

## More Than a Halftime Show

New Orleans' Caesars Superdome buzzed with energy on Feb. 9 as Super Bowl LIX captivated millions, including those at Wake Forest. However, for many, the true game unfolded at halftime.

As the spotlight rose, Kendrick Lamar crouched low before springing into a performance that would spark national conversations, challenging American identity and raising questions about race, resilience and Black excellence.

“Lamar has always been talking about the culture,” said Claire Crawford, an assistant professor in the Department of Politics and International Affairs and the Program of African American Studies. “The Super Bowl was just the icing on the cake.”

“This is the great American game,” said Samuel L. Jackson—or, as he introduced himself, Uncle Sam.

According to *Billboard*, the Super Bowl LIX halftime show drew around 133.5 million viewers, making it the most-watched in history—surpassing even the game itself and breaking Michael Jackson’s long-standing record. While the performance ignited conversations nationwide, its underlying messages seemed to go unnoticed by many at Wake Forest, where reactions were more subdued.

“I’ve asked people about the performance, and most just say, ‘It’s good,’” said junior Evan Lipetz, a history major. “Nothing massive. They say it’s better than Maroon 5’s, but The Weeknd’s was still better. No major conversations beyond that.”

Associate Professor of Anthropology Sherri Lawson Clark, who teaches Introduction to Cultural Anthropology and Roots of Racism, noted a striking takeaway from one of her students. During and after the show, one of the top Google searches was “40 acres and a mule,” a reference in the performance to the unfulfilled promise of reparations to formerly enslaved Black Americans.

“She knew what it meant—she’s a politics major—but when she asked her friends here, some had no idea,” Clark said.

For many at Wake, the performance’s significance was less about history and more about the moment.

“Kendrick won Grammys that same week—he swept all the big awards,” said Lipetz. “And who isn’t aware of the Kendrick Lamar-Drake beef?”

The ongoing rivalry between Lamar and Drake, fueled by diss tracks like Lamar's hit "Not Like Us," kept the rappers in the public eye and shaped how some Wake Forest students engaged with the halftime show.

"Before all the rivalry between them came to light last summer, I had watched both of them live and was a fan of both," said sophomore Martina Bernal, a rap enthusiast. "I watched the show because I wanted to see if he would perform that infamous diss track on the biggest American stage possible."

However, others considered the performance's deeper significance.

"Most people missed the true meaning because the obvious sometimes isn't always the message—but if it wasn't meant for you, then it wasn't meant for you," said Crawford.

For some students, though, the symbolism was clear. Taylor Burke, an executive member of the Black Student Alliance, hosted a Super Bowl watch party where attendees picked up on the performance's ideas.

"The people I watched it with noticed the themes," Burke said. "Can I say that for everyone else? I don't know. I can't speak for everyone else. But we noticed it."

This divide reflects a broader debate over the role of politics in entertainment—especially on a stage as grand as the Super Bowl.

"The U.S. is one of the few countries with a strict two-party system, which makes us really divisive," Lipetz said. "But the Super Bowl is part of American identity, and I think that's really important. When it becomes overly politicized, it can take away from the unity the game brings."

Conversely, Burke said, "Yes, we do notice that the climate is starting to become more political than some may enjoy, but at the end of the day, that's the era we are living in right now. If you feel uncomfortable, either join the movement or turn the TV off."

Clark, however, saw unity in a different way. While she appreciated the symbolism of Lamar's performance, she was also struck by its ability to bring people together.

"When you think about that many people watching, you have people of all races and all ethnicities tuning in for whatever reason, and for me, I think that's profound," Clark said.

"This is a moment that went beyond the music and is one we should celebrate and acknowledge," she added. "Now, the big question we should focus on is, where do we go from here?"

Crawford echoed this sentiment, pushing for deeper reflection.

“The obvious is important—because that’s where you start—but are you critical enough to keep going?” she said. “And when we talk about Wake, that is a question I always have.”

765 words

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### Prior Research

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- [Kendrick Lamar’s 2025 Super Bowl Halftime Show Is Now...](#)
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- [The Story of "Not Like Us"](#)