- Criticism -

The Rhetoric of Beyonce's Formation

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Abstract: After its release on February 6, 2016, Beyoncé Knowles's visual song "Formation" garnered a variety of responses from popular culture critics, scholars, and public figures. If one were to listen to the music and lyrics without viewing the video, the conclusion could be drawn that the song is simply a tribute to Knowles's southern roots, a declaration of her personal preferences, and a celebration of her agency as an independent black woman. However, Beyoncé's embodiment of the West African female deity Mami Wata in the video signals engagement in a discourse about history, spirituality, gender, sexuality, power, capitalism, and geography that sets "Formation" apart from the superstar's catalogue of popular music.

Mami Wata represents the nurturing and destructive forces of nature; women as the purveyors and preservers of culture, and of life. She is a wily and beautiful sea goddess - a divine trickster—known for her ability to enchant men, her fascination with modernity, and her spiritually and materially restorative powers. The Formation video combines elements of Afrofuturist, womanist, and feminist principles to affirm the richness of Black American culture while reminding Black women of their power and the necessity that they use it to ensure black survival. This presentation explores Mami Wata's (Beyoncé's) call to action: "Okay ladies, now let's get in formation" and why it is necessary for black women to do so.

> *"What are you doing if you are not reflecting the times? That to me is the definition of an artist?"*
>
> *-Nina Simone*

Breaking Down the Discourse of "Formation"

This paper focuses on the ways the lyrics, music, dance and visual presentation of "Formation", along with Beyoncé Knowles's ethos as a cultural icon, come together to provide a reflection on the socio-political climate at the time of the visual song's release, as well as a snapshot of black history, within a coded format that is consistent with the African American tradition of emancipatory artistry. It is important to note that Trayvon Martin's birthday was on February 5. He would have been 21 years old in 2016. The Lemonade visual album, which includes the song "Formation", was released on February 6, 2016 and that year the Superbowl took place in Oakland, California, a city well known for its black activism. Additionally, 66% of the athletes in the NFL are African American men. What better way to celebrate Black History Month and black Americans than during, arguably, the most prestigious sporting event of the

year, America's game?

After its release, Beyoncé Knowles's "Formation" video garnered a variety of responses from popular culture critics, members of academia, and public figures, including former mayor of New York City, Rudy Giuliani. In an interview with Hollywoodreporter.com in 2016, Giuliani states:

> Can't you figure out who you're putting on? I mean this is a political position, she's probably going to take advantage of it. You're talking to middle America when you have the Super Bowl, so you can have entertainment. Let's have, you know, decent wholesome entertainment, and not use it as a platform to attack the people who, you know, put their lives at risk to save us. (par. 9)

If one were to listen to the music and lyrics without viewing the video, the conclusion could be drawn that the song is simply a tribute to Knowles's southern roots, a declaration of her personal preferences, and a celebration of her agency as an independent black woman. However, when viewing the video while listening to the music, and conducting a close reading of the lyrics, it is clear the narrative Beyoncé presents is far more complex and deeply political, though maybe not in the way that Giuliani suggests. It is not anti-law-enforcement, but rather, pro-black-survival, a celebration of blackness. In her article "Critical Discourse Analysis – A Primer", Sue L.T. McGregor asserts that:

> Discourse analysis challenges us to move from seeing language as abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political condition. Even more significant, our words (written or oral) are used to convey a broad sense of meanings and the meaning we convey with those words is identified by our immediate social, political, and historical conditions. (par. 4)

The musical style of the song is a subgenre of hip hop known as Trap Bounce. The term "trap music" refers to a specifically southern style of hip hop. The "trap" is the name given to the streets of poor black neighborhoods or the trap houses where cocaine deals are made. Southern rappers usually rapped about drug dealing in the genre's inception. Bounce music is a style of hip hop which originated in the projects of New Orleans and is influenced by the city's deeply rooted musical traditions. Producing a song in this musical style immediately signals entry into a creatively, chronologically and geographically black space, rife with suffering and full of triumph.

The language Knowles uses to communicate her personal/public narrative is what Geneva Smitherman refers to as Black Dialect, Black Language, or Black English. Smitherman writes:

> Black Dialect is an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African Heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture. The Black idiom is used by 80 to 90 percent of American Blacks, at least some of the time. (2)

Knowles's use of rhyme, current cultural colloquialisms such as "haters", "fly", "twirl", "rock", and "trick" (among others), as well as call and response, give the song a hip hop/spoken word quality. This distinction is important because it sets "Formation" apart from the rest of her catalogue of popular music. Hip Hop and spoken word poetry traditionally have been vehicles for black activist rhetoric. A common feature of these forms is their ability to entertain and inform simultaneously, with the goal being to "drop knowledge" while using a rhythmic mnemonic device that can be remembered and repeated.

The name “Formation” itself implies a planned arrangement or structure. This refers to the construction of knowledge about blackness, black womanhood, and black oppression. It also applies to the structure of Black Language, which has historically been associated with a lack of intellectual ability and education. However, this dialect with its regional variations, has a concrete set of grammatical rules that are understood by most black people to some degree due to a shared history and experience, yet more difficult for others outside the culture to interpret. A New Yorker article on the topic of Black English paraphrases the linguist John McWhorter: “…someone who studied Black English as a foreign language would have a hard time figuring out when, and how, to deploy it”. The title of the song is also a call to action, a pledge of solidarity, and the establishment of a structure of protection against an ensuing battle, all of which Knowles directs toward black women as she repeatedly chants, “Ok, ladies now let’s get in formation” (cause I slay)” ("Formation").

What Knowles seems to be requesting is protection against the decimation of black culture and black bodies. Her enlistment of women speaks to the power of the feminine principal: the role of women as purveyors and preservers of culture and of life. When she says, “Slay trick or you get eliminated”, she is not simply talking about a dancer getting cut from an audition if she does not “kill” the moves ("Formation"). She is imploring women to do what is necessary to save blackness, in all its forms, from being eliminated: historically, culturally, geographically and physically. In this case, the use of the typically misogynistic term “trick”, meaning slut or prostitute, is turned on its head. Knowles uses this as a code word to mean a cunning, or wily woman who can use her wits to outsmart those who underestimate her. This character creation is reminiscent of the trickster character common in African folktales, only in female form. Creating a female trickster is an indictment of sexism and an empowerment of women.

"Formation" was directed by Melina Matsoukas, who was interviewed by The New York Times in December of 2016. The journalist, Wesley Morris, made this comment: “It was exciting seeing the world re-engage with a music video as a formal work. We weren’t just talking about Beyoncé with "Formation". We were talking about history, current affairs, art and politics” (par. 7). Matsoukas responded:

> That wasn’t anything expected. I had no idea that it would have that reaction and initiate those kinds of conversations. That was very satisfying as an artist to be a part of that. I feel there’s been a lot of racial injustice in our community, and we’re hungry for somebody to say something and for somebody as strong as Beyoncé to say something and show value to people of color. (par. 7)

Discourse Analysis

As it opens, the video has the grainy quality of a VHS tape and the words “parental advisory” appear like the digital print out on a desktop computer screen. The message warns adults there will be explicit language. This documentary-like introduction has the power to transport the viewer to the period between the late 1970s and 1990s when politicians; and others such as Tipper Gore were waging a freedom-of-speech war on rap music and any music that had any language or political message that went against “the establishment”. In this context, Beyoncé is bringing forth a powerful message that black people's fight to speak and to be heard continues, and that she will not be silenced. The first words are uttered by Messy Mya, a queer Bounce rapper and YouTuber notorious in the New Orleans music and social media scenes, who was murdered in 2010. Beyoncé stands on the roof of a police car that is submerged in water, giving the impression that she is rising from the water. She is wearing a red and white dress. This image evokes the West African female deity, Mami Wata, who, according to Edward Chukwurah, “in her most modern incarnation, is sea-faring, openly gender-queer, and has a love of flashy and foreign gadgets. Her attachment to modernity and

greater destructiveness are reflections of the scorn of tradition, as well as the cultural anxiety inflicted by Western influences" (par. 1). Mami Wata is also known for her beauty and power to enchant men, as well as her power to offer spiritual and material healing to her people. Messy Mya proclaims (0:04): "What happened at the New Orleans? Bitch, I'm back by popular demand!" Then, music plays as a montage of black bodies, violence, nightlife, black neighborhoods, the "Black Church" and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina appear and disappear. This song is as much a personal "shout out" to Messy Mya, as it is a statement about respect for all black identities, black resilience, outrage over the marginalization and oppression of black citizens at the hands of law enforcement and political officials of the city, and a declaration that black New Orleans is back. The feminist and spiritual aspects of this song/video are clearly engaging each other in a discourse about history, religion, gender, sexuality and power.

Beyoncé is stationary now reclining on the police car (0:21). Her demeanor is intensely focused and ripe with ennui as she describes the superficial red-carpet treatment and relentless criticism she receives, due to her stardom. She addresses the speculation about her marriage and her wealth when she speaks the lyrics, "I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress. I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces" (0:33). All the while the music is a repetitive background beat. Then, as she gives what she believes to be her pedigree – her own understanding of who she truly is and where she comes from – the music builds: "My daddy, Alabama. Mama, Louisiana. You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas 'bama" (1:37). The repetitive beat becomes Bounce dance music, a celebration, an indication that something very important is about to be said, and she is fully, energetically engaged.

Knowles uses metaphor and Black Language to create layers of meaning about her personal identity, female identity, and black identity in general. McGregor contends that:

> "Even one word can convey strong meaning—connotations! These connotations are not always, or seldom, in the dictionary, but often assigned on the basis of the cultural knowledge of the participants. Connotations associated with one word, or through metaphors and figures of speech, can turn the uncritical viewer's mind" (par. 15).

Beyoncé sings, "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros. I like my negro nose with Jackson five nostrils. Earned all this money but they never take the country out me. I got hot sauce in my bag swag" (0:45). She is responding to criticisms about her daughter's natural hair that have surfaced in social media, but using the Black English practice of dropping the possessive indicator so she can be understood to be talking about her own hair as well: "I like my baby hair" instead of "I like my baby's hair…". In fact, she is talking about herself, her daughter and all black women being free to make their own decisions about what is beautiful to them, particularly pertaining to hair. This is evidenced by images of black women wearing a plethora of hairstyles throughout the video.

Knowles goes on to use language in the same way to address criticism that has long been present in the media about her husband's physical appearance: "I like my negro nose" instead of "I like my negro's nose…". Again, though she is directly stating she likes the way her husband looks, she is also talking about her own nose, and black noses in general. She uses the metaphor "Jackson Five nostrils" to make a statement about black noses that is respectful and positive on the one hand, since the Jackson Five is iconic in black culture. On the other hand, she is also speculating on "post-Jackson Five nostrils" and the attendant internalized oppression and self-hatred that could be at the root of the surgical alteration of black body parts to resemble white features more closely. The verse ends with Knowles proclaiming that the money she has earned does not change her. The "hot sauce in my bag swag" line implies a secret spicy ingredient or hidden weapon she has but one that many black women,

particularly black southern women, possess.

The bridge between the first and second verses returns to the repetitive background beat, but the precedent has been set. The viewer can sense that more knowledge is about to be dropped. Messy Mya is again featured (1:00) in a sample taken from the YouTube video "A 27 -Piece, Huh?", in which he is expressing appreciation for a woman's hairstyle, as he randomly talks to people walking around the French Quarter. That sample is immediately followed by a brief commentary by queer Bounce artist Big Freedia, who makes it clear that she did not come to play and expresses an appreciation for "cornbreads and collard greens", or what is known as soul food in the "Black Community". Both performers speak in a variation of Black Language that is unique to New Orleans. Their comments make their presence clear and demand acknowledgement. These portions of the song serve to reintroduce Beyoncé, while asserting the right for black people of all identities to exist in a way that centers them.

Knowles uses language that is heavily laden with racist connotations, but she does so in an emancipatory way that requires requalification and redefinition of certain terms. Words such as "negro", "bama", and "yellow bone" have all historically been tools of categorization of black people, their level of intelligence and morality, and their proximity to whiteness. She creates a framework in which such language has uplifting prideful black meaning rather than the dehumanizing and denigrating meanings assigned to it by white racists. She says that when she sees something and wants it (2:00), she goes after it and she may use her "trickster" qualities to attain it. Her statement that "I stunt, yellow bone it" implies that she uses white assumptions about black people and complexion to her advantage. There has been criticism of this line as colorist and indicative of her "light-skinned privilege". However, it is possible that Knowles recognizes the historical significance of this concept – known as passing – as a means by which black folks have been able to gain access to resources and opportunities they would otherwise be unable to access. For many black folks and their families, taking advantage of light-skinned privilege, or passing, has meant the difference between surviving or not. But, for Beyoncé, passing or taking advantage of her privilege as a black woman with a "light" complexion is not a permanent state of being embedded in secrecy or shame, but rather, a means to an end that centers black people of all appearances and identities as valuable and powerful by standards of their own making, as we see in the church pews, the second lines, beauty supply stores, and the family portraits on textured walls.

The second verse of "Formation" can be interpreted as a feminist commentary on women's independence and sexual agency : "If he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster" (2:57). This line implies women's sexual agency, their right to decide whether the sex with a given partner is "good sex" or not, and their ability to provide the man with a good meal as reward for his sexual prowess. However, considering the multiple layers of meaning in the song, this is just one perspective. Knowles is also making an economic and political commentary. Red Lobster, which is a moderately priced restaurant chain that originated in Florida, has become a cultural symbol among black Americans. Yet, footage in the video shows restaurants in black neighborhoods that have been closed down in the wake of Katrina. A take-out box of crawfish, which cannot be found on a Red Lobster menu, but is notorious fare in New Orleans, makes a cameo appearance. The reference to Red Lobster and the subsequent images of closed black-owned restaurants and crawfish can be interpreted as a commentary on how a capitalist system contributes to the demise of a self-sustaining black economy while it allows popular chain restaurants to thrive, although they do not meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Beyoncé goes on to state, "If he hit it right, I might take him on a ride on my chopper. Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some Js, let him shop, uhhh" (3:04). During the Hurricane Katrina event, both Condolezza Rice and George Bush were criticized for their failure to

respond to the crisis in a timely manner. Paraphrasing a U.S. News and World Report article, contributor Kenneth T. Walsh reported that Bush flew over New Orleans in Air Force One to survey the area (par. 6-7) before returning to Washington D.C. from a vacation in Texas. Another paraphrase of Snopes.com illuminates the ides that Rice was shopping for expensive shoes in New York City (par. 4). Beyoncé's lyrics are a codified way of alerting black people to the lack of care exhibited by the administration in dealing with this devastating event. In the video, she flips the double fisted finger. It is possible that those fingers were meant for Bush and Rice as a reflective look at their neglect of duty and obligation to protect the black citizens of New Orleans.

Toward the end of the video (4:00), white policemen stand on the street, in "Formation", donning riot gear, as a small black boy in black pants and a hoody dances in front of them. He suddenly stops and spreads his arms wide. The policemen raise their hands in the air as the words "stop shooting us", spray painted on a wall, flash on the screen. This is at once a commentary on how young black males are viewed by white supremacist society as being a threat to "law and order" merely by their organic performance of blackness and of youth, and a statement that black emancipatory artistry is a performance of resistance against this system of oppression. In an NPR interview, filmmaker Dream Hampton shares her perspective:

> I think that the image with the boy who's basically conducting a police lineup is magic. This is about them being in a trance, and them having to do what they usually try to make him do, which is put their hands up. The next cut about "Stop shooting us, it's not the black power moment that we got in the late '60s and '70s, which she referenced on the actual Super Bowl day, with the Black Panther beret, but it is absolutely a message that comes straight out of Ferguson: "Hands up, don't shoot".
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> I think it was incredibly powerful. I think it was also a nod to Tamir Rice, you know. It's about a black visionary, a black future [where] we are imagining ourselves having power, and magic. And I think it's beautiful. (par. 8-9)

The video closes with Beyoncé standing on what appears to be the porch of a plantation mansion, dressed in black, as a group of well-dressed black men (also in black) stand watch around her. She says, "You know you dat bitch when you cause all this conversation. Always stay gracious. Bes' revenge is yo' paper" (4:30). As she, again, reclaims a word – bitch – her statement is not borne of braggadocio about her personal wealth. It is a statement about the necessity for black people, especially black women, to amass wealth as a form of resistance. Finally, Mami Wata (Beyoncé) sinks into the water reclining on the roof of the police car, returning from whence she came; taking with her something as payment for the injustice that has been perpetrated. From the documentary "Trouble the Water", which chronicles the Katrina disaster, we hear a man exclaim, "Golly, look at that wata, boy!" Mami Wata was summoned to protect, celebrate, embolden, and incite her people. Now, her work is done.

"Formation" and Womanist Discourse

Aside from being a rich multimodal example of how thoughtfully arranged cultural symbols can create a discourse about Black American history, black culture, and racism, Beyonce's "Formation" also creates a womanist discourse in which she establishes black female identity and spirituality as a set of qualities, behaviors, and beliefs that run counter to Western notions of feminism, black feminine identity and spirituality. Womanism is a concept first introduced by writer Alice Walker. In their article entitled "Alice Walker's Womanism: Perspectives Past and Present", Izgarjan and Markov paraphrase Walker's description of Womanism:

Walker defines a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" who loves other women and/or men sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's

emotional flexibility and women's strength and is committed to "survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female". She firmly locates womanism within black matrilinear culture deriving the word from womanish used by black mothers to describe girls who want to "know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for anyone" and whose behavior is "outrageous, courageous or willful" (305).

By positioning herself as both the wealthy powerful, professional woman and the "Texas 'bama", Beyoncé unifies the concepts of inaccessible superstar and the down to earth southern girl from "around the way". She is making a statement about the wide range of characteristics of black womanhood, many of which are ignored or diminished by a white supremacist society. However, these identities are not ignored within a Womanist context. The video centers women of multiple identities: women twerking, women presenting themselves as southern "ladies", women as mothers, women with sexual desire and discernment, women as bitches, women as rich and poor, women as beauty queens, women of various sizes, shades, and shapes, women as ordinary and as goddesses. All these depictions are celebrated, as are the identities of non-binary members of the "Black Community", children, and men. The focus of Womanism is the well-being and validation of all members of the community within the framework of a holistic embrace of feminine identity and spirituality.

Mami Wata's appearance in the video underscores Knowles's message: the black woman as a macrocosm, occupying a place in this world and in the supernatural world. Mami Wata, is often depicted as a mermaid, a creature who is both human and otherworldly. According to Christey Carwile in hamanism: An Encyclopedia of Word Beliefs, Practices and Cutlures, Volume 1, the colors red and white are often used to symbolize Mami Wata's influence (929). The red is symbolic of death, destruction, masculinity, and power, while white symbolizes beauty, creation, femininity, water and wealth. The combination of the two colors and what they represent is an indication of the complexity of black womanhood. Woman is not only soft, pure, nurturing, spiritual, and beautiful. She is also powerful, sexual, materialistic, and dangerous. There is no qualification of these traits as good or bad within the values of Vodou spirituality. They just exist as aspects of life. The confluence of these two aspects of Mami Wata's identity shatter the long-edified essentialist stereotypes of black women as either Mammy, Sapphire, or Jezebel, as well as the archetype of woman (Eve) being responsible for original sin, and thus responsible for the evil in the world that Christianity asserts is the nature of womanhood. Mami Wata's existence maintains that black women have the ability to be many, possibly all, things in a way that is valued, respected, and sometimes feared – as those with power often are – yet, never sinful. Henry John Drewal describes Mami Wata:

> An Efik sculpture portraying Mami Wata as a human-fishgoat-priestess handling a bird and a snake demonstrates her hybridity and powers of transformation. She can also easily assume aspects of a Hindu god or goddess without sacrificing her identity. She is a complex multivocal, multifocal symbol with so many resonances that she feeds the imagination, generating, rather than limiting, meanings and significances: nurturing mother, sexy mama, provider of riches, healer of physical and spiritual ills, embodiment of dangers and desires, risks and challenges, dreams and aspirations, fears and forebodings. (62)

Throughout "Formation" there are scenes of a black male pastor preaching while the congregation, made up mostly of women, rejoices. The juxtaposition of African female cosmology and the traditional Black Church problematizes Christianity and the limitations it places on black women. In an article published in Time magazine in 2016, writers Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley and Caitlin O'Neill describe Beyoncé's embodiment of the deity, Mami Wata, and the Conjure woman who summons her:

> Yes, "Formation" evokes New Orleans' Hoodoo and Voodoo traditions with Bey in witchy black before an abandoned plantation house. But I also mean conjure in the sense of marrying dreams, work and power to create a new world—a world where black women own their bodies, pleasures, and possibilities. "I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it," Bey sings, and I believe her.

Conjure women have become important figures for black feminists who refuse to accept the world we've been given. "In societies in which race and class are defining attributes of one's life, the conjure woman's spiritual disposition affords her the flexibility and prerogative to manipulate such confining spaces…to create safe, protective spaces for other people of color," said Africana scholar Kameelah Martin. (par. 11-12)

According to a nationwide study conducted in 2012 by the Washington Post and the Kaiser Family Foundation, black women are among the most religious groups in the United States. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, an associate professor of Ethics and Society at Vanderbilt Divinity School, states that "black women's strong faith is the result of the triple jeopardy of oppression caused by racism, sexism and classism" (par. 15). Yet, according to Anthony B. Pinn, a professor of Humanities and Religious Studies at Rice University, "their experience of oppression and marginalization are very similar within the church" (par. 16). In the article "Womanist theology", Emilie Townes states that "womanist theology seeks to address the systemic oppression of women of color, the oppressive appropriation of the Bible by patriarchal churches and issues of black sexuality, among other important issues" (159).

Knowles uses her position as an entertainer to engage in a critical public discourse which transports the ordinary lives and experiences of black women from a micro level to a macro level discourse about power dynamics within white supremacist culture, black heteronormative relationships and sexist religious oppression. She reverses what T. A. Van Djik refers to as the positive presentation of the ingroup and "the negative presentation of the outgroup to challenge existing notions of power as they pertain to race and gender". Van Djik contends that "powerful groups can control discourse through content, as well as the structures [or Formation] of text and talk" (356). By invoking multiple cultural symbols within the contexts of film, music, song, dance, history, politics and religion, Knowles assumes power and control, which she captures in a definitively black space and invites black people – black women – to occupy with her.

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