

# Why We Need to Get in “Formation”: The Rhetoric of Beyoncé

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Following the 2016 releases of the single “Formation” and the album *Lemonade* by singer Beyoncé, America broke into contentious debate regarding the political and thematic content of the songs and their accompanying videos. This essay explores the rhetoric of Beyoncé’s music video and song “Formation” and a portion of the visual album for *Lemonade*, analyzing how her depiction of black culture effectively opposes the dominant colorblind ideology of contemporary society. Furthermore, this analysis seeks to make an argument for why this current “moment” in popular culture actually has significance for the expanding national Black Lives Matter movement for racial justice and equality.

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The popular music industry, composed of catchy songs with little substantive ideological matter, is often considered to be a site of bland frivolity and normative compliance. On occasion, however, a major release that deviates from the standards of triviality can be embraced by national audiences and provoke controversy that may generate profound social implications. In February of 2016, the song “Formation,” by popular music icon Beyoncé, became one such instance of this phenomenon. Circulation of the hit song and its music video coupled with a highly polemical Super Bowl halftime performance only days later prompted a fervent debate about race in America. Containing poignant imagery of black culture and blatant references to black power, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement—which has itself incited a rift in American society over the last few years—“Formation” effectively roused the attention of the nation. Following the halftime performance, dissonance, primarily between black and white communities, had some exalting the display

and others denigrating it, calling it a “race-baiting stunt” of “hate speech and racism” (Moyer). In spite of this, the “Formation” movement only gained greater momentum. In late April of 2016, Beyoncé released *Lemonade*, the visual album from which the song derives. Despite rumors swirling that the record was solely about troubles in her marriage with rapper Jay-Z, the theme of black culture featured throughout was too prominent to be dismissed. Contrary to what one would assume, even with her intensely political themes, images, and messages giving voice to black America and its persisting social justice struggles, Beyoncé has successfully captivated audiences across racial, ethnic, and class lines. This ability has aptly been attributed to the “conundrum of Beyoncé”—the notion “that she is for everyone, and yet she is not for everyone” (Blay).

In a society where social perceptions and interactions are guided by a predominating ideology of “colorblindness,” it makes little sense that a musical project like Beyoncé’s could thrive as much as it has (O’Brien and

Korgen 356). Under colorblind culture, the idealized demonstration of race moves toward “ethnic ambiguity” in both aesthetic appearance and cultural displays. The societal shift to “multiracialism is now so marked that some believe the time has come to dismiss race altogether as a useful social indicator”; as one individual in a survey for *The Guardian* describes it, “Trying to define people by the old race labels just doesn’t work any more” (Arlidge). Colorblind ideology fosters the belief that “the barriers between black and white are really coming down,” and at a surface level, this may appear to be true (Arlidge). However, according to cultural theorists Eileen O’Brien and Kathleen Korgen, the perpetuation of colorblindness enables the “minimization of racism” or the denial of actual differences in social experiences and outcomes due to race (359). Racial discrimination is then believed to be something “that is rare, and occurs only in isolated, fluke incidents, if at all” (359). This belief generates “a great ‘perception gap’ between blacks and whites about the extent of contemporary discrimination, with whites largely underestimating it”—ultimately, to the detriment of race relations (359).

I posit that this is where Beyoncé enters the scene. By disseminating racially-driven, political messages that draw attention to the realities of the black experience in contemporary America, Beyoncé can effectually send shocks to the prevailing system, which can encourage social awareness and, in turn, improve racial dynamics. Of course, implying that her music and videos will invariably have such a definitive and complete impact is, perhaps, a naïve approach to analyzing them rhetorically; doing so would require refutation of widely accepted media theories that concede that consumers have a

more negotiated understanding of media messages as a result of their various predispositions and experiences (as opposed to their submission to a “hypodermic needle” influence). While it may be practically impossible for Beyoncé alone to have a definitive impact on race relations, I argue that it is still reasonable to assert that “Formation” and *Lemonade* are invaluable in revolutionizing national conceptions of race.

By analyzing crucial elements of the song and music video for “Formation” and the visual album for *Lemonade*, I intend to illustrate that Beyoncé and her recent creations do not merely constitute another fleeting “moment” of substance in an otherwise superficial world of popular culture. In order to form a more holistic consideration of Beyoncé’s current impact, I felt that it was also imperative to conduct empirical research in order to discover how general audiences and even academic scholars were responding to the projects. Synthesizing the breadth of my textual analysis and primary research along with existing criticism, it becomes evident that the value of Beyoncé, “Formation,” and *Lemonade* far transcend their simple pop culture allure. Due to their promotion of social awareness and justice through authentic depictions of the black experience, as well as their visibility and potential to mobilize and unify across racial lines, these pieces, I propose, are impactful enough to contest colorblindness and assist in advancing the national movement for racial equality in America. For this comprehensive analysis, I will first rhetorically analyze Beyoncé’s songs and videos of “Formation” and *Lemonade*; then, in the second half of this essay, I will discuss the results of my research including general population surveys and interviews with scholars. I will then conclude this inquiry

with the reasons that I purport this current Beyoncé spectacle to be of salience.

**Analyzing the Rhetoric of Beyoncé:  
Using Black Signifiers and Emblematic  
Visuals to Appeal to Black Collectivism**

One aspect of Beyoncé's projects that makes them important in this national movement is their genuine portrayals of what it means to be black in contemporary America. As Johnnetta B. Cole asserts in "Culture: Negro, Black and Nigger<sup>1</sup>," an essay for *The Black Scholar* (1970), "One of the many offshoots of the Black Liberation movement is an increased awareness of being black...turning attention to the complexities and glories of Afro-American history, probing the psychology of being black, and seeking the boundaries of black subculture" (40). The imagery and thematic overtones throughout "Formation" and *Lemonade* explore this very space. They simultaneously celebrate the vitality of black culture to the appeal of black audiences and foster cultural understanding in white audiences; moreover, they openly address critically relevant topics of greater contention, such as police brutality. Beyoncé's allusions, carefully integrated into "Formation" and the rest of *Lemonade*, are pointed statements that draw attention to the social injustices that continue to subjugate black communities. Undoubtedly, to a society that holds stock in a colorblind ideology, such direct references to "blackness" and all that the concept connotes can be inflammatory. Yet, by forcing "white fans...to engage with her blackness and black issues in a real way," Beyoncé's work

at the very least provides an outlet for individuals to begin a racial sensitization process that recognizes the fallacy of post-racialization and additionally serves as "a subtle reminder that black culture is taken for granted" (Blay). Even though many of the expressions may require deeper deliberation as to their meaning, they serve as effective rhetorical appeals to black and white audiences alike.

Achieved through clever nods to that which is inextricably black, Beyoncé's exaltation of black culture utilizes what scholars have long referred to as black "signifiers"—vernacular and visual inclusions that are generally associated with black communities. In Stuart Hall's articulation, evocation of black culture "in its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich, deep, varied attention to speech, in its inflections toward the vernacular and the local, in its rich production of counter-narratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary" often draws extensively from use of the black signifier (378). In simplified terms, Henry Louis Gates explains "[s]ignifyin(g)...is the figurative difference between the literal and the metaphorical, between surface and latent meaning" (82, 75)—a black rhetorical device of sorts.

One signifier that Beyoncé uses is the afro hairstyle that she and her black dancers flaunt in "Formation" and at different times throughout *Lemonade*. Lyrically, she even expresses reverence for the characteristically black silhouette, stating: "I like my baby heir with baby hair and afros" (Beyoncé, "Formation"). With associative use of the

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<sup>1</sup> The author and editor have, with reservations, decided to preserve Cole's original writing of what was then and is now culturally recognized as a racial slur, rather than censoring it to "N\*\*\*\*\*" or equivalent, specifically because of Cole's purpose in printing the word to begin with.

word “heir,” Beyoncé ascribes the hairstyle a status of regality. This choice of diction is noteworthy because the afro is a common black quality that has generally been excluded from societal standards of beauty. As Quamesha Brown, a student from Washington University in St. Louis, explains, the “white ideal of beauty,” consisting of “lighter skin tones, straighter hair, and makeup that covers the natural sheen of black skin tones” has long been presented as desirable over that which is naturally black (10). Brown notes that pressure to adapt to “a more white washed [sic] version of blackness” has been reinforced through media idols such as Beyoncé herself; over the course of her career, she has famously donned straight, blonde tresses (10). By returning both figuratively and literally to her black “roots,” Beyoncé rejects the norm that insinuates that blackness is inherently lesser; it is a minute gesture, but by embracing identifiably black features, she effectively takes a stand against a very perceptible form of social discrimination that devalues black individuals in their natural state. Highly praised feminist scholar bell hooks even affirms this quality of *Lemonade*, agreeing that its “intent, its purpose is to seduce, celebrate, and delight—to challenge the ongoing present day devaluation and dehumanization of the black female body” (n. pag.). But Beyoncé’s stance is not simply limited to the black female aesthetic; along similar lines, she presents another signifier in the lyric in which she venerates the “Negro nose with Jackson 5 nostrils”—a more universal black trait (Beyoncé, “Formation”). By giving recognition to these greatly underappreciated black physical qualities, Beyoncé not only appeals to her black audience but also initiates the racial sensitization process across communities,

urging discourse to redefine what is valued in society.

These signifiers that, according to hooks’ analysis of *Lemonade*, “[shift] the gaze of white mainstream culture” and “[challenge] us all to look anew, to radically revision how we see” black features (n. pag.), are actually critically relevant to another Beyoncé lyric that delves deeper into the issue of social-systemic oppression. Listeners have latched onto the infamously provocative line in the song “Sorry” from *Lemonade* that coldly declares, “He better call Becky with the good hair” (Beyoncé, “Sorry”). However, there seems to be little awareness of the connotations the sentiment engenders. Many initially speculated that Becky was the name of the alleged mistress of Beyoncé’s husband Jay-Z. However, further inquiry produced another theory that identified the potential signification in it. According to the conjecture, “Becky” is supposed to symbolize a female—likely white—with “good hair” being used as a “damaging colloquial term that often refers to someone whose hair doesn’t naturally kink or curl—hair that’s, historically, been labeled as the opposite of aspirational” (Bryant). The idea of “good hair” has roots in the era of slavery, when the degree of kink in hair was used to separate slaves into chores of housework or the more grueling fieldwork; the women with the curlier, more discernibly African hair were sentenced to the fields (Bryant). This weighty inference, if accurate, is truly an example of the black signifier at its finest. By its definition, signifying “can mean the ‘ability to talk with great innuendo,’” especially in “making fun of a person or situation” (Hall 75); whether or not it was used in response to the situation of possible infidelity in her marriage, symbolically, the line makes an acerbic

point regarding the societal deprecation of black individuals. Due to its intrinsic double entendre, the signifier allows Beyoncé to unite the black community in shared experience and understanding while only inviting white audiences in if they make the effort to learn the latent implications, thereby encouraging racial awareness.

Furthermore, in some ways, there is a degree of empowerment through the reclamation of the black identity in Beyoncé's use of signifiers. She takes what has historically been used to repress the culture—like black physical features—repossesses them, and renegotiates their place and influence in today's society. It is similar to the way that she and many other black individuals have reclaimed the term “negro”—or racist derivatives of it. For example, in Cole's “Culture: Negro, Black and Nigger,” the defined subculture of black America, comprised of the elements of “soul and style,” is openly referred to by a fair number of black individuals as “Nigger culture” (42). Gates clarifies this trend in his work on the topic: “To revise the received sign...literally accounted for in the relation represented by *signified/signifier* at its most apparently denotative level is to critique the nature of (white) meaning itself...” (47). Essentially, revitalizing the meaning of “negro” innately produces a degree of power for black communities due to its negation of the (white) connotation.

In the survey I conducted, which inquired about the ways people were receiving these messages, one individual repeatedly voiced a level of discomfort with how Beyoncé uses language, “such as the word ‘negro,’” in her projects. The respondent explained that “she normalizes the use,” which is “negative... because it allows white people to think its [sic] okay to sing.” But this kind of a response ignores the convergence capability

such signifiers have for the black audience. Additionally, it fails to recognize that the multifaceted meanings of the signifiers can be particularly impactful for white audiences, as well—primarily for gaining social and cultural understandings of what it means to be black. So, be it a proud declaration that “baby hair and afros” and “Jackson 5 nostrils” are worthy of boast or a denunciation that “Becky with the good hair” is the aspirational goal, Beyoncé's signifiers are effectively employed, creating “something so specifically *for* black people that it cannot be denied,” while also offering an edifying opportunity for white listeners (Blay).

As imperative as Beyoncé's lyrical use of signifiers are for crafting a narrative of black culture, her symbolic visuals in the videos for “Formation” and *Lemonade* also reinforce the national movement for equality and racial justice. Her controversial scenes invoking the real-life tragedies of police brutality and the coalitional efforts of the historical Black Panther Party are brazen appeals for black communities to unify and for white communities to awaken socially. As media studies scholar Charles Benson (a pseudonym) describes it in an interview I conducted with him, Beyoncé “[reminds] audiences, both white and black, that she is a black woman with a black woman's concerns about the world,” and she compels that same level of social awareness in her audience.

The first deeply provocative visual comes from the video for “Formation,” in which a young black boy is pictured dancing before a line of militaristic police officers. The panning of a wall tagged in sprawling graffiti letters to say “Stop shooting us” subsequently follows cuts of the scene (“Formation (Explicit)”). The emblematic juxtaposition of the black child against the

imposing force of the police line is an outright commentary that can be likened to the Black Lives Matter movement that arose on social media in 2012 (Sidner). Black Lives Matter is dedicated to instigating “a civil rights movement-type of change that shakes up politics and breaks the cycle of violence and silence” that disproportionately afflicts black communities—particularly within the criminal justice system (Sidner). Projecting this scene in her video, Beyoncé makes a clear effort to appeal emotionally to her audience for the purpose of fostering public solidarity for the movement.

In this manner, Beyoncé’s work begins to embrace aspects of black academia—specifically, the established field of Critical Race Theory (CRT). With concerted energy devoted to the “embrace of race-consciousness, Critical Race Theory aims to reexamine the terms by which race and racism have been negotiated in American consciousness, and to recover and revitalize the radical tradition of race-consciousness among African Americans and other peoples of color—a tradition that was discarded when integration, assimilation and the ideal of color-blindness became the official norms of racial enlightenment” (Rabaka 40).

Most applicable in this allusion to the Black Lives Matter movement is black existential philosophy, a concentration within the field of CRT summarized by Magnus Bassey: “Black existential philosophy is ‘the existential demand for recognizing the situation or lived-in context of Africana people’s being-in-the-world,’” seeking collectivization within the black community, and genuine acknowledgement of the realities of black subjugation in the white community (915). To achieve these aims, imagery that invokes Black Lives Matter is essentially the most effective course of action.

For this reason, Beyoncé refers once more to the movement in her visual album for *Lemonade*, striking a slightly different chord of emotion. In the portion titled “Resurrection,” featuring her song “Forward,” Beyoncé dedicates a heart-wrenching tribute to the innocent young black men who were notoriously killed in the various police incidents that gave vigor to the Black Lives Matter movement. Most prominently, the visual consists of moving video portraits of the mothers of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin holding pictures of their sons in chilling remembrance (Beyoncé, “Forward”). Although the video grieves the individuals who fell victim to the system, the thematic message is, according to Bassey, a “protest on behalf of [the] race as a whole rather than on behalf of the individual,” further aligning Beyoncé’s content with Africana critical theory and black existential philosophy (919). Together, the scene of the young boy in front of the police line and the memorial for the nation’s most notable black victims are powerful demonstrations that point to the tragic reality of enduring racial injustice in America. Racism and oppression have merely assumed new, more nuanced forms that Beyoncé’s pointed references—both lyrical and visual—attempt to unmask. It is critical to note, however, that there is never at any point in “Formation” or *Lemonade* a moment in which Beyoncé attributes culpability to any party or community. This is crucial because it allows her, for the most part, to communicate her message of the experiences of modern black America without estranging her white audience. By avoiding antagonistically assigning blame and instead focusing on social cohesion within black communities through collective empathy, Beyoncé gives strength to the

Black Lives Matter movement while also enabling her white audience to engage with the issues.

Beyoncé's actions to unite the black community through the combined use of signifiers that speak explicitly to black audiences and emblematic visuals that "prove that [she] is 'woke,' and fully plugged into what it means to be" black in America are reminiscent of a historical group that sought similar organization of black Americans (Blay). The highly controversial Black Panther Party—which Beyoncé and her dancers memorably donned the apparel of for the Super Bowl performance of "Formation"—largely focused on forming a black nation-state, though over the years their efforts have been oversimplified to the pursuit of black militaristic power. The party's most eminent leader, Malcolm X—whom Beyoncé has referenced repeatedly—was equally "concerned about African American consciousness as a whole" and "the meaning of being Black in America" as he was about black power (Bassey 919). A black existentialist thinker, he was a preeminent figure in the promotion of "cultural pride and the celebration of black people" as well as "Black cultural expression" (Bassey 919). However, popular connotations regarding the activist often evoke him as the more violently inclined antithesis to Martin Luther King Jr., whose similar civil rights efforts diverged from Malcolm X's through their characteristic peacefulness. As a result, one of the most loudly voiced critiques of Beyoncé's thematic content has been that she is endorsing the use of violence for progressivism. bell hooks, for example, pressed in her essay on *Lemonade* that, "contrary to misguided notions of...equality...violence does not create positive change" (n. pag.)

While there is certainly validity to this point, it must be suggested that hooks and others like her are missing the central purpose of the black-power-inspired motifs. Says writer-activist LaSha in *Salon* magazine, "*Lemonade's* seeming endorsement of violence does not designate violence as a vehicle of change," as some suggest, but, rather, it "provide[s] validation of those basic feelings" of anger, frustration, grief, and hopelessness that the black community has experienced (n. pag.). And, although hooks takes an overall opposing stance to *Lemonade*, there is some degree of crossover between her school of thought and that of Malcolm X, whom Beyoncé has so meticulously interwoven into a supportive role for her project. In a fairly recent interview with *The New York Times*, hooks encouraged people to "think of anger as compost...think of it as energy that can be recycled in the direction of [their] good" as "an empowering force" (Yancy). In a comparable vein, Bassey argues that "Malcolm X...awakened black people's moral outrage" to redirect it into intentional, collective activity on behalf of social justice for the community (917).

With the influence of these thoughts evident throughout "Formation" and *Lemonade*, Critical Race Theory unmistakably marks Beyoncé's material. Her own acclamation of blackness, in concurrence with her concern about social consciousness, assists in cultivating that collective culture which is necessary to contest racial inequity. Much like esteemed black scholar W.E.B. DuBois "urged[,...]African Americans 'must develop their own distinct and 'superior' culture within the context of the American social system while simultaneously fighting to eliminate 'the color line'—the social, political, economic, and legal barrier of racial segregation" (qtd. in

Bassey 928). Beyoncé's glorified re-creation of black culture alongside her political messages about injustice help reinforce DuBois' idea. In other words, Beyoncé's efforts to unify and awaken black communities are not insignificant; rather, they may be just the momentum that is needed for the national movement to challenge the dominant social system.

Even with the clout of black collectivization, it must be acknowledged, as Reiland Rabaka does, according to the tenets of Critical Race Theory, with its "criticism... directed at the established order's claims of colorblindness and racially-neutral rule[,]. . . it will never be enough for the racially oppressed to repudiate racism" (39, 40). So, while it is commendable and necessary that "Formation" and *Lemonade* reinvigorate the concept of black culture and arouse awareness of injustice among black communities to unite against repression, there is an additional obstacle that must be overcome for Beyoncé's creations to be truly revolutionary: the white audience.

### ***Considering the Rhetoric of Beyoncé: Population Perceptions and Bridging Racial Binaries***

At the apex of the popular music industry, Beyoncé is in a social position not unlike those artists of the decades before her (e.g., James Brown, Aretha Franklin) who "[enjoyed] a public voice...to blend the contradictory elements of the Black Power movement into an uneasy unity and to create an anti-racist current among whites" (Gilroy 355). Comparable to her predecessors, Beyoncé must grapple with the decentralization of the Black Lives Matter movement—which is really only consolidated on social media—and the predominant perception that U.S. society is colorblind. The

challenge these obstacles pose is certainly daunting. However, unlike other popular culture figures, Beyoncé is fairly uniquely and advantageously located in society: "[Her] music is not relegated to urban radio. She can pack stadiums. She brings different kinds of audiences to the movie theaters. She is beloved and imitated, across race, class, sexuality, generation, and national borders" (Griffin 138). As a result, this potency of social capital allots her a marked amount of influence to impact societal discussions about race. It is at this point that the "artistic and political expressions of people of color" that have already been determined in academia to have a positive effect on the "antiracist process of sensitization" become pertinent (O'Brien and Korgen 370). Intersecting Beyoncé's black existential philosophy inflections, positive audience receptivity indicates that the potential success of racial sensitization is a reasonable prospect.

My empirical research makes clear that, with the pivotal juncture between black and white audiences being Beyoncé and her music, this inclination towards sensitization is in fact the effect. This project began when the popularity of "Formation's" song, video, and performance in concurrence with their inflammatory qualities made me question whether both black and white audiences felt that they could relate to the messages of social justice. I then speculated whether general audiences would also view Beyoncé as a figure for social change. If that were the case, then it would suggest that her award-winning songs and videos have somehow successfully facilitated discussions regarding race in America. However, research on this aspect of Beyoncé's cultural impact in America is currently lacking. Therefore, I organized my own research inquiry centered

on the question, *How has the iconic power and influence of Beyoncé’s musical art affected race relations between black and white communities in America?* To explore this question, I distributed a survey to general audiences and conducted two interviews with expert scholars; then, I substantiated the results with critical analysis of the works in question.

## Methods

My research sought to not only survey the experiences, reactions, and perceptions of Beyoncé’s audience, but also to study her impact through a scholarly lens via interviews with two professors in the fields of communication and rhetoric. Early in this inquiry, I decided it would be best to limit my survey population to those who were most likely to engage meaningfully with Beyoncé—or, at the very least, be moderately aware of pop culture conversation regarding her and her music. Thus, I set the parameters of my sample population to individuals between the ages of 18 and 35, with express emphasis on those who identified as at least partially black or partially white. However, being located in Denver, Colorado, with only immediate access to the University of Denver, the surrounding Denver community, and my hometown city of Fort Collins, I recognized that, if limited exclusively to those who identified as at least partially black or partially white, the majority-white population of the locale would more than likely inundate the black response, rendering any discussion about race *relations* inadequate. Plus, I did not believe that a difference in racial identity signified an ignorance of such dynamics. Furthermore, with a desire to build an ample base of respondents, it was not practical to exclude non-blacks and non-whites.

Instead, participants who identified as a specific race were ultimately directed to a specific set of questions in the survey to accommodate their varying racial experiences, perceptions, and attitudes.

With the inclusion of other racial identities, my survey succeeded in receiving 188 total responses to both multiple choice and open-ended questions (see survey form in Appendix A). The survey was circulated online utilizing the Qualtrics platform. I also distributed a link to the survey on my personal Facebook page as well as on a couple of community fan pages dedicated to Beyoncé; on Twitter, the link was posted on my personal profile and mentioned on a thread of a fan account. On both sites, it was highly encouraged that participants also forward the survey on to associates that fit the target demographic. A portion of the survey promotion was also organized outside of social media. I emailed several staff members from my former high school in Fort Collins, Colorado, to ask for their help in sharing the survey with students who were of age along with any colleagues they knew who would be willing to help. My parents also assisted in the circulation of the survey in their respective offices at ADP Screening and Selection Services in Fort Collins, Colorado, and General Electric in Longmont, Colorado. As previously stated, the survey received 188 total responses; though, due to the diversity factor, not every participant answered every question. The responses to all surveys (complete or incomplete) were used in the data pool.

To incorporate an academic perspective in this project, I interviewed two expert scholars: Charles Benson, whose professional work “centers on the nexus of children’s culture and gender studies” and the socializing process that occurs through

the diffusion of media to children, and Kelsey Hughes (a pseudonym), who was at the time teaching classes about race and popular culture, the rhetoric of consumption, and the foundations of communication. Hughes explained that her primary work focuses on “understanding how messages persuade people—looking at a text and viewing what impact it has on people in the world.” It is important to note that Benson identifies as a New Orleans Creole, or black, male, and Hughes identifies as a Caucasian female.

## Results

To the extent that Beyoncé’s abundant social capital could carry political action, her activism by way of popular music distribution can be viewed as “a safe protest from a safe platform, produced by the culture industry in order for the masses to also participate safely in protest that does not actually directly challenge the system” (Benson). In an equally judicious manner, the whole project can be seen as a packaged media product that has been “calculated for maximum salability” (Benson). Even bell hooks has cynically reduced *Lemonade* to “the business of capitalist money making at its best.” To hooks and many others, Beyoncé’s media parade appears to be little more than “a skillful exploitation of [black women’s] vulnerabilities, the result of ingenious conceptualization and flawless execution that ‘positively exploits images of female black bodies’” (LaSha).

Yet my survey results revealed that some still find the videos to be valuable demonstrations. Specifically, when asked how individuals perceived their understandings of or feelings regarding race having been impacted by Beyoncé, 14 out of 104 respondents expressed sentiments along the lines

of, “She’s no MLK or Malcolm X but she is doing what she can” from the sizeable platform that she does have. Seven additional respondents articulated opinions comparable to the idea that “The dialogue surrounding the videos brings to light issues that [they] might not personally consider.” One particular participant even admitted that “[Beyoncé has] brought the conversation forward and allowed [the respondent] to be corrected on previous held beliefs.” Finally, another individual replied: “It’s definitely prompted me to think about the issues being discussed more than I had before. It’s also helped me try to open my eyes a little wider and see both points of view.”

Advancing social awareness and understanding on both sides of the issue, Beyoncé forms a very important centripetal locus for black and white audiences to exchange critical ideas and dialogues about race and its social implications in today’s world. Results from my study even corroborate this, as 59 percent (n=91; N=155) of survey respondents reported that they felt likely to listen to Beyoncé’s music or share her music videos with a person of another race. Additionally, 72 percent (n=78; N=108) of survey participants expressed that they would feel comfortable to some degree critically discussing the racial themes, images, and messages in “Formation” or *Lemonade* with someone of another race. Due to their evident ability to serve as facilitative intermediaries for interracial exchanges of thoughts and experiences, it is therefore reasonable to assess Beyoncé’s recent work as effective tools for working to change the nation’s understanding of race.

## Discussion

Unarguably, Beyoncé maintains a particularly advantageous location in society for promoting social change. Besides commanding black audiences, Beyoncé has successfully crossed over into white audiences with remarkable commercial salability. And as Benson sees it, “few artists have gotten away with being so unapologetic about blackness in white spaces with as much success as she has had.” Hughes, on the other hand, attributes it to a long, strategic “game” in which Beyoncé, early on, “got her foot in the door, built up some power, and can now speak her mind and be political about it.” As Blay argues, “With this power comes a much wider reach,” which Beyoncé has made full use of “as her fans, lured by the gospel of the ‘Independent Woman,’ are being forced to engage with blackness and black issues in a real way” by means of the lyrical and visual considerations of “Formation” and *Lemonade* (n. pag.).

These reactions indicate that, whether it is due to the messages that are encoded within the songs and videos or the conversations that are opening up about those artistic choices, there is progress occurring. When considering how Beyoncé and her work may have the capability to transfigure national impressions of race, the visibility and sheer attraction of her and her work as a popular culture entity cannot be ignored. While it may not bring black and white communities together absolutely, Beyoncé’s platform appears to open up a space that “allows us to understand and talk about race more openly because of her influence in pop culture”—and, in the words of one survey participant, “in ways that are provocative, challenging, engaging, etc.” Based on the impressions from Beyoncé’s music and videos in addition to these liberated

conversations about race, this movement has the potential to eventually reach the revolutionizing heights it hopes to achieve. According to O’Brien and Korgen’s study on black-white contact in a colorblind society, there is a “common pattern for white anti-racists, in which multiple incidents of sensitization to racial injustice culminate to finally inspire antiracist action” (364). If additional personal anecdotes of such discriminatory instances emerge and are compiled with the discourses already in action from Beyoncé’s media frenzy, then the compounded effect could be profound, mobilizing communities to demand true racial equality for all.

## Conclusion and Reflection

In a society that appears to have been largely lulled into the false pretense of a post-racial world by the guiding ideology of colorblind culture, popular music icon Beyoncé’s work has the potential to generate an intense shock to the national system. Through the vehicles of “Formation” and *Lemonade*, Beyoncé has disseminated provocative messages illustrating the enduring struggles for racial justice within black communities across modern America. Swept into mainstream media by popular culture outlets, this Beyoncé “moment” has been speculated by Benson and others to be a transient spectacle that “will be ‘debated’ for a few days until...[we] forget all about [it] to hurry up and talk about how ‘post-racial’ our society is.” Conversely, I argue that because of the substantiality of these creations, there is no reason that they cannot be consequential to society in a more lasting manner. Popular culture has had fleeting instances of activism and progressivism before, but what is different this time is how *society* is located. The inundation of cases of police brutality

and racial injustice—amplified by their tendency to go viral across social media—and the growing size and voice of the Black Lives Matter movement have already placed color-blind culture in a slightly precarious position. With the momentousness of “Formation” and *Lemonade* contributing to these efforts, the fallacy of post-racialism can begin to be dismantled.

Because I identify as a young biracial (black/white) woman at a predominantly white institution, I felt that this research project would be interesting and impactful to explore not only for myself, personally, but also for my immediate community—many of whom excitedly watched the premiere of *Lemonade* with me. Over the course of this inquiry, I have learned a remarkable amount about racial and media dynamics. At the start of my analysis, I insinuated that popular culture is often dismissed as being inconsequential. I introduced “Formation” and *Lemonade* as examples that break from perceived patterns of insignificance. It is my hope that, over the course of this critical examination,

the importance of this Beyoncé moment has become apparent. Applying the studies of Critical Race Theory, black signification, and black-white contact theory in a color-blind society, I reason that there is much that can be ascertained from and discussed regarding Beyoncé and her current music. These events and issues are ideal because of how widely accessible they are for people. For example, feminists can engage with these songs and videos through conversations about intersectionality, academics can scrutinize and debate them, activists can utilize them as rallying points, and everyday people can simply like, share, and enjoy them; people from so many different walks of life can interact with and be affected by this moment, and that is incredibly powerful for society. If Beyoncé is realistically unable to end the injustices of racism alone, then at least she has the chance to bring us together, help lower our barriers, and encourage us to resolve these issues cooperatively. Put succinctly, that quality is what will enable progress to flourish.

## Acknowledgments

This research benefited greatly from the (anonymous) professors that were interviewed for their professional insight, as well as the many people who took the time to fill out my survey. I am grateful to them, my parents, and the staff of Rocky Mountain High School for helping my questionnaire reach more people than I could have alone. Finally, I would be remiss in not acknowledging the tremendous support and mentorship that my advisor Dr. Kara Taczak provided in my journey to this point.

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## **Appendix A: Survey Questions**

By completing the following questions, you are also granting consent for this information to be used as part of a research project that I am completing for a course at the University of Denver. Your participation is completely voluntary. The information you provide may be used in a project and may be published online and/or in print, but your identity will remain anonymous. While profile information you volunteer in this survey may be included in my writing project (i.e. your age, sex, class standing, etc.), your name and identity will NOT be used or reported. If at any time you do not want to answer a question, or do not want to complete the questionnaire, you do not have to.

### **Age**

- 18 – 21
- 22 – 26
- 27 – 30
- 31 – 35

### **Gender**

- Male
- Female
- Other

### **Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply)**

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other

### **How do you understand/think about race?**

- I'm very conscious of race and the role it plays in shaping social interactions and outcomes.
- I am aware of race and I somewhat understand the role it plays in shaping social interactions and outcomes.
- I am conscious of race, but I feel that everyone has an equal opportunity to succeed.
- I do not think about race or its effects often.
- I take a "colorblind" approach; I feel it is best not to exaggerate our differences.
- Other:

**How would you describe race relations between Blacks and Whites in the United States?**

- I think Blacks and Whites have a healthy dynamic. Racism is a thing of the past.
- I think Blacks and Whites coexist well enough, though I do think there are some tensions.
- I think Blacks and Whites have many issues to work out. Racism still exists, though it manifests itself differently today.
- I don't know.
- Other:

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected.

**Are you a fan of Beyoncé?**

- Definitely yes
- A little bit
- Neutral
- Not really
- Definitely not

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

**Have you become more aware of black culture and the black experience since listening to Beyoncé?**

- Definitely yes
- A little bit
- Neutral / Unsure
- Not really
- Definitely not

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

**Do you feel that you can relate to the other race (black/white) better because of/through Beyoncé and her music?**

- Definitely yes
- A little bit
- Neutral / Unsure
- Not really
- Definitely not

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

**How likely are you to listen to Beyoncé's music or share her music videos with a person of the opposite race?**

- Extremely likely
- Moderately likely
- Slightly likely
- Neutral / Unsure
- Slightly unlikely
- Moderately unlikely
- Extremely unlikely

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

**Do you feel that you can relate to Beyoncé and her music?**

- Definitely yes
- A little bit
- Neutral
- Not really
- Definitely not

**Have you seen the video for "Formation" or the visual album for Lemonade? (If not, the survey will be completed)**

- Yes
- No

*If No is selected, then skip to end of survey.*

**What were your impressions? Thinking about race, which images were most powerful to you?**

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

**What do you think of Beyoncé's references to Malcolm X, the Black Panther Party, and the Black Lives Matter movement in the videos?**

- They made me very uncomfortable
- They made me slightly uncomfortable
- Neutral
- I did not notice them
- I thought they were very impactful
- Other (please expand):

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

To what extent do you believe that Beyoncé's depiction of black culture and the black experience in "Formation" and throughout *Lemonade* was accurate?

- I believe it was genuine and accurate (explain):
- Neutral / Unsure
- I believe it was not entirely accurate (explain):
- Other:

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

To what extent do you feel threatened by the racial themes, images, and messages in "Formation" and/or *Lemonade*?

- Moderately threatened/uncomfortable
- Slightly threatened/uncomfortable
- Neutral
- Not very threatened/uncomfortable
- Not threatened/uncomfortable at all

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

To what extent would you feel comfortable critically discussing the racial themes, images, and messages in "Formation" and/or *Lemonade* with someone of the opposite race?

- Extremely comfortable
- Moderately comfortable
- Slightly comfortable
- Neutral
- Slightly uncomfortable
- Moderately uncomfortable
- Extremely uncomfortable

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) White is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Black or African American is selected.

How do you feel your understanding of--and feelings regarding--race have been impacted by Beyoncé?

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) American Indian or Alaska Native is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Asian is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Other is selected.

**Do you think that Beyoncé has impacted race relations between Blacks and Whites in America?**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neutral / Unsure
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) American Indian or Alaska Native is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Asian is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Other is selected.

**Why do you think that?**

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) American Indian or Alaska Native is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Asian is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Other is selected.

**What do you make of all of the controversy surrounding the video and performance of "Formation"?**

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) American Indian or Alaska Native is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Asian is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Other is selected.

**Did any of the racial themes, images, and/or messages in the videos impact your understanding of black culture and the black experience in contemporary America?**

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

Answer if Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) American Indian or Alaska Native is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Asian is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander is selected or Race / Ethnicity (choose all that apply) Other is selected.

**How would you perceive "Formation" or Lemonade impacting race relations between Blacks and Whites in America?**