</sup> Many Black people enthusiastically responded to Beyoncé's performance. One person tweeted that it was "the blackest moment to ever air on [YouTube]" ([Kayla@Westdisemani](#)). The Monday after Coachella, Beyoncé donated to several HBCUs:

The bulk of coverage of Beyoncé's "Beychella" performance centered ... her tribute to [historically black colleges and universities](#). Her show featured a marching band, a drumline and even a mini step-show. On Monday, she backed up the performance by announcing a \$100,000 donation to [Tuskegee University](#), [Bethune-Cookman University](#), [Xavier University of Louisiana](#) and [Wilberforce University](#). One student from each school [would] receive a \$25,000 scholarship through her BeyGOOD initiative. ([Suggs](#))

On this world stage, Beyoncé asserted her cultural connections and her roots in Black community, manifesting this common marginalization mantra: "My existence is resistance."

"Break My Soul" further situates Beyoncé as an outspoken social and political advocate. Her engagement in community-building is radical in a capitalist US society that denies Black self-affirmation and lauds individualism, self-sacrifice, and hierarchy—principles that run counter to non-Western worldviews that center community and collaboration. Although critics highlight Beyoncé's contradictions and complexities, they also acknowledge that she performs Black cultural and ancestral histories. [Farah Jasmine Griffin](#) explains:

She represents a New America. She is not of the Obama era; she helped usher it in. ... [Y]et Beyoncé is also deeply rooted in ... American history. She calls on and mobilizes both a personal and collective racial past to market herself to contemporary audiences worldwide. Beyoncé's ... mixed-race identity is entangled within the histories of New World racial slavery and the racial hierarchies that the institution bore. ... Beyoncé builds on the fantasy of the mulatta temptress, which has origins in New World cultures from Brazil to Cuba to the American South, especially New Orleans.... [H]ighlighting her Louisiana Creole ancestry, her fair skin, blond weave, and hyper-sexualized performance style, she has parlayed a centuries-old stereotype into a lucrative and dynamic career. (138)

Even as the public generally scrutinizes celebrities' personal and professional lives, Beyoncé's messages of self-empowerment resonate. She explains her personal renaissance:

With all the isolation and injustice over the past year, I think *we are all ready to escape, travel, love, and laugh again*. I feel a renaissance emerging, and *I want to be part of nurturing that escape in any way possible*. ... I've done so much in 40 years that I just want to enjoy my life. *It's hard going against the grain but being a small part of some of the overdue shifts happening in the world feels very rewarding*. I want to continue to work to dismantle systemic imbalances. I want to continue to turn these industries upside down. I plan to create businesses outside of music. I have learned that I have to keep on dreaming. (emphasis added) (Greenridge)

Disrupting the status quo is radical. Relative to dismantling racial injustices, [Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), observes: "large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity." This sentiment aligns with Beyoncé's racial justice consciousness. Whether performing the Negro National Anthem or remixing [Madonna's](#) "Vogue"<sup>13</sup> to include "Black Queens"<sup>14</sup> like Jill Scott, Alicia Keys, Nicki Minaj, Rihanna, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Nina Simone, Erykah Badu, and Grace Jones, Beyoncé decenters the whiteness that Madonna salutes—Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, Dietrich, DiMaggio, Marlon Brando, Jimmy Dean, Grace Kelly, and others.

The communal energy is palpable among Beyoncé enthusiasts who connect with "Break My Soul" and *Renaissance*. [Anthony Auguste's](#) YouTube film, "Beyoncé BREAK MY SOUL remix ft Kevin Prodigy," identifies dance as a manifestation of empowered community:

A community that EMBRACES

A community that INSPIRES

A community that TRANSCENDS THE NORMS OF SOCIETY

In 2023, "Break My Soul" and *Renaissance* won Grammy Awards for Best Dance Recording, and Best Dance/Electronic Album, respectively. Beyoncé's latest album, *Cowboy Carter* (2024), is Act 2 of *Renaissance*. It educates listeners about US country music's origins and historic Black erasure from this genre.<sup>15</sup> Beyoncé conceptualized this album admittedly after feeling unwelcomed as a Black artist in country music.<sup>16</sup> Being marginalized did not break her soul any more than having never garnered an Album of the Year Grammy. Instead, she creatively responds to such industry snubs with US history lessons, Black excellence, and robust communal and cultural reclamations.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Boggs, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in [Remi Graves](#), "Claiming the Margin as Centre," Poetry School. 2020.

<sup>3</sup> For more on "Break My Soul" collaboration and on their *Lemonade* collaboration on "Formation," (2016a), see [Big Freedia](#), "Big Freedia Reacts to Fan Criticism that Beyoncé Didn't Give Her 'Feature' Credit on 'Break My Soul.'" (2016b).

<sup>4</sup> See [Karen Grigsby Bates](#) on Gaynor's work with and the significance of song for the National Network to End Domestic Violence.

<sup>5</sup> See [Chris Barilla](#) (2022), [Sarah Kaufman](#), [James C. McKinley, Jr.](#), [Quita Tinsley](#), [Jennifer Tisdale](#), and [Tiffany White](#).

<sup>6</sup> See these Black celebrities' brushes with systemic racism: [Monte Williams](#), "Danny Glover Says Cabbies Discriminated against Him," *The New York Times* (4 November 1999); [John Heilprin](#), "Store Clerk Refuses to Show Oprah Handbag, Says It Was 'Too Expensive,'" *The Ledger* (9 August 2013); and [Manny Otiko](#), "Al Roker

- Forced to Give Son a Quick Lesson on Racism after Cab Driver Passed Them Up for a ‘White Guy a Block Away,’ *Atlanta Black Star* (23 November 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> Janell Ross, “23 Ways You Can Die, If You’re Black in America,” *The Washington Post* (14 July 2016). <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/14/23-ways-you-can-die-if-youre-black-in-america/>.
- <sup>8</sup> Global Citizen, “Beyoncé: Coronavirus Killing Black People at Alarming Rate in America (Video).” *The Guardian* (19 April 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> Rachel Chang, “How Beyoncé Made History with Her Coachella Performance,” *Biography.Com* (12 January 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> Jesse J. Holland, “Beyoncé’s Super Bowl Nod to Black Activism Is Praised and Also Criticized,” *seattletimes.com* (8 February 2016).
- <sup>11</sup> Gerrick D. Kennedy, “Beyoncé’s Refusal to Shrink Her Blackness Made Her Coachella Showing Revolutionary.” *Los Angeles Times* (24 April 2018).
- <sup>12</sup> See Renée Ater’s non-comprehensive “digital monument” listing of unarmed Black people killed by police 1968 to mid-2020.
- <sup>13</sup> Madonna, “Vogue,” *Breathless*, Sire and Warner Bros (1990).
- <sup>14</sup> Daniel Welsh (2022), “Beyoncé Rewrites Madonna’s ‘Vogue’ Rap for Iconic New Version of ‘Break My Soul,’” *huffingtonpost.co.uk* (8 June 2022).
- <sup>15</sup> Michael Cragg, “Beyoncé: Cowboy Carter Review—Takes Country Music by its Plaid Collar and Sets it on Fire.” *The Guardian* (6 April 2024).
- <sup>16</sup> Maria Sherman and the Associated Press, “Beyoncé Says Her ‘Country’ Album was 5 Years in the Making and a Response to ‘An Experience that I Had Years Ago Where I Did Not Feel Welcomed.’” *Fortune* (29 March 2024).

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**How to cite this article:** Lester, Neal A. 2024. "Beyoncé's "Break My Soul": An Anthem of Courage, Resistance, Peace, and Community." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 00(0): 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13374>.