

CULS5213 Media and Popular Culture

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**Black Lives Matter: The diversity of African American culture in Beyoncé “Formation”  
Music video**

**Music video: A performing medium for contemporary singers to display their music**

Roy Shuker proposes some of the major characteristics and functions of popular music in his book *Understanding Popular Music*. He mentions that popular music should emphasize the interpretation through performance, and is received primarily in terms of the body and emotions rather than as pure text.<sup>1</sup> Music video for instance, should consider their production process, commercial function for the music industry, and their reception as polysemic texts, open to varying audience interpretations for a fuller understanding.<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is “the interaction of context, text, and consumption which are determining the cultural meaning of music video.”<sup>3</sup> While there are numerous popular art music nowadays, “Formation” in Beyoncé’s sixth studio and second visual album<sup>4</sup>, *Lemonade* (2016) stands out the most and has left with multiple interpretations for the public. In particular, the music video expresses the singer’s unique bodily movement as well as her emotions that successfully correspond to her image as part of the Black community.

As Carol Vernallis says, music video's narrative dimension should be considered in relation to its other modes, such as underscoring the music, highlighting the lyrics, and showcasing the star.<sup>5</sup> The visualizations in “Formation” blends into the song lyrics and

<sup>1</sup> Roy Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*. (Routledge, 2013), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Shuker, *Understanding Popular Music*, 186.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 186.

<sup>4</sup> Kinitra D. Brooks, Kameelah L. Martin, *The Lemonade Reader: Beyoncé, Black Feminism and Spirituality*. (Routledge, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Carol Vernallis, *Experiencing Music Video: Aesthetics and Cultural Context*. (Columbia University Press, 2014).

Beyoncé's own image (as an entertainer and activist) and music style (contemporary R&B and hip pop style). The music video is also designed deliberately in connection to the singer's cultural background and personalities which highlights the complexity of Black Southern community. In just 4.48 minutes, the music video captures multiple possible messages, mainly the Black experience in America (the destructive aftermath of the Hurricane Katrina), the celebration of Black pride (financial power, self-determination, women's empowerment and rejecting standard of beauty), the uniqueness of African-Americans culture (particularly in New Orleans), the diversity of African-Americans identity (Creole culture) and the call for racial justice among the police and black community.

### **Explicit music style: Beyoncé's image as an Entertainer and Activist**

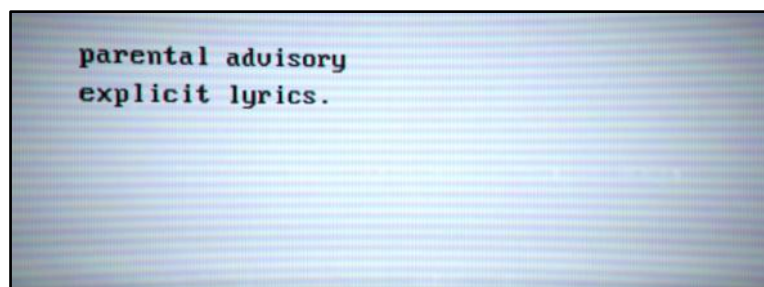


Fig. 1 Parental advisory warning in *Formation* (0:01-0:02)

It is not the first time that the singer has addressed social, racial and political issues in her music. Beyoncé has the image of an "uncontainable" global icon who controls the penetrating gaze by creating Black counter-looks that reposition Black women beyond pejorative imaging and stereotyping in media and music.<sup>6</sup> As the *New York Times* describes, "Formation" masterfully confirms Beyoncé at the same time, "as an Entertainer and an Activist" who stands for the black Southern community.<sup>7</sup> This also explains the reason why she voices out Black pride and African-American cultures in this music video. Considering that Beyoncé

<sup>6</sup> Kinitra D. Brooks, Kameelah L. Martin, *The Lemonade Reader: Beyoncé, Black Feminism and Spirituality*.

<sup>7</sup> Caramanica, J. , Morris, J. and Wortham, J. "Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, Activist, Both?". *New York Times*, 2016. [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/arts/music/beyonce-formation-super-bowl-video.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/arts/music/beyonce-formation-super-bowl-video.html?_r=0) (Assessed 29 March, 2020).

has declared herself as a feminist at the 2014 VMAs for millions of black women,<sup>8</sup> it has further re-awakened the world to Black Feminine Divine.<sup>9</sup> Many critics describe her song as “a righteous gospel”<sup>10</sup> and it is now officially considered as a song of the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement by Alicia Garza, one of the early leaders of the movement.<sup>11</sup> Beyoncé’s music style has always been straightforward and outspoken with explicit lyrics as shown in the beginning of her music video (see fig.1). The striking visuals in “Formation” also function as the tool that help audience to understand the metaphorical messages portrayed in the song, and these will be further explored in the following sections.

### **Black experience in America: The Hurricane Katrina tragic aftermath**

The music video begins with a voice, asking “*What happened at the New Wildin?*” which refers to the New Orleans. The audio is taken from the New Orleans social media rapper Messy Mya’s YouTube video titled “Booking the Ho\*s From New Wildin”, who was shot and murdered in 2010 but still has not yet confirmed the murderer.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that the music video questions about his mysterious death and uses his voice to bring out the social issue in New Orleans. The opening scene then shows



Fig. 2 Beyoncé sitting on top of the New Orleans police car (0:05)



Fig. 3 The fatal aftermath in New Orleans (0:20)

Beyoncé sitting on top of the police car (hinting at the police and race relations in the later part) with massive flooding and destructions in the city (see fig.2&3). These can be interpreted as

<sup>8</sup> Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism*. (University of Texas Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>9</sup> Brooks, *The Lemonade Reader: Beyoncé, Black Feminism and Spirituality*.

<sup>10</sup> Brooks, *The Lemonade Reader: Beyoncé, Black Feminism and Spirituality*.

<sup>11</sup> Philip J. Deloria, Alexander I. Olson, *American Studies: A User's Guide*. (University of California Press, 2017), 212.

<sup>12</sup> Caly Cane, *Live Through This: Surviving the Intersections of Sexuality, God, and Race*. (Cleis Press, 2017).

the fatal aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans happened in 2005, and the criticisms on the US government's slow response to the foreseeable disaster. As *The Guardian* reports, the United States as the First power in the world fails to assist such disastrous aftermath. For instance, lack of the communication with the citizens and their unsuccessful evacuation plan. Along with the fatal flooding which makes it more difficult to provide supplies and medical teams for the whole rescue project.<sup>13</sup> Some claims that the government's slow response is mainly due to New Orleans' cultural background because it is a city specifically for African American community.<sup>14</sup> With over two-third of the black populations, the African American city has resisted white supremacy for centuries and supported a generous and unique culture of vivid beauty.<sup>15</sup> However, it is often mentioned for its history of political corruption, high crime rate and its insularity.<sup>16</sup> The music video does not explain in much details regarding this viewpoint, rather it focuses on the life of the Black Southern community under such natural disasters by displaying Beyoncé along with the fatal destructions in the background. In fact, New Orleans was missing nearly half of its populations and faced innumerable challenges after the hurricane, such as the difficulties of rebuilding their homes, businesses and infrastructure and facilitating the return of thousands of residents scattered across the country, the music video successfully addresses the stark racial and economic divides the storm exposed to a global media audience.<sup>17</sup>

### **Celebration of Black pride: Financial power and self-determination**

One of the major messages in "Formation" is the celebration of Black pride, firstly it confirms the financial power and self-determination of the Black community. Corresponds to

<sup>13</sup> Julian Borger, Duncan Campbell, "Why did help take so long to arrive?". *The Guardian*, Sep 3, 2005. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/03/hurricanekatrina.usa1> (Assessed Mar 29, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Philip E. Steinberg, Rob Shields, *What is a City?: Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina*. (University of Georgia Press, 2008), 32.

<sup>15</sup> Steinberg, *What is a City?: Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Leslie A. Wade, Robin Roberts, Frank de Caro, *Downtown Mardi Gras: New Carnival Practices in Post-Katrina New Orleans*. (University Press of Mississippi, 2019), 3.

the lyrics “*I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress*”, Beyoncé intentionally appears in numerous high-fashion outfits throughout the music video. She wears a *Gucci* red shirtdress and puts on a pair of *Louis Vuitton* boots in the opening scene (see fig.4) and a *Gucci* translucent dress when she is standing in the balcony (see fig.5). Then, she changes into a red puffed sleeved bodysuit with the *Chanel* necklace for the hallway dance (see fig.6) and wears a *Fendi* white fur coat while riding on the car (see fig.7).<sup>18</sup> Beyoncé also appears in an elegant *Aura Tout Vu* long black dress, a vintage hat along with *Dylanlex*'s diamond jewellerys, earrings and necklaces. Standing together with the other four African-Americans, who are also dressed in etiquette black suits in front of an antebellum house (see fig.8).<sup>19</sup> The scenes can imply the



Fig. 4 *Gucci* shirtdress and *Louis Vuitton* boots (0:04)



Fig. 5 *Gucci* spring 2016 collection (3:22)



Fig. 6 *Chanel* red bodysuit and necklace (0:51)



Fig. 7 *Fendi* white fur coat (2:14)



Fig. 8 *Aura Tout Vu* long black dress and *Dylanlex*'s accessories (1:12)

<sup>18</sup> Sarah Lindig, "This Is How Much Beyoncé's 'Formation' Wardrobe Cost". *Harper's BAZAAR*, 7 March, 2016. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/trends/a14524/beyonce-formation-outfits/> (Assessed 30 March, 2020).

<sup>19</sup> Lindig, "This Is How Much Beyoncé's 'Formation' Wardrobe Cost".

financial power and wealth of the powerful Black community possessed instead of the stereotypical impression that they are always impoverished. In particular, the scenes depict a vision of unapologetically black, unapologetically feminist lives situated in the historical, artistic, and political landscape of the US South.<sup>20</sup> As Beyoncé sings, “*I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making / Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper*”, the music video could be suggesting, the best revenge for the Black community to climb up the cultural hierarchy is to be financial independent so they could find their pride within this process.

Such an exaggeration of displaying extravagant costumes and financial power can also be interpreted from another perspective. It corresponds to the one of the characteristics of music video, seeing it as a commodity and advertisement for promotion. As Jody Berland claims in her article, the TV visualization of pop music involves certain degree of commercial purpose, everything in the world of pop music is commodity.<sup>21</sup> Especially when music video always prioritizes visual over audio, audience will focus more on the visual presentation at the first time. The display of luxurious brands can be considered as a perfect tool for promotion and commodity.

### **Celebration of Black pride: Women’s empowerment and rejecting standard of beauty**



*Fig. 10* Beyoncé dancing powerfully with her black female dancers (1:29-1:33)

As Simon Frith suggests, pop singers are engaged in a process called *double enactment*, in which they enact both a star personality and a song personality.<sup>22</sup> Aforementioned, it is not

<sup>20</sup> Tinsley, *Beyoncé in Formation: Remixing Black Feminism*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Berland, Jody. “Sound, Image and Social Space: Music Video and Media Representation” in Simon Frith & Andrew Goodwin eds. *Sound & Vision: The Music Video Reader*. (Routledge, 2005), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. (Harvard University Press, 1998), 212.



the first time Beyoncé sings such explicit and powerful songs. The singer's husky sound and powerful dance moves with her dancers fit well into the song as a contemporary R&B and hip pop music genre. They dance in an organized formation whenever she sings the chorus "*I slay / We Gon' Slay*" (see fig.10). Particularly, the singer herself is a black woman who embraces her Southern identity in every aspects, she brings out the message of the advocacy of Black women's empowerment. From the line "*Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, I slay*", Beyoncé is possibly celebrating the pride and honour that every Black women should have and is encouraging their participation to get in "formation" with her.



Fig. 11 Black women with different colour of hair extensions (1:20)



Fig. 12 Black women styled in various hair braids (2:45-2:48)

Apart from that, the music video is also calling for the rejection of the standard of beauty imposed on Black females. Traditionally, hair is a universal bond and unity among black women.<sup>23</sup> In the African-American culture, good hair meant that "a black person's hair was similar to that of Europeans in texture", either it is long, wavy or straight.<sup>24</sup> They will be considered as being more attractive and socially "better" than their own community. However, the music video features Beyoncé and the other female dancers rocking with multiple hairstyles

<sup>23</sup> Cassandra George Sturges, *A Woman's Soul on Paper*. (iUniverse, 2001), 30.

<sup>24</sup> Sturges, *A Woman's Soul on Paper*, 31.

that are different from the traditional standard of “beauty”. She has this long and golden braids (see fig.8), while the other three put on red, orange and blue hair extensions (see fig.11). The other women are styled in black hair braids of different hair lengths and textures (see fig.12). Instead of following the traditional culture of imitating the hairstyles of Europeans, the music video displays the multiple ways of hairstyles the black women can style with. What really makes the Black community truly beautiful is to wear the way they want and be true to themselves.

### Displaying the uniqueness of African-American culture



Fig. 13 A Black priest in the church (0:18)



Fig. 14 The Black community worshipping (4:06)

“Formation” also exhibits some of the unique black cultures that can only be found among the African-American community. The music video first depicts a Black priest and the other Black community worshipping in the black church (see fig.13 & 14). The Black church here refers to the African Americans congregations in the black Christian churches of the United States which is established after the slavery, they are mainly the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church and the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC).<sup>25</sup> In fact, the black sacred cosmos or the religious worldview of African Americans is related both to their African heritage.<sup>26</sup> The black church is therefore special to the Black community as it functions as the religious representation exclusively to the African-Americans (totally controlled by black community), that frees them from the white dominated church in the past.

<sup>25</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, Lawrence H. Mamiya, Lawrence H.. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. (Duke University Press, 1990), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Lincoln, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 2.





Fig. 15 The scene of Mardi Gras (3:20)

The music video then displays one of the biggest carnival celebration that is exclusively proclaim in New Orleans called Mardi Gras since the 1730s (which is the French word for “Fat Tuesday”) <sup>27</sup>. Mardi Gras is all about music, parades and excitement before the rigorous fasting and sacrifice during Lent before Ash Wednesday.<sup>28</sup> It is important to note that many were worried and argued whether the Mardi Gras should be held as usual especially after the suffering of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, the first post-Katrina Mardi Gras offered the opportunity to demonstrate survival, to uphold the city's unique way of life, and to collectively embody an unbroken spirit, one tested by epochal suffering and loss. <sup>29</sup> It marked a significant turning point; because the city had managed to return to a kind of regularity, while so much work remained to be done, New Orleans had accomplished one gesture of recovery, and its cherished way of life could move ahead.<sup>30</sup> By presenting one of the unique culture in New Orleans, the music video shows how the carnival is filled with joy and happiness (see fig.15) and brings the Black community into unity and coherence while facing the aftermath of the hurricane.

“Formation” also captures the scene when a Mardi Gras Indian is wearing the aesthetic Native Americans fur dress (see fig.16).<sup>31</sup> Despite the Mardi Gras Indians are comprised in large part of the New Orleans’ inner city, the African-American community are historically the

<sup>27</sup> “Mardi Gras Traditions”, *Mardi Gras New Orleans*. <https://www.mardigrasneworleans.com/history/traditions/> (Assessed March 28, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Wade, *Downtown Mardi Gras: New Carnival Practices in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>31</sup> “Mardi Gras Indians History and Tradition”, *Mardi Gras New Orleans*.

least recognized Mardi Gras tradition by the public due to the cultural separation of slavery and racism.<sup>32</sup> However, they gradually developed their own style and outfits for celebrating this important event that is unique in their culture.



*Fig. 16 A Mardi Gras Indian (2:32)*



*Fig. 17 The scene of second line parades (2:52)*

Followed by the scene of Mardi Gras, the music video portrays the Second line parades, which is also another exclusive culture of New Orleans. It refers to the African-based musical parade that features a brass band (see fig.17). They have been linked to funerals in the wider popular imagination, but are also staged for the anniversaries of the African American "social and pleasure" clubs that sponsor them, in particular the Social, Aid and Pleasure Clubs (SAPCs).<sup>33</sup> Similarly, there is a scene of Black marching band on the street (see fig.18). The



*Fig. 18 The scene of Black marching band (3:16)*

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Matt Miller, *Bounce: Rap Music and Local Identity in New Orleans*. (University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 32.

roots of this performance can be traced back to the post-Civil War period when the newly freed African Americans began to experiment with sounds, styles and what it meant to be an American citizen.<sup>34</sup> Over the next fifty years, historically black colleges had perfected this musical fusion and their brass band training, and by the 1960s, the black college marching bands had firmly taken root as a distinctive performance tradition.<sup>35</sup> It is therefore regarded as one of the most unique African-American culture, exclusively in New Orleans.

### **Beyoncé as a Creole: The diversity of African-Americans identity**

Apart from displaying the unique culture among the African-American community, the music video then proceeds to present the diversity of African-American identity with reference to Beyoncé's Creole identity and family history. The term Creole refers to all nonindigenous persons born 'here', namely in their territories of origin whether Europe, Africa, West African, French or Spanish, but mostly the group have roots in French Louisiana.<sup>36</sup> The creole culture is considered as a constitutive feature of their common identity by means of which they distinguish themselves from other ordinary ethnic groups in the society and often stress their racial and cultural hybridity.<sup>37</sup> There is a line in the lyrics, "*My daddy Alabama, Mama Louisiana / You mix that Negr\* with that Creole make a Texas bama*" that corresponds to the singer's identity as a Creole. In fact, Beyoncé's father hails from Alabama who has an African-American heritage, while her mother is descended from a French-Canadian in the 18th century.<sup>38</sup> The singer is bringing out her diverse identity and the blend cultures and origins of modern blackness in the music video. She also shows the determination of defending her roots by singing, "*Earned all this money / but they never take the country off me*". Even though she

<sup>34</sup> William Dukes Lewis, *Marching to the Beat of a Different Drum: Performance Traditions of Historically Black College and University Marching Bands*. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Lewis, *Marching to the Beat of a Different Drum: Performance Traditions of Historically Black College and University Marching Bands*.

<sup>36</sup> Jacqueline Knörr, *Creole Identity in Postcolonial Indonesia*. (Berghahn Books, 2014), 20.

<sup>37</sup> Knörr, *Creole Identity in Postcolonial Indonesia*, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Antonio J. Newell, "Beyoncé 'Formation' Music Video And Style Geared To HBCU Bands?". *Inquisitr*, Feb 7, 2016. <https://www.inquisitr.com/2773855/beyonce-formation-music-video-and-style-geared-to-hbcu-bands/#ixzz6HztAnQK6> (Assessed March 30, 2020).

is financially independent, the singer is not wiping out her blackness, but to embrace every aspects of it. Beyoncé makes further reference to her Creole identity from her choice of soul food in the song, “*I like corn breads and collard greens, Oh yes, you besta believe it*”. Corn breads and collard greens are the ethnic cuisine traditionally eaten by African-Americans of the Southern United States.<sup>39</sup> Overall, the music video utilizes Beyoncé’s image as a well-known artist and her Creole identity to exhibit the diversity of African-American cultures and identity to the public through popular music.

### **Open to interpretation: Call for racial justice among police and race relations**



*Fig. 19* A young black boy dancing in front of the police (4:02)



*Fig. 20* Raising up his hands as surrender (4:21)

The most controversial scene in “Formation” is the police and race relations at the end of the music video. The scene is open to interpretation and is most possibly aim to show support for the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement. Released between the birthdays of African-American Trayvon Martin and Sandra Bland, both the victims of brutal police enforcement and racism, some declare the scene has an anti-police implication.<sup>40</sup> However, one could justly interpreted as drawing attention to the governmental power imposed on the Black community. There is a young black boy dancing in front of the police frontline armless but appears to be fearless (see fig.19). To a great extent, this scene is addressing the shooting of the 18 year old African-American boy Michael Brown in 2014, who was shot by a Ferguson police officer while being

<sup>39</sup> "Soul Food a brief history." *African American Registry*. <https://aaregistry.org/story/soul-food-a-brief-history/> (Assessed March 28, 2020).

<sup>40</sup> Deloria, *American Studies: A User's Guide*. 212-213.

told to move to the sidewalk unarmed.<sup>41</sup> Protests and demonstrations continued for weeks after the accident, demanding for racial justice and civil rights for African-Americans.<sup>42</sup> Particularly, the community of New Orleans have generally existed outside the police and white power structure of the city, and have in fact faced police repression historically.<sup>43</sup> However, the music video somehow expresses a peaceful scenery in complete contrast to the reality. The young boy raises his hands as a sign of surrender, which is followed by the police in formation (see fig.20). The camera then shifts to the graffiti that says “*Stop shooting us*” on the wall (see fig.21). These scenes could be seen as the call for racial justice and what the Black



Fig. 21 Graffiti writing “*Stop shooting us*” (4:22)

community hope for: not to be ruled by deaths, pain and the violent governmental power. Rather than expressing an anti-police sentiment, the video stresses on the wish for a harmonious social relation between the police and the Black community. As the ending scene suggests, Beyoncé sinking into the water together with the New Orleans police car (see fig.22), those violent enforcement should also come to an end.



Fig. 22 Beyoncé sinks into the water together with the police car (4:25)

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Williams, “Five Years After Michael Brown’s Death, His Father Wants a New Investigation”, *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/09/us/ferguson-michael-brown.html> (Assessed 30 March, 2020).

<sup>42</sup> Williams, “Five Years After Michael Brown’s Death, His Father Wants a New Investigation”.

<sup>43</sup> Steinberg, *What is a City?: Rethinking the Urban After Hurricane Katrina*, 34.



**Conclusion: “Formation” as a successfully produced music video**

All in all, popular music emphasizes the interpretation through performance, music video to be specific, should be open for interpretations so as to give audience a fuller understanding of the messages behind. Beyoncé’s “Formation” can be considered as a successful music video produced to showcase her image as both an entertainer and activist. In addition, the music video skillfully depicts powerful visuals such as the scenes of New Orleans culture and the destructive aftermath of Hurricane Katrina that blend well with the song lyrics. By displaying explicit visuals in popular music, these assist audience for more vivid interpretations. This music video also shows support for the Black community and highlights the diversity of African American culture in connection to Beyoncé’s own cultural background as a Creole woman.

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