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The Gratitude Served in the House of Chrome

In the trailer for her upcoming concert documentary, *Renaissance*, American singer-songwriter Beyoncé Knowles-Carter says, “The goal for this tour was to create a place where everyone is free, no one is judged...at any point they could close their eyes and be right back there” which fully encapsulates the overwhelming energy felt while watching her tour (Knowles-Carter). Beyoncé describes the tour as the “tour of gratitude” as she thanks fans for being supportive of her music, and shares how thankful she is to be able to perform on stage twenty-six years into her career (HipHopRapScene). During her *Renaissance World Tour*, Beyoncé utilizes not only her music from her newest album *Renaissance*, but also precise outfits and choreography to provide the safe space she mentioned in the trailer for the LGBTQ+ community. While providing a safe space in stadiums that hold over seventy-thousand people, across thirty-nine cities, each having multiple shows, she pays homage to the brave spirits who paved the way for the queer community by sharing their histories in the world of music. Beyoncé choosing to use her massive platform to highlight the queer community is crucial to the rehumanization of the members of the community, who in the United States alone were targeted by the proposal of over five-hundred-twenty anti-LGBTQ+ bills of legislation just three months into the new year (Human Rights Campaign).

One of the most memorable parts of the *Renaissance World Tour* are the stunning designer outfits that Beyoncé, as well as all of her background dancers, which she refers to as her

‘crew’ wear. She and her crew changed outfits a total of nine times between the interludes that separated each act, over the course of the just short of two-and-a-half-hour show, they matched in over one-hundred and forty different styles (Bennet). The outfits worn by her crew are iconic, not only because they break traditional gender norms to show that clothing truly has no gender, but also due to their versatility of style. The full-body suits with rubies and other vibrant gemstones, to glossy jumpsuits, dresses, and even bedazzled jerseys in every color imaginable light up each performance, but the brands Queen B specifically choose from reflect just how much she did her homework on Queer history. One specific brand she featured was from the designer Alexander McQueen, famously known for being an openly gay fashion legend that greatly impacted the queer community. Before the epidemic, McQueen styled models in attire that reflected how women were seen as scandalous when wearing certain attire, much of the public had the poor idea that those similarly dressed were to be “carriers of disease” which sparked a feeling that “echoed for the queer community two centuries later with the HIV/AIDS crisis” (Unframed).

A fan-favorite outfit that happens to be the only design featured in all fifty-six shows was the ‘Black Hands’ shimmering gold bodysuit which has long black arms with red nails covering her body, was also designed by another openly gay designer named Jonathan Anderson. Beyoncé likely chose to feature his designs because he uses his brands like Loewe and Visual Aids to actively raise funds to support artists who live with HIV because he believes the “HIV/AIDS crisis is not over” (Loewe). In fact, Beyoncé’s uncle Jonny, whom she refers to as her godmother, was a gay man who died from the virus, and in the packaging for her *Renaissance* album, she dedicates the record to him, saying, “he...exposed me to a lot of the music and culture that serve as inspiration for this album” (Rude). Also, during the “Opulence” interlude an hour into the

show, Beyoncé is seen on a giant screen wearing a deep red ribbony dress, the pigmented ribbon is known to symbolize AIDS awareness, and the color red was specifically chosen as a way to avoid “traditional colours associated with the gay community...to convey that HIV was relevant to everyone” (World AIDS Day). It may seem far-fetched to analyze the color of the ribbony dress this deeply, however, it is no doubt intentional by Beyoncé, especially because the tour documentary releases on December 1, 2023, which lands on World AIDS Day. It is clear by the selection of gender-nonconforming styles and brands she has her dancers wear, that she recognizes the stigmatization that the LGBTQ+ community has gone through for not just the unique styles they’ve worn in time, but also early epidemics that were thought to only be associated with their specific group of people as a “punishment of God” (Murphy).

Although the artistic styles of choice by Beyoncé greatly highlight the beauty of being openly comfortable in one’s own identity, it only scratches the surface of the monumental bravery shown in queer history that allows people to be openly themselves today. She does however accomplish this through the carefully crafted choreography implemented throughout her show, and her dedicated scenes to represent ballroom culture. Underground ballroom culture, also known as vogue, was one of the earliest dedicated safe spaces unofficially established in the 1960s in New York by African-American and Latino individuals in the LGBTQ+ community (Chatzipapatheodoridis). According to the article, *Strike a Pose...Vogue...Performances*, the underground scene was a place where, “Voguers would come to the balls imitating superstars...as a mockery against, but, simultaneously, a glorification of standardized-typically Western-ideals of beauty, sexuality, and class” because these Voguers had been excluded from the already limited queer spaces simply for being people of color (Chatzipapatheodoridis). The same article argues that in order to keep the legacy of vogue alive to ensure future generations

have access to these safe spaces to openly express themselves and to come together with other members of their community, popular artists that feature this culture must do so with, “appreciation of vogue as a queer history” and Beyoncé goes above and beyond in this category (Chatzipapatheodoridis). During the second act of her show, she appears on stage encased in a robot mold of herself which she breaks out of, revealing that she is wearing a silver bodysuit, and soon after her dancers come on stage in small groups wearing the same outfit. Their movements are slow and stiff at first, with jittering movements showing them visually feeling uncomfortable, it isn’t until they all join each other as one that they gain the confidence and power to fully move their bodies. This symbolizes how underground ballroom culture allowed people to feel comfortable in their identities, how it brought people together and empowered the queer community to live their lives without shame after the world casted them away.

As mentioned before, Beyoncé understands the challenges the LGBTQ+ community faced with having to harbor their celebrations of their identity from the public eye, so instead of just symbolizing the culture of vogue, she brings the celebration directly to the stage. While Beyoncé sings a remix version of her song *Break My Soul* with samples of Madonna’s song *Vogue*, she gives famous vogue performers an opportunity to represent ballroom culture, instead of hiring non-vogue dancers to mimic what can be found in ballroom battles. She does this during an act specifically titled *Motherboard*, because in these subterranean competitions were individual groups referred to as Houses, and in these you would find leaders called Mothers and Fathers. These parental figures would provide, “guidance to newcoming protégés who couldn’t or wouldn’t identify with their biological homes, or...simply want to join the ballroom scene under specific nomenclature” and it was also common for, “Houses to provide...financial support” by helping members (referred to as their children) look for work

(Chatzipapatheodoridis). Finally, towards the end of her show Beyoncé lets the vogue professionals fully take over the stage and they get to do a ballroom battle in front of thousands of people, all while ballroom legend Kevin JZ Prodigy from the House of Jordan/Zion serves as the battle's commentator. Some of the categories included, "Serving the Old Way" which featured the earliest body movements of vogue, another was, "Body" which centered around body-positivity for plus sized dancers (HipHopRapScene). By dedicating time to let professional dancers that were already directly active in ballroom well before this tour, Beyoncé is the perfect example of how an artist should go about representing cultures they want to share with their audiences, in a way that appreciates the culture rather than unintentionally misrepresent it or claim it as their own.

Queen B didn't just show her appreciation for the queer community who inspired her album *Renaissance* through the dances and styles of vogue, but also by carefully placing historical snippets of speeches and audios into her performance that the community has found to resonate with. For example, during her song *I'm That Girl* which is about the discovery and embracement of self love, she sings the lyric, "cleanse me of my sins" which directly signifies how the LGBTQ+ community have been called sinners for being queer by religious ministry and followers (Murphy). She follows this lyric by letting Kevin JZ Prodigy state, "Do I need to say sorry for being who I am? Look at me, this is me! No right way, no wrong way, there is only one way, and that is the Renaissance way!" which directly resonates with the people in the community who were followers of these religions, and fell into the vicious cycles of self-hate and internalized homophobia (HipHopRapScene). The first statement shows the common situation where the usually closeted person begs their God for forgiveness of living in sin, and at some point most attempt to try to 'pray the gay away'. Prodigy's statement reflects the step

after this vulnerable point in the individual's life where they discover self love and decide to embrace their identity regardless of how others might react. Then, in her song *Alien Superstar*, another narration is implemented where she samples Barbara Ann Teer's speech *Black Theatre* in which she says, "We dress a certain way. We walk a certain way. We talk a certain way. We paint a certain way. We make love a certain way...All of these things we do in a different unique specific way that is personally ours" which is marked by fans as a monumental scene in the tour, and has been popularly used as captions for their instagram posts featuring their attendance of the concert (Various Artists). This segment is incredibly influential as it reminds queer people in a year of stigma and hate that their uniqueness is beautiful, and that in times where their identities are being associated with evil, they can find power to stand up for themselves.

To conclude, Beyoncé stunningly uses her platform to share her love and appreciation for the LGBTQ+ community which has recently been targeted by legislations of hate, by sharing significant parts of queer history through the styles and brands she chooses to present her crew in, and the choreography she revolves her tour around. When she puts openly queer dancers who break traditional gender roles, art from gay designers, and samples of LGBTQ+ media on stage in front of millions to see over the course of five months in what she calls a 'Summer Renaissance', she shows the world that regardless of the unpleasant picture being painted by hate groups, queer people are people, who have every right to exist as authentically as themselves outside of 'closed doors'. She ends her *Renaissance World Tour* flying above the audience on a silver horse saying, "I hope you all feel inspired, I hope you all feel safe...I hope you feel joy inside your heart...hope you hold onto that joy and I hope you take it everywhere you go" and as someone who was lucky enough to experience the mind-altering concert in person, I feel that Beyoncé was successful in providing the safe space for the LGBTQ+

community that she had set out to create, which doubled as a history lesson for the members and allies of the community (HipHopRapScene). Early on she recognized that her concert had influence and served as a core memory for those who have been casted out by their families, so she began referring to those who have attended as her 'children' of the, "House of Chrome" (HipHopRapScene).

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