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Beyond Beyoncé's Halftime Show

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Beyond Beyoncé's Halftime Show

Abstract

In the weeks following the Super Bowl there has been quite an uproar regarding the halftime show featuring Beyoncé, Coldplay and Bruno Mars. All over Twitter, Facebook, blogs, news outlets, and in political commentary we were faced with the argument, "It's wrong that Beyoncé used the Super Bowl to advance her own political agenda." But to all those angry/hurt/confused about Beyoncé and her "right" to interrupt the Super Bowl with commentary on race relations, consider this: Is football, or any form of entertainment for that matter really independent of political, economic and racial issues? Is the NFL immune to the questions Beyoncé raised in "Formation?" [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, Beyonce, Bruno Mars, Coldplay, Football, Formation, Gene Washington, Gettysburg College, Greg Laundry, halftime show, Marlin Briscoe, NFL, Pepsi, quarterbacks, Race, racism, Roger Staubach, sports, Super Bowl

Disciplines

African American Studies | Civic and Community Engagement | Ethnic Studies | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sports Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

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[February 22, 2016](#)

In the weeks following the Super Bowl there has been quite an uproar regarding the halftime show featuring Beyoncé, Coldplay and Bruno Mars. All over Twitter, Facebook, blogs, news outlets, and in political commentary we were faced with the argument, "It's wrong that Beyoncé used the Super Bowl to advance her own political agenda." But to all those angry/hurt/confused about Beyoncé and her "right" to interrupt the Super Bowl with commentary on race relations, consider this: Is football, or any form of entertainment for that matter really independent of political, economic and racial issues? Is the NFL immune to the questions Beyoncé raised in "Formation?"

It's not.

First, you are lucky if you are able to consider race and issues of racism as a discussion which has a time and a place at which it is relevant. If you subscribe to this argument you should recognize that you are fortunate to have the ability to delineate times during which you are willing to confront race and times when you are allowed to forget about it. It is a privilege to be able to choose a time of the day where you can sit back and entertain yourself and watch football and call it something completely unrelated to race or identity. It's a privilege to say that you "don't want race in your football." You do not have to see the racial disparities on your screen if you don't want to, when others must continue to [ask the difficult questions](#).



But the reality is, regardless of your privilege to think about race when you want to, race is an aspect of identity and identity is a major factor in our organization of ourselves and the world around us. We all have identities. Many of us have various. I, for example, identify as a cisgender, biracial (in my case Hispanic and White), female. But I also identify as a student, an artist, an athlete, an activist and so on. Our identities help us define our communities and their roles in the larger public.

So let's consider the argument that football is not related to racial discussions or politics. If this is the case we should not see anything unusual when considering the racial identities of the various men who identify as NFL players based on demographics from 2014.

As of 2014, about 68% of the NFL identifies as Black, about 28% White and 4% Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander or Other. The Eagles were the "Whitest" team, with 50% of its players identifying as white. Teams like the Raiders and the Bills contained over 78% Black players. [These numbers are just an introduction.](#)

Nearly 78% of NFL quarterbacks in 2014 identified as white. To the 64 white quarterbacks there were only 14 black. Yet, only 28% of the entire NFL identifies as white. There were 1155 players in the NFL. 470 were white and of those 470, 65 were quarterbacks. This means that 13% of white NFL players are quarterbacks, while only 1.7% of Black players are quarterbacks. Meanwhile, Black players make up nearly 98% of cornerbacks and 86% of wide receivers. Many people chalk this up to some kind of speed only achievable by Black people – an argument which casts Black players as kinds of fantastical animals capable of inhuman feats, rather than athletes – so let's consider this historically.

In the past, Black quarterbacks with the ability to run the ball, like Marlin Briscoe and Gene Washington, were made to [change their position to wide receiver](#). Meanwhile, their white counterparts who were running quarterbacks, like Roger Staubach or Greg Laundry, were lauded for their play-making abilities and overall offensive strategy. So, historically, it's not just speed, or the "need elsewhere" for a wide receiver, that accounts for why so many quarterbacks are white. After all, the last four positions to be desegregated were: free safety, middle linebacker, center and quarterback. Why? Because the quarterback is a cerebral, [leadership position](#). Quarterbacks sit in a position of power, couched by fans' respect for their intelligence: two characteristics of the position that, prior to the 1960s, Black people were not considered capable of. And frankly, this prejudice hasn't disappeared in the ensuing years. It's not just quarterbacks, either. Consider this: there is a disparity in representation of black people and white people in all kinds of leadership positions on the football field – captains, head coaches (there are only 5 head coaches in the NFL of any kind of minority, even after the 2003 enacted Rooney Rule), general managers – these positions are held overwhelmingly by whites. Compare this to the fact that an overwhelming majority of players in the NFL are black.

Okay, so why? Why are so many quarterbacks white? And why am I making this argument when this very Super Bowl featured a talented black quarterback, praised for his ability to run the ball? And on top of that, how to does this have anything to do with Beyoncé?

The grotesque racial disparities in the NFL indicate that there is a more complex issue at play than just "where talent lies." It seems instead, that there is a larger systemic issue occurring. What sort of camps, equipment, classes, and trainers are necessary to gain the skills to become an NFL quarterback? In other words, what role does socioeconomic status play in whether or not these kinds of opportunities are available for traditionally marginalized groups? How are coaches at high schools in Texas, Florida and Georgia – leading states in producers of NFL players as well as states with lengthy histories of racial oppression – deciding who should play what kind of position? Are they making assumptions based on racial identity? Are they pushing players into specific positions because that is "their best chance of making it?" Why is there only [one black punter](#) in the entire league? Does it have something to do with

the high supply and minimal demand for these players? How does that aspect of competition factor into those expensive, elite camps, or dedication of time to master the technical skill to be a punter?

The point is this: it's not just a coincidence that power in football tends to be held by white players, captains, coaches and managers. And while that racism may not be overt, or even always purposeful, we need to continue to reflect on our unconscious biases as well as the roles that socioeconomic status and access to resources play. Football is not free from the larger systemic issues of race and identity, nor is any other sport or manifestation of popular culture. We need to remember whom we empower and whom we disempower and for what reasons.

This is why Beyoncé's interruption of America's football game was so appropriate. She was not just voicing a political opinion, but commenting on a larger issue ingrained so deeply into our society that it affects every aspect of our culture, even football. Take a step back. Re-watch the halftime show without the discomfort of all your friends and family over for a Super Bowl party. Think about what Beyoncé really did that night. Beyoncé garnered approval from the NFL and Pepsi, two of the largest franchises in the nation, to remind us that no aspect of our lives is free of our unconscious biases. For some, issues of race, gender, sexuality and a host of other "politicized issues" are not primarily political discussions or battles to be won; they constitute identity and everyday experiences. They do not get to "escape" the tough questions, they do not get to "return to normal life," after a heated debate or a peaceful protest or a failed movement. Beyoncé used her status and her image as a role model to redirect the most watched television event in the country from mindless entertainment to a thoughtful examination of voices that are too often marginalized.

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