

## Beyoncé's Super Bowl Spectacles and Choreographies of Black Power in the Movement 4 Black Lives

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### Introduction

**O**n February 7, 2016, Beyoncé Knowles Carter and her flock of all-Black femme dancers, drumline, and horn players marched their gartered legs onto the Super Bowl football field, with right fists raised high to salute Black Power. I imagine many of the 111.9 million viewers that tuned in for the halftime show were as shocked and invigorated as I was by the overt expression of Black femininity and Black Power the femmes performed as part of the Super Bowl halftime extravaganza (Werpín 2016). Their hair fro-ing on either side of their tilted black berets, their torsos and hips strapped inside tight black leather, Knowles and dancers commanded all the ladies to “GET IN FORMATION.”

In an obvious nod to the Black Panther Party's fifty-year anniversary, Beyoncé and thirty dancers marched in and out of familiar formations popularized by the majorettes, dance, and drill teams who perform during the halftime shows at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) throughout the US South, solidifying their homage to Black liberation by marching into an X formation. Within the context of Black revolution unfolding on the field, the X clearly signified Malcolm X and not the performers' ability to execute the alphabet. Back and forth, from side to side, the all-Black female drumline punctuated the movements of the dancers' hips and accentuated the sparse sounds of the “Formation” recording playing in the background. Each confident step conjured the revolutionary fervor of the Black Panther Party and was reminiscent of the Sonic Boom of the South, Jackson State's celebrated marching band, and the hair tossing Black Southern Belle sass of Southern University's Dancing Dolls, Jackson State's J-Settes, and Grambling State's Orchesis.

Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance was a site of convergence. Just as the dazzling halftime choreographies of HBCU bands and dance teams inspired the choreographies of her halftime show, the women, femmes, and gender nonconforming activists that created and fuel the Movement 4 Black Lives (M4BL) inspired its Black liberation content.<sup>1</sup> This article is about all of it. It's about Black femininity in all of its expressions. It's about the “Football Industrial Complex” and all of its contradictions. It's about the endless fight for Black liberation and all of its iterations. And it's about

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how the queer femme choreographies of HBCU dance teams—performed on the football field but mined from military drills, Black social dance, and queer nightclubs—undergird the rhythm and steps that support and propel the movement forward.

In “Choreographies of Protest” (2003), dance scholar Susan Foster theorizes the efficacy of nonviolent, organized bodies to make social change. Foster intentionally resists framing the lunch counter sit-ins of the civil rights movement, and the direct actions of HIV/AIDS activists and World Trade organizers, as dances or as actions influenced by the artistic practices of artists or activists. Like Foster (2003), I hope to show “how bodies make articulate choices based upon their intelligent readings of other bodies” (397). The choreographies I’m interested in flourish on the football field, in Black queer nightclubs, and on the streets in protests throughout the United States. However, by centralizing Black female and femme bodies, and the choices they make to contest structures of power, I throw into sharp relief the relationship between the queer labor embedded in the spark of the dancer’s sequins and dazzling counts of eight as they march across football fields, and the spectacle of the direct actions of organizers for Black liberation.

I ground my analysis within a queer Black feminist framework to account for the lived experiences and cultural production of Black cis and trans women, and gender nonconforming femmes. I argue that the spectacle of American football, and the performance practices of HBCU dance lines birthed within it and seasoned in queer nightclubs, propelled Black “femme-ininity” from the sidelines to the center of choreographic and discursive practices of Black liberation. I wed queer Black feminism with Yoruba cosmology to analyze three protests instigated during NFL events in 2016: Beyoncé’s Super Bowl performance, the direct actions of Black Lives Matter activists at the Super Bowl, and Assata’s Daughters’ protest at the NFL Draft. Ultimately, I theorize the generative potential of spectacle and uplift the organizing and labor of queer Black femmes and gender nonconforming people in the Movement 4 Black Lives.

The choreographies I analyze in this article ironically precede Colin Kaepernick’s infamous kneel. The 2017 *Sports Illustrated* Muhammad Ali Legacy Award winner and former San Francisco 49ers’ quarterback “took a knee” during the national anthem at all of his football games throughout the 2016–2017 season to protest police brutality against Black people. All of the choreographies I discuss harness the spectacle of American football to bring attention to police brutality, but Kaepernick’s kneeling on one knee remains in the consciousness of the country. We remember his protest, but Black women cleared the path for him to do so.

## Black Femme-inism/Black Power

Black femme bodies occupying public space and demanding liberation for all Black lives is a site of reckoning where dance, football, spectacle, race, gender, femme-ininity, and activism weave in and through one another in important ways for my investigation. Separate entities in their own right, I plant them in a metaphorical garden, with queer Black feminism as their nurturing source and supply. In doing so, I keep in step with the Movement 4 Black Lives, whose organizers, including Alicia Garza of Black Lives Matter, Page May of Assata’s Daughters, and Charlene Carruthers of BYP 100 (Black Youth Project), all identify Black feminism as what Black feminist scholar Barbara Ransby (2018) refers to as the “ideological bedrock” of the movement (2).

Since the 2012 shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, sparked Alicia Garza, Patrice Cullers, and Opal Tometi to create Black Lives Matter, Black women, femmes, and gender nonconforming people have led the movement for the abolition of the police. Their organizing launched the once controversial but now popular slogans #BlackLivesMatter and #DefundPolice. As Ransby (2018) notes, however, unlike their civil rights and Black Power predecessors, the contemporary Movement 4 Black Lives shuns the leadership of a charismatic, male leader, and the

heteronormative, patriarchal representations of Blackness narrativized in both movements. Instead, they opt for nonhierarchical, horizontal leadership models that situate women, queer, and gender nonconforming people at the center of the movement for Black liberation. Therefore, the new M4BL is informed by the Black feminist edict that if the most marginalized members of Black communities can be free, then all will be free. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017) supports Ransby's observations by describing Black feminism as a "guide to political action and liberation" (13). In *How We Get Free*, a thoughtful collection of interviews of Black feminists from the Combahee River Collective to the Black Lives Matter movement, Taylor aptly describes the vital relationship between the Movement 4 Black Lives and queer Black feminism, claiming that "political analysis outside of political movements and struggles becomes abstract, discourse driven and disconnected from the radicalism that made it powerful in the first place" (13). My choreographic analysis elucidates the Black feminist's ethos embedded in the activists' and Beyoncé's performance interventions on and off the football field.

Activists in the M4BL appropriated Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance and her bold declaration and celebration of Black women, femininity, and femme-ness, portrayed in her visual album *Lemonade* (2016) to draw attention to ongoing organizing for Black liberation. Beyoncé's "Formation" Super Bowl performance is but one track on the sound score, and one choreography in endless site-responsive performances. Black femininity, Black feminism, and Black femme-ness are at the center of this discourse. As the NFL reluctantly crawls toward acknowledging racial oppression,<sup>2</sup> it is important to illuminate the labor of Black femmes who cracked the fissures of the historically hypermasculine, predatory capitalist space of American football. Their labor inspires the melodic sound scores and jubilant choreographies that operate as this movement's "drinking gourd."<sup>3</sup> As Black queer femme feminist scholar Omise'eke Tinsley (2018) argues, however, heteronormative patriarchal perceptions of queerness and femininity threaten to elide the queer femme labor integral to Black feminism.

In *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism* (2018), Tinsley theorizes *Lemonade* as a cultural text that casts Black femmes as confident agents in domestic and public spaces. Her celebration of Beyoncé counters renowned feminist scholar and activist bell hooks's dismissal of the pop culture icon as inherently anti-feminist and intentionally capitalist.<sup>4</sup> Tinsley's work represents one of many attempts by Black feminist scholars and cultural workers<sup>5</sup> to recuperate Beyoncé's performance of Black femininity from reductive narratives like those expounded by hooks, which regard it as "frivolous, retrograde, and insufficiently black feminist" (10). She builds off of Kaila Adia Story (2017), Sydney Fonteyn Lewis (2012), and, ultimately, Audre Lorde's (1984) articulation of feminine erotic power to argue that Beyoncé's hyperfemininity and the representations of Black women in *Lemonade* "offers public space that visualize possibilities for performing race, gender, sexuality and regional *black-femme-ly* [emphasis in original], in ways other mainstream representations currently don't" (13). However, hooks's critique is not unfounded. Beyoncé strategically harnesses her femininity and the erotic to sell her brand, thus she knowingly participates in a predatory capitalist economy. This same economy regards femininity not only as white but also as accoutrement or "essence" that femmes perform in abidance to patriarchal law. Hence, Black femme visibility is a survival strategy. Beyoncé's hyperfemininity claims and creates space for Black queer, cis, trans, and gender nonconforming femmes to see themselves in an economy that renders them invisible.

## Becoming Oshun

One performative tactic Beyoncé employs to brandish Black femme power is her appropriation of the Yoruba Orisha, Oshun. The Yoruba religion and divination practice of Ifa and its manifestations throughout the Americas—Candomblé in Brazil and Lucumi (Santería) in Cuba and Puerto Rico—are polytheistic religions with Orishas/divinities that represent the forces of nature. The Orishas appear to the community through the dancing bodies of ritual participants to communicate

information, and provide protection and guidance from the spirit world (Daniel 2005). Oshun, the Orisha of fertility, love, and beauty, has always been a symbol of femininity and divine feminine power for cis, queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people.<sup>6</sup> She adorns herself in yellow and gold, and harnesses the power of the sweet waters of rivers and lakes to give and take life. Those familiar with Oshun iconography immediately recognized her in Beyoncé's extravagant yellow dress and the waters she seemingly commands to flood the streets around her in "Hold Up," the first song on the visual album.<sup>7</sup>

Beyoncé's appropriation of the image and likeness of Oshun buttresses Black, lesbian, warrior, and radical poet/theorist Audre Lorde's (1984) assertion that, within African cosmologies, the Black and feminine represent divine power and strength. Lorde theorizes the divine feminine presence throughout her work as an episteme that lives beyond the written text and Western constructions of knowledge—an episteme rooted in African cosmologies that value feminine strength and ways of knowing and being in the world. In "Uses of the Erotic," a foundational text for Black feminism, Lorde conceives of the divine feminine as an erotic, yet devalued, under-resourced, energetic "lifeforce of women" that is crucial to our survival (55). When Beyoncé and dancers harnessed the spectacle of popular culture, their celebrated beauty and sexuality, and the iconography of African religions to declare Black femininity beautiful, they affirm Black Power and Black Lives do matter. Similarly, when they marched onto the Super Bowl field clad in Black Panther-esque attire and raised their right fists in the air to begin the performance, their proclamation of Black Power wed the 1966 Black Radical tradition of the Black Panther Party to the 2016 radical Movement 4 Black Lives.

## Spectacles and Black Power

Yoruba and Western intellectual thought differ in the way they define, value, and respect spectacle. The Yoruba word for spectacle is "iran," derived from the root word "ran eti," which translates as "to remember" (Drewal 1992, 13). Hence, a spectacle is performed to help the community remember that which they value. In Yoruba cosmology, spectacles are rituals performed by "knowledgeable actors" to restore or keep balance and harmony in the community or to transition a person from one state of being to the next (1992, 13). Western intellectual thought roots spectacle in commodity culture and the fleeting glitz of pop culture's mediated images. Guy Debord (1995), for example, theorizes spectacle as the relationships between people mediated by images devoid of meaning. He argues that the shine of the spectacle distracts the masses from the labor of production and draws our attention solely to that which has been reproduced, never the thing itself.

It makes sense that the uprisings I weave together unfold within the confines of the Football Industrial Complex. American football embodies both definitions of spectacle. As sport theorist Kimberly Schimmel (2017) observes, when millions of people around the United States gather to watch the game with friends and family, we are participating in a civic ritual that, like sacred or mundane rituals, performs the values and belief systems that govern a community. American football illuminates our competitive nature and our willingness to employ violence and aggression to win. Colin Kaepernick, who the NFL has essentially blackballed for his kneeling protest, however, reveals the economic and political relationship between football and the nation state. A relationship that "blur[s] the distinction between the state and civil society, promoting a sense of 'we' that does not structurally exist," writes Schimmel (2017, 82). This blurring is the distracting shine to which Debord refers.

The glamour and glitz of American football, for example, masks the extent to which the division of labor mimics the plantations of antebellum slavery. Whereas 70 percent of the NFL players are Black, only 9 percent of managers are Black, and there are no Black CEOs or presidents. (Sonnad 2018). Every Sunday, the spectacle of American football attracts millions of fans to their

televisions or home team stadiums to watch Black gladiators tear each other apart while the white team owners sit comfortably in their air-conditioned boxes counting their coins and enjoying a catered champagne spread. As journalist Lauren Ezell (2013) describes in “Timeline: The NFL’s Concussion Crisis,” the owners accumulate generational wealth off of players who suffer from concussions and lifelong injuries for which their lucrative but often fleeting salaries fail to compensate.

Beyoncé and her team of Black women, flocking onto the field like the dance and drumline of the Black Panther Party, unearthed the racist infrastructure that bolsters the NFL. The spectacle of the Football Industrial Complex relies on dancers sidelined as cheerleaders or halftime dance teams as part of its billion-dollar economy. Though the mostly cisgender female dancers earn between \$75 to \$150 per game and up to \$50 per hour for special appearances—a mere fraction of the \$408,000 salary the average National Football League (NFL) player earns—the women are a vital component to the brand. With buxom breasts, and slim waists, hips, and thighs, the mostly white dancers’ hyperfeminine appearance and choreographies compliment the hypermasculinity the game and the industry commands and promotes. Together, cheerleaders and football players reflect America’s patriarchal, heteronormative, binary constructions of gender back to consumers of American football in their selected team’s favorite colors.

Perhaps Beyoncé’s embodiment of the gendered norms performed within the Football Industrial Complex distracted state officials from a performance that would ultimately reopen bloody wounds received in battles between the Black Panther Party and the police fifty years prior.<sup>8</sup> Black women triumphantly marched Black Power onto the football field and in response state officials wielded their offensive power. Nearly two weeks after her Super Bowl performance, CNN’s headlines announced, “Police Union Calls for Law Enforcement Labor to Boycott Beyoncé’s World Tour” (Hassan, Kreig, and McAfee 2016). Former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani retorted, “This is football, not Hollywood, and I thought it was really outrageous that she used it as a platform to attack police officers who are the people who protect her and protect us and keep us alive” (Chokshi 2016). The vitriolic response by Giuliani and the police attests to the extent to which Beyoncé and dancers successfully hijacked the Super Bowl to celebrate Black people and Black lives. With confidence, the dancers *occupied* the football field and summoned ghosts of Super Bowls past. Like the rifles that members of the Black Panther Party strapped across their torsos, the dancers’ bucking hips, decisive kicks, and razor-sharp pulsating rib cages seemed to provoke and dare an offensive altercation. Her black leather jacket embellished with gold buttons and a large gold jeweled X across her chest conjured the iconic jacket Jackson wore for Super Bowl XXV and throughout the nineties. The all-Black female marching band and dance team honored the performance tradition of the Grambling State Tigers, whose six Super Bowl performances mark them as the guests with the most Super Bowl appearances.<sup>9</sup> Their Afroed hair billowing out of black berets, tilted just so, paid homage to the Black Panther Party’s fifty-year anniversary.

In *Check It While I Wreck It: Black Womanhood, Hip-Hop Culture, and the Public Sphere*, Gwendolyn D. Pough (2004) theorizes on the Black Panther’s strategic use of spectacle. As Black men living on the margins, Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, the founders of the party, understood the necessity of spectacle. Rendered invisible by their race and socioeconomic status they understood that to gain power in the US public sphere, Black men needed to be seen before they could be heard. They understood that their Black audience, the intentionally marginalized, overworked, yet underemployed, would rightfully read beauty, self-determination, and power in their “uniforms.” The spectacle of their sleek black leather jackets, baby blue shirts, berets tilted just so, and rifles draped across their bodies were all tactical accoutrement used to create their revolutionary image and inspire the fight for Black liberation (Pough 2004). When Beyoncé stood before millions, with blonde hair flowing and thick thighs grinding, and belted, “I like my Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils,” she enlisted the spectacle of the Football Industrial Complex as an accomplice in her celebration of Black beauty. In so doing, she aligned her performance with the Black Panther Party and deployed spectacle as a strategy to draw attention to police brutality.

## Queering Formations

Come on Ladies Now Let's Get in Formation  
Prove to me you got some coordination  
Slay Trick or you get eliminated (Beyoncé 2016a)

According to the annual Nielsen ratings, the Super Bowl is the most-watched televised event in the United States every year (Nielsen 2019). The fanfare surrounding the game, notably the commercials and the halftime show, are pop culture artifacts divorced from the game itself. Beyoncé's appearance in Super Bowl L, along with the white, wholesome British pop rock band Coldplay<sup>10</sup> and the swag of the mixed-race über pop star Bruno Mars,<sup>11</sup> needed to commemorate fifty years of the NFL and twenty-five years of celebrity-fueled halftime shows. True to brand, Coldplay opened the commemorative halftime show amidst rainbows and Technicolored flowers. Bruno Mars, flanked by six Black and Brown cis-appearing male dancers, spiced up the quaint show with a medley of his hits. He completed his set with what I cast as a warning: "If you don't believe me, just watch." As I detail below, in response to Mars's conclusion of his Grammy Award-winning "Uptown Funk" (2014), Beyoncé as drum major confidently marched the dancers onto the field and commanded, "Okay ladies, now let's get in formation."

The fans who tuned into the game, or rather the halftime show, should have seen it coming. On the day before Beyoncé and crew filed into Levi's Stadium, she released the song "Formation" (2016) and the controversial video on the music streaming service TIDAL and her Instagram page, without context. Voice-overs from Anthony Barré, a slain YouTube star from New Orleans, and Big Freedia, the Queen of Bounce, open and interrupt the video, discursively queering the post-Katrina New Orleans in which the video is set. After an invisible hand types "parental advisory warning: explicit lyrics" onto a blurry white screen, Anthony Barré's query, "What happened after New Orleans?" helps to situate the audience in the Mardi Gras city in the wake of the natural and political disaster. The camera then cuts to Beyoncé slowly squatting atop a New Orleans police car submerged in flood waters. The contrast between Beyoncé—with hair pulled up and back, and body fully covered by a long-sleeved red jumpsuit—and the drowned police car, establishes the relationship between Black people and the police teased throughout the video. The camera travels through beauty shops, vacant lots, bars, and restaurants, prominently featuring Black women and femmes dancing and living in the city's Ninth Ward. From Black cowboys and Second Line bands to Mardi Gras floats and Black Indians, the video provides the audience with a glimpse into the city's rich culture. A shot of a police jacket, or the random red and blue flash of a police car's lights, signify the constant surveillance the citizens endure. The scene of a young Black boy dancing in front of a line of police in riot gear, while the camera pans over "Stop Shooting US" spray painted on a brick wall, however, directly ties the video to the Movement 4 Black Lives.

Southern pop culture scholar Zandria Robinson's (2016) eloquent description of the visuals in the soon-to-be anthem is one of several thought pieces inspired by the video:<sup>12</sup>

Formation is the result of a dissembling and silenced black womanhood, broken, baptized, forged in fire and resurrected through the strength of intergenerational mother wit to sing and signify resilience and resistance (<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/how-beyonces-lemonade-exposes-inner-lives-of-black-women-36868/>).

The "resilience" and "resistance" Robinson describes manifests as choreographies abstracted from HBCU dance teams. Beyoncé and dancers weave in and out of formations they will eventually perform live at the Super Bowl. Instead of the football field, they dance femme-ness into spaces traditionally deemed unsafe for women. With confident precision, their dancing bodies occupy vacant parking lots, fill an emptied Olympic-sized swimming pool, and haunt a Gothic plantation home. Their dancing almost functions as a tutorial on how to move dance team choreographies

from the field to the streets. Whether executed by dance teams parading on the streets or dancing before millions of Super Bowl viewers, the familiar choreographies and economy of gestures inspire literate audience members to participate with the dancers. The choreographies entice movement, and as I describe throughout this article—*movements*.<sup>13</sup>

“Ladies, get in formation” is a call familiar to majorettes, drill teams, and dance teams around the country. The execution of unison choreography the dancers perform depends on airtight formations that amplify the precision of the group moving across the one-hundred-yard football field as a unit. However, the rest of the lyrical refrain—“Prove to me you got some co-or-di-nation. —Slay trick or you get eliminated”—emerges from the Black dance team culture at historically Black colleges and universities in the American South and Black queer ball culture.

The centrality of the marching band in college football reifies the gender norms established in the NFL. Gender diverse band members are masculinized by the linear, militaristic choreography they execute in stiff uniforms, while blasting fans with the familiar sounds of brass and drums. Cheerleaders and dance team members are equally feminized by their short skirts and leotards, regardless of the strength and vigor their choreography may demand, or the presence of masculine bodies. The Football Industrial Complex needs bands, cheerleaders, and dance teams to motivate and inspire eager fans to buy paraphernalia and season tickets, and support the alumni association even when the team performs poorly.

At HBCUs, the dance teams and dancing bands are heralded as the reason thousands of fans annually attend games or tune in on television. Cultural critic and writer Jada F. Smith (2018) articulates the significance of dance teams in her aptly titled article “How HBCU Majorettes Shaped My Identity of Black Womanhood”:

In southern-HBCU circles like the one I grew up in, there is a prolific use of the phrase “Half time is game time.” It affirms what everyone has known about HBCU sporting events since integration: the marching band is inarguably the best and most important part of the experience. . . . HBCU band culture and fan clubs were pervasive, but for me and many others raised in that environment, the music was merely a palette for the featured artists—the dancers whose eight-counts and sequined outfits gave the whole endeavor life (<https://www.lennyletter.com/story/hbcu-majorettes-shaped-my-idea-of-black-womanhood>).

Within the context of “Formation,” the lyrics function as a call to action for Black femmes, inviting us to stand in our power and beauty and against intersecting vectors of oppression.

Beyoncé’s 2018 Coachella performance turned Netflix documentary, *Homecoming* (2019), further showcases the singer’s affection for and appreciation of the queered HBCU tradition. Throughout the documentary, she calls forth the names of prominent and lesser known HBCUs and explicitly features Southern University’s Dancing Dolls. By acknowledging and paying respect to the bodies and spaces that birthed the choreographies she performs in music videos, football stadiums, and arenas throughout the world, she elides the criticism that Madonna received from the queer community for her appropriation of voguing choreography.

Frederick McKindra’s (2019) formidable response to *Homecoming* outlines the singer’s careful treatment of the Black southern roots that inform her choreographies and the hip-hop majorette styles emulated within. From the coy undulating spines of Southern University’s Dancing Dolls to the ferocious bucking hips of the Jackson State J-Settes, McKindra marks the labor of southern cisgender “straight black women and femme gay black” men who have engaged “digital media platforms over the past decade to formalize and institutionalize the genre as a dance discipline” (2019). With smiles glued to their glittery faces, hair weaved, straightened, and curled, the two teams perform



Figure 1. Southern University's Dancing Dolls at the State Fair Showdown vs. Texas Southern University (2019). Dancers left to right: Jada Delpit, Lindsey Lee, Kaylor Mallet, Camryn Harris. IG: @theforeverdolls. Image by 2C2K Photography.

the extreme in styles—from sexy and demure to sexy and aggressive—and prance southern middle-class femininity onto football fields and into stadium stands throughout the South. Black femme men and trans women, however, transformed the Africanist call and response tradition of the famed J-Settes into a technique and style emulated throughout the hip-hop majorette competition scene.

Rigid rules around gender roles and sexuality prohibited Black men and trans women from joining dance teams when they first emerged in the late 1960s. As a result, they danced alongside them in the stands and created new choreographies of their own in queer nightclubs. Lamont Loyd-Sims's "J-Setting in Public: Black Queer Desires and Worldmaking" (2014) carefully documents the development and transformation of the "j-sette" from a call and response technique performed by the Jackson State J-Settes at football games, to a competition style infused with vogue and whacking choreographies executed by Black trans women and femme queer men in competitions throughout gay clubs and pride events in the South.

Choreographer JaQuel Knight ushered j-sette choreography from Black queer nightclubs into the mainstream with his choreography for Beyoncé's "Single Ladies" and "Diva" music videos off of her *I am ... Sasha Fierce* (2009) album. Lifetime Television's *Bring It!* (2014) and Oxygen's *The Prancing Elites* (2015) explicitly introduced mainstream audiences to the femme hip-hop majorette competition scene and its queer history. *Bring It!* features Black adolescent girls, whereas *The*



*Prancing Elites* follows Black trans women, or gender nonconforming people, on the competition circuit. The pelvic thrust of the defining buck, the vogue inspired death drop, 12:00 o'clock kicks, and cat jumps are dances of Black femininity choreographed on and by cisgender and trans female bodies and queer Black men. Performed to contemporary hip-hop music, the call and response choreography embodied in the j-sette, inspires audience participation. For ninety-four seconds, Beyoncé and her squad shunned the stage for the field and deployed the rich performance tradition as a weapon against misogynoir and police brutality. Their choreographic intervention honored the labor of queer, trans, and cisgender hetero femmes before millions at the all-American Super Bowl.

## Super Bowl City and Black Lives Matter

The Super Bowl is more than a game played on Super Bowl Sunday; it is a weeklong celebration. Celebrities and fans flock to the host city the week of the game to participate in concerts, galas, and family-friendly football related games and events, transforming the host city into “Super Bowl City.” To add to the extravaganza, producers of the Super Bowl mine local high school marching bands, church choirs, and talent to fill the field with bodies to support the superstars performing on the stage. Levi’s Stadium in Santa Clara, California, is a far cry from the images of the queer Black and femme New Orleans featured in Beyoncé’s “Formation” music video and invoked on the football field. During Super Bowl L, however, the media shined the spotlight on the small city in the San Francisco Bay. Black Lives Matter activists Rheema Emy Calloway and Ronnisha Johnson took advantage of Beyoncé’s proclamation of Black Power, and the promiscuous relationship between football and the media, to bring attention to the murder of Mario Woods, a twenty-six-year-old unarmed Black man shot and killed by five San Francisco police officers. In a phone interview with Sam Levin and Julia Carrie Wong (2016), reporters for the *Guardian*, Calloway and Johnson recount numerous attempts by Black Lives Matter activists to engage the Super Bowl platform to seek justice for Woods. On February 4, for example, organizers with banners stating “Justice 4 Mario Woods” marched to Super Bowl City to disrupt a gala event for NFL team owners at city hall. In her performance at Super Bowl City on the Saturday night before the game, before a crowd of thousands, the Grammy Award-winning singer Alicia Keys thanked organizers for fighting for justice for Woods. BLM organizers also tweeted a five-second video of famed running back Adrian Peterson, asserting “Justice 4 Mario Woods.” Ultimately, the decisive action of Calloway and Johnson brought attention to the murder.

The two organizers were part of the local talent recruited to enhance local participation in the half-time spectacle. Ironically, Calloway and Johnson won tickets through a Bay Area radio contest to march with a school band (King 2016). As the halftime show concluded, Calloway and Johnson spotted Beyoncé’s dancers marching off the field with their right fists raised high. The activists chased after them and asked the dancers to take pictures, record a video, and hold a sign exclaiming “Justice 4 Mario Woods” (Levin and Wong 2016). In an interview with Jamilah King for *Mic* magazine (2016), Calloway claims, “The dancers were really excited to take pictures, (. . .). They didn’t second-guess taking a stand in solidarity with us for Mario Woods and it seemed they had already heard the story, but we didn’t have enough time to react” (King 2016). The video went viral, as did Tina Knowles’s (Beyoncé’s mother) Instagram post of herself and approximately thirty of Beyoncé’s dancers posed in the Black Power salute.

The speed with which Johnson and Calloway had to act is worth recounting here. I know firsthand how quickly the transition on and off the field occurs during the Super Bowl halftime show. In Super Bowl XXX, I was selected from the local talent to be a backup stage dancer for Diana Ross. It was a whirlwind. The performers do not have access to the game. Handlers funneled us onto the stage or the field and quickly funneled us off and out of the stadium immediately following our performance. The exit choreography was tight. Like all choreography that requires decisive unison, any misstep draws attention to the group. Calloway and Johnson risked potential legal

sanctions for their clandestine actions. However, their preparation and quick thinking successfully connected “Justice 4 Mario Woods” to Beyoncé’s platform, which, after the release of “Formation” and a Super Bowl performance tribute to the Black Panther Party and Malcolm X, was now decidedly linked to the Black Lives Matter movement.

Calloway and Johnson’s improvisations within the “exit score” set off a chain of events evidencing the efficacy of spectacle when harnessed by Black femme bodies in motion toward freedom. Further, the dancers’ unquestioned willingness to help the activists signifies an unspoken trust between Black women, and a desire to show up for and with one another when the moment calls us to do so. The viral video the femmes collaboratively created inspired public outcry, resulting in a careful review of Woods’s case, reform for the San Francisco police department, and the eventual resignation of San Francisco Chief of Police Greg Suhr (Risberg 2020). The Woods family filed and won a wrongful death suit against the city of San Francisco and received \$400,000 for Mario’s death (Iovino 2019). The fusion of the Black Panther Party with Black Lives Matter through the dancing bodies of Black women proved generative optics for activists who would seize Beyoncé’s proclamation of Black beauty and Black Power to propel the Movement 4 Black Lives forward.

## Assata’s Daughters and the NFL Draft

Chicago in April is cold. Growing up a dedicated Prince fan in sunny Phoenix, Arizona, I always thought Prince was waxing poetic when he sang “Sometimes It Snows in April” (1986). After eleven years of living in Chicago, however, I realize he was simply looking out of his Chanhassen, Minnesota, window and stating factually that it snows in April. The inclement weather, however, did not prevent nearly 225,000 fans from venturing to Chicago’s Grant Park to partake in the activities surrounding the NFL Draft, from April 28 to April 30, 2016.

Like the Super Bowl, the three-day event transforms the host city into the NFL Draft Town, where fans flock to the draft compound to meet and greet players, attend concerts, and toss and kick footballs with family and friends. On the final day, fans who received the “first come, first served” tickets file into the designated draft venue to watch their favorite NFL team select the top college players of the year to join their professional franchises. According to *Sports Media Watch*, the ESPN and NFL Networks collectively reported approximately 4.3 million viewers of the draft and corresponding activities in 2016 (Paulsen 2016). On Saturday, April 30, 2016, the last day of the draft, NFL fans venturing along Chicago’s Lake Shore Drive to explore more of Grant Park were confronted by approximately fifty members of Chicago’s Assata’s Daughters, Black Lives Matter, and F.L.Y.<sup>14</sup> chained together across the busy intersection.

I imagine the draft tourists thought they might have stumbled across a Beyoncé video. In fact, in a nod to Beyoncé’s Super Bowl costumes, the femmes were dressed in all black, with thick silver chains across their chests and raspberry berets tilted sideways on their heads. They invoked the Orishas with Yoruba tribal markings on their faces, similar to the face paint worn by Beyoncé and dancers in the music video for “Sorry” (2016) from the immediately successful album *Lemonade* (2016). Beyoncé’s use of the body art in her video is one of many references to Yoruba culture and her desire to embody “Oshunness,” layered throughout the visual album.<sup>15</sup> The majority of the organizers were members of Chicago’s Assata’s Daughters. Named after the 1960s Black radical Assata Shakur, their mission, articulated below and found on their website (assatasdaughters.org), demonstrates a commitment to Black liberation rooted in Black feminist praxis:

Assata’s Daughters (AD) was founded, planned, and operated by Black women, femmes, and gender non-conforming people to carry on the tradition of radical liberatory [*sic*] activism encompassed by Assata Shakur, to train up others in the radical

political tradition of Black feminism, and to learn how to organize on the ground around the demand for Black liberation, particularly a demand for abolition (<https://www.assatasdaughters.org/our-herstory-2019>).

In accordance with their mission, the women and femmes took over the famed intersection with specific demands: the removal of Chicago police officer Dante Servin from the city's payroll for the 2012 shooting death of twenty-two-year-old Rekia Boyd; and a budget for Chicago State University (CSU), which laid off three hundred employees on April 29, 2016. The announcement for the protest on their website, "#REMBERREIKIA April 30, 2016—A Formation inspired action at the NFL Draft," acknowledges the organizers' intentions to reappropriate Beyoncé's aesthetics to disrupt the NFL Draft. The landing page for the *Formation*-inspired action clearly articulates their reasons for occupying Lake Shore Drive:

Our continued resistance serves as the penalty for destroying Black Lives. There will be no uninterrupted NFL Draft Town when Black women die without justice. There will be no silence while Mayor Emanuel and the city council are cutting a \$302,000 deal for an event worth \$3.2 million at the same time that we cannot afford to fund Black education.

We choose to #RememberRekia by demanding that Dante Servin is fired without a pension and instead that decision makers commit full, permanent funding to Chicago State University (<https://www.assatasdaughters.org/nfl-draft-formation-action>).

Their website's statements demonstrate a sophisticated Black feminist analysis of Windy City politics that prioritize the financial gains of the Football Industrial Complex over the lives of Black women and the education of Black people.

Like HBCU dance teams and bands, the activists' appropriation of Beyoncé's aesthetics strategically shifts Black women from the sidelines to center field or, in this case, Lake Shore Drive. The organizers engaged the swag and style aesthetics of their activists' predecessors—the Black Panther Party—to ensure visibility and legibility to white audiences and to appeal to Black audiences. Buttressed by the celebration of Black femininity in *Lemonade*, the threat of Black Power in "Formation," and the divine force of Oshun, the activists' chants remind NFL fans that they are *not* in a Beyoncé video:

"Put some respek on her name!"  
"Save CSU Budget or Else! Black Education is good for our health!"  
"You don't get no pension when you get paid for lynching!" (*Chicago Unheard* 2016)

Their rhythmic chants quickly disrupt any perception NFL Draft attendees might have had of landing in a Beyoncé media storm. Instead, passersby found themselves engulfed in a slick, well-rehearsed, choreographed protest. The optics helped the activists cultivate and engage audience members for their performance. The Beyoncé look-alikes slyly sip cups of lemonade in between chants while Beyoncé's song "Freedom" (2016) blares in the background. Like the music and dances of HBCU halftime shows, their allegiance to Black popular culture affirms what Black dance scholars Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (1990), Thomas F. DeFrantz (2016) and Malone (1996) identify as the efficacy of Black social dance. Namely, *Black dances* are cultural, intellectual, and political *movements* grounded in the *embodied* knowledge of Black people who recognize *the body* as a pivotal site for political intervention to challenge, resist, and mobilize collectives to dismantle systems of exploitation.

Underneath the cacophony of sound, the rhythmic tremble of a marching snare drum sonically linked NFL halftime choreographies to the choreographies of protest that occurred on Lake

Shore Drive in April 2016. The persistent rat-a-tat-tat recalled the march of soldiers at war, for whom the drum kept the rhythmic pace. I invoke that sound here as I describe the evening Dante Servin killed Rekia Boyd. I provide the details of her death to honor her life and to provide further context for the development of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012.<sup>16</sup>

Rekia Boyd was laughing with friends when a stray bullet from Dante Servin's gun struck her in the back of the head ending her life. On March 21, 2012, at approximately 1:00 a.m., Boyd and friends were hanging in Douglas Park on Chicago's West Side. Dante Servin was driving to his home near the park after finishing an off-duty side gig. Servin claims he politely shouted out of his car window at the group of youths to quiet down. Antoine Cross, a friend of Boyd's, however, asserts that Servin attempted to buy drugs from the group, which prompted Cross to approach the car and tell him to get his "crackhead ass out of here" (Momodu 2017). Servin mistook the phone in Cross's hand for a gun and sped off in his car while shooting over his shoulder and out of his window at Cross. His random bullets hit Cross in his hand and Boyd, who was steps away, in the back of the head. Servin was charged with involuntary manslaughter but cleared by Judge Dennis J. Porter following a non-jury trial on April 20, 2015. The judge claimed that Servin should have been charged with first-degree murder because the police officer intentionally shot to kill Cross.

The Black women and femmes chained across Lake Shore Drive amongst the fanfare of the NFL Draft represent four years of consistent protests and teach-ins outside of the Chicago Board of Police office, organized by Assata's Daughters, BYP 100 (Black Youth Project 100), and Black Lives Matter, demanding the firing of Servin. Their unrelenting actions also led Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel and Police Superintendent Garry McCarthy to pressure the board to remove Servin. Ultimately, the police veteran of twenty-one years retired from the force on May 17, 2016, two days before he was scheduled to appear for his hearing before the board, thereby keeping his pension intact (Crepeau 2019). Chicago's ABC7 reports, Rekia Boyd's family received a \$4.5 million wrongful death settlement from the City of Chicago in 2013, but Servin retains his freedom (<https://abc7chicago.com/archive/9026410/>).

## Conclusion

When Assata's Daughters, Black Lives Matter activist Rheema Calloway, and Beyoncé's "Dancing Black Pantherette's" usurped NFL spectacles to ignite Black Femme Power with performance practices mined from collegiate Black dance lines, they buttressed efforts of the #SayHerName movement to remind us all of the loss of Black cis and trans women's lives. Founded by the African American Policy Forum, #SayHerName endeavors to support the efforts of the Movement 4 Black Lives in addressing the specificity of gendered violence Black cis and trans women endure by police (<https://www.aapf.org/sayhername>). The #SayHerName movement does not evidence a failure on the part of BLM to affirm all Black lives, so much as it demonstrates how, in a heterosexist, patriarchal culture, the predominance of masculinity and the bodies that perform it will prevail, unless efforts against it are intentional and strategic.

This article serves to document the concerted efforts of Black women, femmes, and gender non-conforming people, whose labor fuels the movement for Black liberation. It serves to provide a snapshot or moment in time when Black femmes harnessed the spectacle of the Football Industrial Complex, and the choreographies inspired by femme cis, queer, and trans bodies, to force the nation to reckon with legislated Black death. I hope my analysis makes plain the extent to which the queer femme labor undergirding the contemporary movement for Black liberation mirrors the queer femme labor embedded in HBCU dance line choreographies.

Writing in 2021 gifts me with the good fortune of hindsight while visioning the future. Kamala Harris, a child of Jamaican and Indian immigrants, is the first female Vice President of the United

States of America. Colin Kaepernick is now a celebrated activist but remains an unemployed quarterback. In April 2017, he donated \$25,000 to Assata's Daughters to support their organizing efforts. His donation catapulted the organization into the national news media, causing a stir in the conservative press (Cox 2017). In July 2015, the City of Chicago seized and bulldozed the organization's "HomeQuarters" after two consecutive fires destroyed their building. The first was ruled an accident caused by faulty electrical wiring; the cause of the second has yet to be determined (Andu 2019). Fortunately, no one was injured in the fires, but the arson highlights differences in power and access. Although Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance and Black affirming aesthetics in *Lemonade* may have helped to "stir the pot," the organizers on the ground risk the lasting scars of a fire's burn.

#BlackLivesMatter and #DefundthePolice are no longer controversial statements made by seemingly radical Black activists. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a stillness that allowed the nation to witness George Floyd's murder, Breonna Taylor's assassination, what was essentially a lynching of Ahmaud Arbery,<sup>17</sup> and white women weaponizing their tears.<sup>18</sup> Now, suburban white kids chant #BlackLivesMatter in the streets and circulate #DefundthePolice on social media. Without careful oversight, these well-meaning white youth will co-opt the Movement 4 Black Lives, similar to the ways they have historically appropriated Black social dances and claimed them as their own.

In this moment of reckoning, of righting wrong systems, I contend that Black feminism and choreographic analysis provide a generative framework for theorizing social movements and *how* we move. A Black feminist analysis demystifies #blackgirlmagic to reveal centuries worth of labor, rehearsals, and the necessity to seek joy and pleasure to combat systemic oppression. It illuminates how Black femmes coalesce representations and affirmations of Black femme beauty, Yoruba spirituality, Black femme and queer social dance, and opportunities to shine in the public sphere to proclaim #AllBlackLivesMatter, #StopShootingUS, and #SayHerName.

## Notes

1. Movement 4 Black Lives is a coalition of activist groups organizing for the abolition of the police. For a detailed discussion on the various groups who comprise M4BL, see Ransby (2018).

2. CNN contributor Peniel Joseph critiques the NFL's lackluster attempts to address racial equity in the op-ed "The NFL's Racial Justice Efforts Fall Far Short," CNN, September 11, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/11/opinions/nfl-should-do-more-for-racial-and-social-justice-joseph/index.html>.

3. "Follow the Drinking Gourd" is a song sung by enslaved Africans with directions to the Underground Railroad hidden within the lyrics. See Follow the Drinking Gourd (n.d.).

4. On Tuesday, May 6, 2014, hooks infamously referred to Beyoncé as a "terrorist" when hooks was a panelist on "Are You Still a Slave: Liberating the Black Female Body," accessed June 22, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJk0hNROvzs>.

5. Race and justice reporter Jamilah King chronicles the responses by prominent Black feminists to bell hooks's critique of Beyoncé in "Is Beyoncé a Terrorist? Black Feminists Scholars Debate bell hooks," *Colorlines*, May 9, 2014, <https://www.colorlines.com/articles/beyonce-terrorist-black-feminist-scholars-debate-bell-hooks>.

6. For an overview of how queer, trans, and gender nonconforming people find solace in the Lwa and Orishas in African diasporic religions, see Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Ezili's Mirror: Imagining Black Queer Genders* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

7. For a detailed analysis of the Yoruba and Oshun references in *Lemonade*, consider Kamaria Roberts, "What Beyoncé Teaches Us about the African Diaspora in *Lemonade*," *Canvas*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/what-beyonce-teaches-us-about-the-african-diaspora-in-lemonade>.

8. Robyn C. Spencer illuminates the gendered labor in the Black Panther Party in *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

9. See Michelle R. Martinelli, “Marching Bands to Maroon 5: A Brief History of the Super Bowl Halftime Show,” *USA Today*, January 31, 2019, accessed August 30, 2020, <https://ftw.usatoday.com/2019/01/super-bowl-halftime-show-history>.

10. For a brief discussion on what music critic Josh Modell surmises is Coldplay’s “vanilla earnest” and “easy to swallow expertly crafted pop songs,” see “Coldplay Runs Away from Coldplay on the Wildly Uneven *Everyday Life*,” *AV Club*, November 22, 2019, <https://music.avclub.com/coldplay-runs-away-from-coldplay-on-the-wildly-uneven-e-1839946885>.

11. Cultural writer Alessa Dominguez succinctly describes the retro tone and tenor of Mars and his pop appeal. See “Can Bruno Mars Live?” *BuzzFeed News*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alessadominguez/can-bruno-mars-live>.

12. Aisha Durham examines Beyoncé’s evolution in “Class Formation: Beyoncé in Music Video Production” (Durham 2017).

13. Contemporary choreographer Jumatatu Poe’s “Let ’im Move You” explores the calls and response structure of j-sette choreographies in domestic and public spaces. Their project brilliantly elucidates the femme facility of the j-sette and how it fluidly occupies time and space. Jumatatu Poe, “Let ’im Move You,” accessed October 30, 2020, <https://www.jumatatu.org/>.

14. F.L.Y. is a Black queer femme organization led by Nic Adler and Rae Chardonnay. They are noted for providing safe party spaces for Black queer and gender nonconforming femmes in Chicago. Matt Harvey, “The Most Colorful Parties in the City Are Noire,” *Chicago Reader*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/party-noire-carnival-black-queer-femme-alder-chardonnay/Content?oid=71913755>.

15. Roberts, “What Beyoncé Teaches Us about the African Diaspora in *Lemonade*.”

16. Several Chicago news sites followed and reported on the city’s response to Boyd’s death. I abstract details from Crepeau (2019).

17. Deneen L. Brown, “‘It Was a Modern Day Lynching’: Violent Deaths Reflect a Brutal American Legacy,” *National Geographic*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/06/history-of-lynching-violent-deaths-reflect-brutal-american-legacy/#close>.

18. I refer to Amy Cooper, the Central Park bird-watcher who called the police on a Black man who asked her to leash her dog. Through fake tears, Cooper lied and told the police a Black man was threatening her life. The man recorded the incident, and the video went viral. For more details, see Amir Vera and Laura Ly, “White Woman Who Called Police on a Black Man Bird-Watching in Central Park Has Been Fired,” *CNN*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/05/26/us/central-park-video-dog-video-african-american-trnd/index.html>.

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