From Bandannas to Berets: A Critical Analysis of Beyoncé's "Formation" Music Video

by

Kesha Shalyn James

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Auburn University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts in Communication

Auburn, Alabama
August 5, 2017

Keywords: Beyoncé, Formation, Black women, Black music,
Black culture, media representations

Approved by

Susan L. Brinson, Chair, Professor of Communication & Journalism
George Plasketes, Professor of Communication & Journalism
Kevin Smith, Associate Professor of Communication & Journalism

Abstract

The release of Beyoncé's "Formation" music video as well as her debut performance of the song at the 2016 Super Bowl has incited debate and controversy across the United States. While some feel empowered and prideful, others are angered and outraged by the lyrical and visual messages Beyoncé communicates in this mediated text. Applying a critical/cultural studies perspective lens, this study explains how Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology in the United States. Critically analyzing the visual and lyrical composition of "Formation," this analysis interrogates the messages of both race and gender as well as the representation of Black Women. The findings indicate a direct challenge to white androcentric power as the visuals and lyrics re-appropriate stereotypical images of Black Women, thus demonstrating Black Women's power and dominance in society. The implications of explaining the ways in which Beyoncé communicates *what* and *how* it means to be a Black Woman in "Formation" inform and explain the social, political, and economic reality of Black Women in the United States today, as mediated texts re-present everyday reality.

Acknowledgments

To begin, I thank Dr. Brinson, my Committee Chair, for her constant guidance, encouragement, and assistance in the construction, research, and editing process of this project. Whether it was the weekly meetings, countless emails, or occasional phone calls, I am sincerely grateful for her dedication and support not just as a professor, but also a mentor and friend. It was an honor to work with someone who I not only admire and respect, but someone who challenged me intellectually to grow and transform my thought. Through this transformation, I realized my true passions in life as well as understand how I can help to create and influence change and for that, I am truly thankful.

Additionally, I would like to thank my family. It is practically impossible to convey the amount of gratitude I have for each of you, but the relationships, knowledge, and love I receive from you gives me the confidence to pursue my goals. To my mother, Sandy James, whose constant support I relied on to complete this project. Throughout this process, my mother listened to ideas and written excerpts, heard my anger and outrage about the injustice of marginalized groups, and uplifted me with numerous pep talks. Thank you for always being in my corner, and I am truly thankful and appreciative of your unconditional love, advice, and friendship. And to my two sisters in formation alongside me, Nikki and Lexy. I thank you for your love, support, and enthusiasm throughout this process. You both inspire and motivate me daily, and I am deeply thankful for our sister bonds and friendship.

Lastly, I thank the Black Women, the Black community, and all those considered "Other" in the United States. Thank you for your struggle, for your strength and determination, for your unique culture, and for your continuous effort to celebrate your individuality and identity. Whether it was from my observations, friendships, conversations, or research, you all truly inspired, empowered, and motivated me to continue in this year long process.

Table of Contents

List of Images

Giving Them Something to Talk About: Expressing the Voices of the Marginalized

"You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation, always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper." Standing outside of an old New Orleans plantation home, Beyoncé lifts the black hat that conceals her face, looks directly into the video camera, and expresses this sentiment in the concluding lyrics of "Formation," which, indeed, generated much conversation. Prior to the day Beyoncé performed in Levi's Stadium at the Super Bowl 50 halftime show, she broke the Internet with the February 6, 2016 release of her "Formation" video that incited a frenzy of discussions and conversations. Shocking her fans and the world, the controversial music video prompted a significant and critical discussion of social and political issues, specifically regarding race and gender, in the United States. Regardless of the viewers and listeners' reactions of "Formation"—whether they liked it, disliked it, agreed, or disagreed—they were talking (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016).

While the unannounced release of Beyoncé's "Formation" video shocked and excited fans, this was not the first time the artist launched her music and videos without prior notice to the public, having previously broken iTunes Store records with her eponymous album *Beyoncé* in December 2013 ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016). Featured on her sixth album and second visual album entitled *Lemonade*, "Formation" was unlike any music video Beyoncé previously released. The lyrical and visual elements of

"Formation" are explicitly political and provocative. "Formation" is a "riskier, filthier, angrier, and pulpier" version of Beyoncé to which the world was not yet exposed (Santos, 2016, p. 1), which in turn produced both a great amount of backlash and support ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016*;* Caramanica et al., 2016). Beginning her musical career at the early age of nine in Houston, Texas, Beyoncé Gisselle Knowles-Carter, also commonly referred to as Queen Bey ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016; Sangweni, 2016) transitioned from working with the all-female musical group *Destiny's Child* to emerging as a record-breaking and top-charting solo artist in the music industry ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016). While Beyoncé's career catapulted to great heights and her music makes waves of noise, she remains relatively silent to both the media and the public. However, with the release of "Formation," Beyoncé communicated a powerful, bold statement, using her music to speak for her (Fallon, 2015; Schneier, 2015; Swift, n.d.).

"Formation" is an intricate and meticulous work of art that illuminates the dark past of Black Americans in the United States, while also conveying the hope for a brighter and just future for younger generations. Interestingly, the "Formation" video encompasses all time periods—the past, the present, and the future. The explicit and subtle messages communicated in this video about Hurricane Katrina forces viewers and listeners to understand the cultural impact the disaster had on Black Americans (Bradley, 2016; Caramanica et al., 2016). Along with communicating the unsettling experiences of

Black Americans, Beyoncé emphasizes the historical and cultural oppression of Black Women in the United States, both lyrically and visually. Beyoncé informs listeners and viewers that in order for Black Women to get in formation, they must process and learn from all of their experiences to emerge as a strong and powerful unit. Therefore, Black Women must learn to celebrate and love their Blackness, which is what the music video essentially does. It embraces and promotes Black self-love. Demonstrated both lyrically and visually in the music video, Beyoncé is aggressive, raw, real, and very Black. Stripping down from her typical mainstream, glamourous dress, hair, and makeup, Beyoncé owns her Blackness in every form, unapologetically. Along with the visual depictions, the lyrics of "Formation" challenge the standards of beauty in the United States. Beyoncé encourages and empowers Black Women to embrace and love their large facial features and ethnic hair, rather than be ashamed (Caramanica et al., 2016; Jacobsen, 2016).

The powerful and thought-provoking images and lyrics communicated in the "Formation" music video inform the public about what it means to be Black and more specifically, what it means to be a Black Woman in the United States in 2016. With the "Formation" music video, Beyoncé informs Black Women so they, too, can mobilize, proclaim their pride in being a Black Woman, and get in formation alongside her to

challenge the sexist and racist representations of Black Women in the United States (Doubek, 2016; Jacobsen, 2016).

Along with the historical and cultural references of Hurricane Katrina and Black female beauty and empowerment, Beyoncé communicates a significant topic of discussion in her "Formation" music video—the Black Lives Matter Movement. With the explicit and vivid depictions of the young Black boy in the hoodie break dancing in front of ten white male police officers and the graphic display of graffiti on the wall stating "stop shooting us," Beyoncé communicates a powerful message about the organized institutions that oppress and marginalize Black Americans and is demanding them to respect Black lives (Doubek, 2016).

The controversial social and political topics of conversation Beyoncé highlights in her music video are rich topics to mine. I employ a critical/cultural studies lens in my analysis to inquire how Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology in her "Formation" music video, both lyrically and visually.

References

Beyoncé Biography. (2016). *TIDAL*. Retrieved from https://listen.tidal.com/artist/1566

Bradley, R.N. (2016, February 7). Getting in line: Working through Beyoncé's "Formation." *Red Clay Scholar (blog)*. Retrieved from https://redclayscholarblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/07/getting-in-line-working-through-beyonces-formation/

Caramanica, J., Morris, W., & Wortham, J. (2016, February 6). Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, activist, both? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/arts/music/beyonce-formation-super-bowl-video.html?_r=4

Doubek, J. (2016, February 7). With 'Formation,' Beyoncé lights up the internet. Here's what people are saying. *National Public Radio (NPR)*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2016/02/07/465934070/with-formation-beyonc-lights-up-the-internet-heres-what-people-are-saying

Fallon, K. (2015, August 20). How Beyoncé conquered the world…silently. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/08/20/how-beyonc-conquered-the-world-silently.html

Jacobsen, M.E. (2016, February 6). Beyoncé's "Formation" lyrics are a reminder of my own #blackgirlmagic. *Romper*. Retrieved from

https://www.romper.com/p/beyonces-formation-lyrics-are-a-reminder-of-my-own-blackgirlmagic-5186

Sangweni, Y. (2016, February 6). Here's everything we know about Beyoncé 'Formation' video. *Essence*. Retrieved from http://www.essence.com/2016/02/06/beyonce-formation-video-everything-we-know

Santos, A.A. (2016, February 6). Listen: Beyoncé's new song "Formation." *Vox*. Retrieved from http://www.vox.com/2016/2/6/10927952/beyonce-formation

Schneier, M. (2015, August 19). Beyoncé is seen but not heard. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/fashion/beyonce-is-seen-but-not-heard.html

Swift, N. (n.d.). Why Beyoncé has stopped giving interviews. *Nicki Swift*. Retrieved from http://www.nickiswift.com/2814/beyonce-stopped-giving-interviews/

Resistin' and Representin': Race and Gender Context of the United States

Race and Hurricane Katrina

The critical/cultural studies approach asserts that analyses of mediated texts should include an evaluation of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Due to the polysemic nature of mediated texts, it is vital that the author not only analyze the text but the culture in which it was produced and consumed (Barker, 2012; Kellner, 2003; Stacks & Hocking, 1992). To understand the messages Beyoncé communicates about race and gender in "Formation," it is essential to identify and evaluate the cultural context of the United States to better interpret the messages re-presented in this music video. In an effort to challenge the sexist and racist dominant ideology, it is significant to note the race relations in the United States prior to the production of the music video as well as the year it was released.

A cultural reference explicitly communicated in "Formation" reflects upon the historical and social aspects of New Orleans, Louisiana, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans, and its impact on the Black community. Historically and culturally, New Orleans possesses a vibrant, rich culture with its jazz funerals, authentic and spicy cuisine and seafood, parades, music, art, and second lines (Brown, 2007; Flaherty, 2007). Due to New Orleans' traditions, celebrations, and arts being largely influenced and immersed within Black culture, the city is characterized as "North

America's African city" (Flaherty, 2007, p. 102). With New Orleans' population comprised of 68 percent Black Americans, the culture communicates both liberation and resistance for its city and its people (Flaherty, 2007, p. 103; Nunn, 2009; Powell, Jeffries, Newhart, & Stiens, 2006). Despite efforts to protect their culture and their community, New Orleans was forever changed on August 29, 2005, when Hurricane Katrina came storming in, flooding and devastating the city (Elliot & Pais, 2006; Forman & Lewis, 2006). While Hurricane Katrina was a traumatic disaster, it revealed another disaster at work in the United States—racial injustice and racial apathy. Forman and Lewis (2006) assert that Hurricane Katrina's "devastation was felt broadly and deeply, but not evenly" (p. 176). Primarily affecting the poor Black communities and neighborhoods, the effects of Hurricane Katrina left surviving Black residents with no resources, no homes, and no sense of hope or confidence in the American institutions that govern them (Bouie, 2015; Elliot & Pais, 2006; Forman & Lewis, 2006).

Hurricane Katrina signified a pivotal moment in history that explicitly communicated the inherent structural and institutional racism that pervades the United States (Bouie, 2015; Elliot & Pais, 2006; Forman & Lewis, 2006; Hartman & Squires, 2006). To understand both the structural and institutional racism that eroded the city of New Orleans and its Black community, it is essential to examine the prior conditions of the city and its people before Hurricane Katrina occurred. Founded in 1718, New

Orleans, Louisiana, originally operated as a prominent location for white slaveholders to buy and sell Black slaves. While Black people were granted their freedom eventually, the structure of oppression and marginalization constructed through the Southern slavery era resulted in conditional freedom for Black Americans with the establishment of Jim Crow laws (Miller & Rivera, 2007; Nunn, 2009; Salaam, 2007). Though plagued with the legal establishment of racial inequality, Black Americans during the 1950s and 1960s attempted to reclaim their freedom; however, they were essentially isolated from the social and economic spheres afforded to white Americans in New Orleans, despite the achievements made during the Civil Rights Movement era. Lingering sentiments of racial inferiority ultimately led to the formation of racially segregated neighborhoods in New Orleans, with Black Americans, particularly poor Black Americans, residing in the Lower Ninth Ward (Miller & Rivera, 2007; Nunn, 2009). According to Massey (2001), "any process that concentrates poverty within racially isolated neighborhoods will simultaneously increase the odds of socioeconomic failure" (as cited in Hartman & Squires, 2006, p. 4). Thus, the racial polarization of New Orleans led to its classification as being one of the nation's top 15 "most racially segregated" urban communities (Hartman & Squires, 2006, p. 3). The racially isolated and segregated communities in New Orleans resulted in a concentration of wealth, primarily in white communities, while New Orleans' total poor population was 85 percent Black (Nunn, 2009). Socially,

politically, and economically disadvantaged, poor Black New Orleans residents were left in a vulnerable position prior to and after Hurricane Katrina.

Bordered by bodies of water as well as positioned "three feet below sea level," the city of New Orleans and its residents were familiar with potentially dangerous and threatening weather conditions, such as hurricanes, floods, and tropical storms (Salaam, 2007, p. ix). The threat and implications of Hurricane Ivan in 2004 eerily foreshadowed the issues that would arise with Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Particularly regarding evacuation plans, Hurricane Ivan demonstrated the problems of solely relying on the Superdome for evacuation with the lack of space available as well as the insufficient amount of food and water provided to the residents (Salaam, 2007). Despite the obvious gaps in planning and preparation, local, state, and federal officials continued to dismiss the problems of an aging levee system, lack of transportation plans for those without personal transportation, and inadequate space available to evacuate its citizens (Nunn, 2009; Salaam, 2007). Aware for decades of both the deficient levee system and pump system's capability, government officials deemed repairs and construction as too costly (Nunn, 2009; Salaam, 2007). Structured to protect the city and its people from the surrounding bodies of water, Lake Pontchartrain and the Mississippi River, the outdated and worn levee system was unable to combat the powerful effects of Hurricane Katrina (Nunn, 2009). Mostly dependent upon the efficiency of the levee and pump system were

individuals residing in the Lower Ninth Ward (Gordon, 2009). Lack of protection for these people and its area communicated the structural and institutional oppression of Black Americans. Thus, Hurricane Katrina was not simply a natural disaster, but rather a "man-made" disaster "birthed in…racism" (Flaherty, 2007, p. 100; Gordon, 2009).

The lack of governmental regulation and attention on natural disaster emergency plans in the poor neighborhoods of New Orleans revealed the racist indifference to Black lives. Classified as America's worst and most costly natural disaster, Hurricane Katrina resulted in the deaths of more than 1,000 New Orleans residents and exceeded over 70 billion dollars in damage (Bouie, 2015; Elliot & Pais, 2006; Forman & Lewis, 2006; Levitt & Whitaker, 2009; Nunn, 2009; Sexton, 2007). Not only was there a lack of preparation for these emergencies, but there was also a lack of immediate response and decision-making that led to a racial wound in the United States being re-opened and infected by flooded waters. Specifically, the governmental institutions' lack of immediate response and decision-making in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina communicated the value of poor Black Americans in society—they had no value, which further highlighted the racial inequality and injustice in the United States (Bouie, 2015; Elliot & Pais, 2006; Forman & Lewis, 2006). Emergency responses in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina further communicated the inadequacy of government officials and organizations at all levels whose primary responsibility is to serve and protect its citizens from harm

(Gordon, 2009, Greene, 2009; Lapham, 2007). For example, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as well as Louisiana's state government failed to sufficiently provide care to New Orleans residents, did not promptly respond, and even hindered organizations such as the Red Cross from providing aid and assistance (Greene, 2009). Actions such as these led to organized relief failing to arrive to New Orleans and its survivors until days after Hurricane Katrina occurred (Nunn, 2009).

Regardless of intentions, structural and institutional racism is embedded in every facet of American life, including the mainstream media, which contributed to the lack of success in responding and assisting the poor Black Americans in New Orleans. According to Cook (2015), "…memories of [Hurricane] Katrina, and your sense of what the hurricane meant in 2005, and what it means today, also were shaped by media" (p. xiii). As New Orleans flooded so did Americans' television screens with images of Women, men, and children of all ages stranded on rooftops, struggling through infested and toxic waters, and laying dead in streets and bridges (Nunn, 2009). Along with these conditions, television news reports framed Hurricane Katrina's survivors as "looters" and "refugees" which resulted in military units occupying the areas and led to the deterrence of search and rescue missions in New Orleans (Bierria, Liebenthal, & Incite!, 2007). By criminalizing and associating Hurricane Katrina survivors with the Third World, this message distanced this disaster, the city, and its people from the United States (Cook,

2015; Gordon, 2009; Lapham, 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). Thus, media depictions of poor Black Americans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina justified and rationalized the failed preparation, response, and efforts of American government.

Americans' views on both the lack of preparation and lack of governmental response to Hurricane Katrina revealed a divide between Blacks and non-Blacks. The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina communicated that the perception of this event was largely based on an individual's race. While for Black Americans, Hurricane Katrina communicated "America's indifference to Black life," white Americans' experience of Hurricane Katrina was vastly different, largely due to racial apathy or "white ignorance" (Bouie, 2015, p. 2; Forman & Lewis, 2006). Though many white Americans viewed Hurricane Katrina as a "natural" disaster that could have only been prevented by God, Black Americans communicated their frustration with the systemic oppression, marginalization, and disregard for Black life. This was specifically demonstrated in the remarks made by Kanye West, a hip-hop musical artist, in which he stated publicly on television that "George Bush doesn't care about [B]lack people" (Brown, 2007, p. 52; Nunn, 2009). Responding to the the *laissez-faire* approach exhibited by government and President George W. Bush, West's sentiments echoed and resonated with much of the Black community in that Black New Orleans residents were still not adequately provided food, water, shelter, etc. even weeks after the storm hit (Lapham, 2007).

Hurricane Katrina exposed the national systemic oppression and marginalization of poor Black Americans, which fostered a strong distrust for government institutions and white Americans (Elliot & Pais, 2006). After Hurricane Katrina, many people blamed Ray Nagin, the mayor of New Orleans who was Black, the governor of Louisiana, FEMA, the President of the United States, and the victims for the devastation that plagued the city of New Orleans (Pouncy, 2009). However, Powell et al. (2006) discuss that the attribution of blame is neither progressive nor transformative. Rather, the authors emphasize the need to expand the traditional concept of racism in that it is not simply one institution or one individual. By attributing racism and blame on one person or institution simultaneously neglects and strengthens the structural racism that pervades all American institutions and its citizens (Powell et al., 2006). Thus, the concept of racism is perceived as static, and this myopic perspective hinders true transformative change from occurring (Powell et al., 2006). The rippling waves that eroded and flooded the city of New Orleans and its people were not simply a result of one institution or individual, but rather the rippling effects of structural racism that historically and culturally has pervaded and been embedded in every facet of American life (Powell et al., 2006).

Despite the traumatic and devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, numerous grassroots organizations were developed through the leadership, organization, and formation of Black Women. In an effort to "render themselves truly visible," Black

Women along with other members and volunteers of all races and genders came together to communicate the reality of their oppression in order to gain justice and equality (Bierria et al., 2007, p. 44). Not only concerned with the Black community, "radical women of color organizing is about manifesting [their] own political agency and forging [their] own authentic visibility as [they] work for the liberation of all people" (Bierria et al., 2007, p. 44). Moreover, many of the grassroots organizations that emerged during this time adopted and communicated philosophies similar to that of the Black Panther Party of the 1960s (Hilderbrand, Crow, & Fithian, 2007). While the natural disaster happened twelve years ago, the social disaster of structural and institutionalized subjugation of Black Americans and indifference to Black life still floods the experiences of Black Americans today, specifically in regards to the current Black Lives Matter Movement (Bouie, 2015).

Race and Black Lives Matter Movement

Since the origins of the United States, racial oppression of Black individuals was apparent with the harsh and unjust system of slavery (hooks, 2001). While slavery has ended, it is evident that institutions that dehumanize and devalue Black lives still pervade our culture in the United States today. The creation of #BlackLivesMatter emerged as a response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watchman who murdered unarmed 17-year-old Black teenager Trayvon Martin in 2012. The court's

ruling communicated to Americans, specifically to Black Americans, the insignificance and devaluation of Black life. ("About the Black Lives," n.d.). Originated by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, #BlackLivesMatter signified a call to action to stand up against the political institutions that intentionally target and marginalize Black Americans (Garza, 2014). While Martin's death outraged the Black community, the Black Lives Matter Movement did not become widespread until the death of Michael Brown in 2014. The 18-year-old teenager was killed by Darren Wilson, a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, after which Brown's body remained uncovered in the middle of the street for four hours. This police brutality catapulted the movement and fueled the momentum and rise of Black Lives Matter on social media, which permeated the national dialogue on race relations in the United States (Biondi, 2016; Sidner & Simon, 2015).

While the Black Lives Matter Movement is often viewed as a movement solely against police brutality, the movement is multifaceted. The national organization's mission is to inform others, both Blacks and non-Blacks, about the social and political institutions that oppress Black individuals in order to unite them and work towards Black liberation (Garza, 2014). The effort to promote the value of Black life has received both a great amount of praise and criticism. In an attempt to break the silence about the reality of Black individuals' experiences, #BlackLivesMatter polarized much of society (Sidner & Simon, 2015). With no clear hierarchy of leadership, critics declare that the Black

Lives Matter Movement worsened race relations in the United States. With the summer 2016 Black Lives Matter protest in Dallas, Texas, the movement received a great deal of criticism with inciting and escalating violence. In an attempt to raise awareness and advocate equality and justice for all people, the protest ended with a lone gunman attacking and shooting 11 police officers, which resulted in the deaths of five police officers. Following the attacks of the Dallas police officers, the Black Lives Matter Movement clarified that the actions of this individual did not reflect the goals and purpose of the movement and that the deaths of the police officers was indeed a tragedy (Geir, 2016; "The Black Lives," n.d.). Despite the negative criticism and commentary, activists and organizers are unapologetic in their efforts to raise awareness and recognition to racial prejudice and discrimination in America (Geir, 2016; Sidner & Simon, 2015; "The Black Lives," n.d.).

The ongoing long list of unjust police killings of Black individuals demonstrates the need to restructure the function and actions of the powerful institutions that are meant to serve and protect American citizens. Police officers' disregard of Black life resulted in the tragic deaths of:

- Tamir Rice, a young Black child shot by the police (Biondi, 2016);

- Eric Garner, a Black man who was held in a fatal chokehold by multiple police officers, in which he gasped for air 11 times stating the phrase "I can't breathe" (Baker, Goodman, & Mueller, 2015; Biondi, 2016);
- Walter Scott, a Black man who was chased by the police and shot in the back (Biondi, 2016);
- Jamar Clark, a Black man who was shot in the head after the police allegedly struggled to arrest him (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Ezell Ford, a Black man who was shot by police officers in South Los Angeles on a sidewalk near his home (Funke & Susman, 2016; Mather, Queally, & Gerber, 2017);
- Laquan McDonald, a Black teenager who was murdered on the streets of Chicago by police officers (Biondi, 2016; Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Yvette Smith, a Black Woman who was murdered by the police on her front porch (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Alton Sterling, a Black man who died by police officers' unnecessary close-range shooting (Biondi, 2016);
- Gregory Gunn, a Black man who was shot outside of his home by the police (Funke & Susman, 2016);

- Rekia Boyd, a Black Woman who was fatally shot in the back of her head by the police while standing in a Chicago alley with her friends (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Akiel Denkins, a Black man who was shot by the police after allegedly resisting arrest (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Samuel DuBose, a Black man who was murdered by the police after refusing to provide his license and step out of his vehicle during a traffic stop (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Akai Gurley, a Black man who was killed during a public housing patrol after a police officer's bullet rebounded off a wall and hit him (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Brendon Glenn, a Black unarmed man who was shot in the back by the police (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Shereese Francis, a Black Woman who was suffocated to death by police officers as they attempted to handcuff her (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Freddie Gray, a Black man who died from a broken neck while being escorted in the back of a police van, after police officers restrained him with hand and leg cuffs but no seat belt (Funke & Susman, 2016);

- Natasha McKenna, a Black Woman who died after police officers used a stun gun to shock her an excessive four times, after cuffing both her hands and legs (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Christian Taylor, a young Black unarmed teenager who was fatally shot by the police during an alleged burglary at a car dealership (Funke & Susman, 2016);
- Philando Castile, a Black man who was brutally shot by police officers at point-blank range in front of a child (Biondi, 2016); and
- Sandra Bland, a Black woman who was arrested for questioning police officers' instructions and suspiciously died in jail, after being arrested for a total of 65 hours (Liebelson & Reilly, 2016).

The brutality exhibited by police officers fueled the outrage and angry protests of the Black Lives Matter Movement (Biondi, 2016). The activists, organizers, and supporters of the movement are no longer sitting idly by and hoping for change to happen—they are actively transforming the social landscape of the United States and the power structures that oppress them. With chants such as "we shut shit down," "we are here because Black people deserve to be free," and "the whole damn system is guilty as hell," the rebellious and defiant nature of the current Black Lives Matter Movement reflects the sentiments of the 1960s Black liberation movement (Biondi, 2016, p. 6).

The messages communicated by the movement represents the urgency of these issues that will not cease until Black lives are valued and appreciated in society. Moreover, the movement is not only perpetuated by various social media platforms but also by celebrities. Receiving the 2016 Black Entertainment Television (BET) Humanitarian of the Year Award, actor Jesse Williams addresses the social and political oppression of Black people in his acceptance speech. Williams reinforces the Black Lives Matter Movement's urgency and resilience in which he states: "…we're done watching and waiting while this invention called whiteness uses and abuses us" (Brotha Doug, 2016, 4:00-4:07). He reinforces the notion that the systemic oppression that historically and culturally "divide[d] and impoverish[ed] and destroy[ed]" Black Americans cannot continue if Blacks and non-Blacks mobilize and challenge their unjust power and dominance. And the time to mobilize is now (Brotha Doug, 2016, 0:42-0:46). Not only does Williams advocate for racial justice and equality, but dedicates his award specifically for Black Women "who have spent their lifetimes dedicated to nurturing everyone before themselves" (Brotha Doug, 2016, 0:59-1:05). The significance of this assertion aligns with the organizers of the grassroots organizations following the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and with the Black Lives Matter Movement—they were all Black Women. Historically and culturally, Black Women's efforts in organizing and mobilizing have been pivotal in transforming their communities and society, despite the

lack of acknowledgment they receive. It is their children, history, culture, and community that encourage them to resist the oppressive structures and institutions that marginalize them (Mullings, 1997). With the mobilization of all genders and races, the Black Lives Matter Movement challenges the power structures in society and is steadfast in its radical and militant efforts to ignite awareness, create change, and transform a society that has historically and culturally oppressed and marginalized them (Biondi, 2016).

Understood within the context of the lives of Black Americans and the Black Lives Matter Movement, the release date of "Formation" was a political statement that Beyoncé strategically executed. It is significant that "Formation" debuted in February, the month the United States officially recognizes and celebrates Black history and Black people. By providing information, others become aware of the oppression and obstacles Black Americans had to face but also become informed about the various contributions and accomplishments they have made. Furthermore, the video was released on February 6, 2016. This specific date is also inherently political: Trayvon Martin's birthday. By releasing the "Formation" video, Beyoncé both celebrated Black history and simultaneously celebrated and commemorated the memory of Trayvon Martin (Bradley, 2016).

While the Black Lives Matter Movement is a powerful movement in society and is significant to the messages communicated in the "Formation" music video, this

movement is ever-evolving and transforms with the societal issues and conditions that plague the United States. At the height of the Black Lives Matter Movement came another national event that pervaded the dialogue and television screens of Americans which was the 2016 presidential election season. As noted by Harriot (2017), the Black Lives Matter Movement recently seems to have disappeared from this nation's consciousness, hindering the visibility of racial inequality and injustice for Black Americans and minorities. While the Black Lives Matter Movement may not frequently appear in conversations or media reports as often as it once did, it is still present and active. The movement simply has shifted as the political landscape of the United States has changed with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. While police brutality against Black Americans remains a priority, the Black Lives Matter Movement is a movement in search of justice and equality for *all* people. With the recent immigration ban in the United States, organizers, activists, and individuals involved in the Black Lives Matter Movement protested at airports and have been actively mobilizing against the Trump administration and policies that are anti-Black, anti-Woman, anti-Muslim, etc. (Garza, 2014; Patterson, 2017). Therefore, the Black Lives Matter Movement is still present in the United States strongly advocating and demanding respect, equality, and justice for *all* Americans.

Beyoncé's "Formation" video explicitly communicates the social and political issues of race relations in the United States with the visual messages representing Hurricane Katrina and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Providing this contextual information to viewers and listeners is vital in order to understand the overall message this music video communicates. Challenging the notion that the white male has the most power in the United States, Beyoncé communicates a transforming viewpoint in that Black men and Women are gaining power and dominance in society. Furthermore, to fully comprehend the messages the "Formation" music video communicates, it is essential to understand the historical and cultural representations of Black Women in media, including television and film, the representations of Black Women in music videos, and Beyoncé as a solo musical artist. Having a general understanding of these various components enables viewers and listeners to understand the message of "Formation" and its significance to American society.

Media Representations of Black Women

Popular culture communicates the sexist and racist hierarchy of power in society to the public through media representations of individuals and groups of people (Bobo, 1995). Popular culture and its history is crucial to understanding media representations of Black Women in that it re-presents the social, political, and cultural landscape of the United States (Barker, 2012; Kellner, 2003). While media representations communicate

structures of oppression and power, "the potential of popular culture is such that it can disrupt the social surface" (Bobo, 1995, p. 4). Therefore, messages communicated in mediated texts wield a great amount of power in the transmission, cultivation, maintenance, and perpetuation of stereotypes associated with particular groups of people in the United States (Barker, 2012; Bogle, 2016; hooks, 1992; Kellner, 2003).

After slavery ended in 1865, white supremacists understood the value of controlling images to maintain their sexist and racist power and dominance in society (hooks, 1992). Similarly, the mainstream media in the United States, which upholds the dominant ideology of white male supremacy, also maintains and reinforces their control and power in society by stereotyping characters with particular images and characteristics, specifically minority groups such as Black Women (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Gammage, 2016; Mullings, 1997; Wilson, Gutiérrez, & Chao, 2003). Strategically attempting to diminish their identity, self worth, and significance in society, the representations that are afforded to minorities are regarded as naturally inferior to the images of white characters (Collins, 2000; Wilson et al., 2003). Images are essential to the foundation of social and political power, in that images shape and influence individuals and marginalized groups' reality which, in turn, communicates the power or lack of power they hold in society (hooks, 1992). Thus, the images communicated are inherently political and ideological. The power of images is that they may influence how

those individuals view themselves (hooks, 1992; Gammage, 2016; Sims, 2006). Therefore, when individuals consistently and frequently view distorted and destructive images that communicate their lack of individual and collective worth and power in society, these views may invade their psyches and often cause "individuals [to] carry the[se] labels until they are deemed their nature" (Gammage, 2016, p. 51). Thus, negative stereotypical images ultimately hinder individuals from constructing their own personal and collective identities in society (Gammage, 2016). Due to the pervasive nature of popular culture and its media representations, the stereotypical images of particular groups of people advance the false notion that these depictions are accurate portrayals of people in reality (West, 1995).

The social construction of the Black Woman in the United States has largely been determined by and communicated from the white male perspective. Thus, "their identity [essentially has been] socialized out of existence" (hooks, 2015, p. 7; Sims, 2006). Historically and culturally in the United States, the Black Woman has been dehumanized, disregarded, and deemed insignificant in that they are not even categorized as the "Other" in society. Victimized and oppressed by both racist and sexist ideologies, the Black Woman has largely been unheard, underrepresented, and undervalued (hooks, 2015; Wilson et al., 2003). Moreover, the marginalization and subjugation of the Black Woman is largely due to the notion of biological essentialism, also referred to as genetic

determinism (Bem, 1993; Mullings, 1997). Biological essentialism claims that individuals' superiority or inferiority in society is solely determined by their biological makeup. Therefore, individuals' sex and race determines one's place in society—the jobs they employ, the power they are afforded, or their financial status (Bem, 1993; Mullings, 1997). This concept of biology determining individuals' social reality justifies racist and sexist actions to ultimately communicate the inferiority of the Black Woman as natural, normal, and inherent (Bem, 1993; Collins, 2000; Mullings, 1997).

Historically and culturally, the media rationalize racist and sexist portrayals in the construction of the Black Woman's identity through their use of controlling and perpetuating stereotypes of Black female characters (Collins, 2000; Gammage, 2016; Mullings, 1997). The media play a significant role through their ability to communicate traditional and stereotypical ideas of Womanhood and femininity (Wood, 2013). Operating on the basis of the traditional binary system of gender roles, the media exclude the Black Woman from the white tradition of femininity. The concepts of "true" Womanhood and femininity posit that females are coy, passive, pure, submissive, small, domestic, dependent, and white (Bem, 1993; Collins, 2000; Mullings, 1997; Wood, 2013). Thus, the media reject the notion that the Black Woman is a "true" Woman (Collins, 2000; Mullings, 1997). With no proclaimed identity and power in the Women's liberation movement or the Civil Rights and Black liberation movements, the Black

Woman essentially has no social identity or currency in the United States (hooks, 2015). Therefore, the stereotypical characters portrayed by Black Women in television and film communicate and socialize audiences, both Blacks and non-Blacks, what it means to be a Black Woman—how they should behave, speak, dress, etc. (hooks, 1992; Wood, 2013). The limited number of both Black Women and roles further complicates the assumption that they represent *all* Black Women; thus, categorizing, limiting, and oppressing Black Women both onscreen and off (Collins, 2000; Sims, 2006; West, 1995).

It is significant to note the social, cultural, and political climate of the United States that greatly influences specific characters and representations within certain time periods of cinema history (Barker, 2012; Bogle, 2016; Gammage, 2016; Kellner, 2003; Mullings, 1997; Sims, 2006). According to West (1995), the historical, cultural, and mediated representations of Black Women have been depicted in the images of the Mammy, the Sapphire, the Jezebel, or a combination of all three representations. Moreover, media representations of Black Women have been further reinforced historically and culturally, due to studios' hiring process. According to Sims (2006), studios perpetuated the sexist and racist dominant ideology in the United States by casting Black actresses primarily for their physical characteristics and attributes, such as "skin tone, facial features, and hair texture" (p. 32). This emphasis on Black actresses' physical qualities associated with specific roles ultimately led to them being typecast—

being assigned to one specific role or media representation. The media's act of typecasting created yet another obstacle for Black Women to overcome both the racist and sexist boundaries constructed for them, which communicated and reinforced white male superiority, power, and control over them and their identity (Bogle, 2016; Sims, 2006).

Stereotyped and confined to these images, mainstream media adopt and reproduce the racist and sexist ideal character portrayals for Black Women in the United States, both historically and culturally (Bogle, 2016; Gammage, 2016; Mullings, 1997). While stereotypical images plague Black actresses of the past and present, Bogle (2016) asserts that "the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype" (p. xxiv). The ability to combat these controlling media images through subverting these stereotypes ultimately allows Black Women to define the character on their own terms. Thus, Black Women gradually and publicly define and claim their Black female identity, while undermining and resisting white male superiority (Bogle, 2016; hooks, 1992).

Media representations of Black Women are largely influenced by the societal standards, treatment, and opportunities afforded to them in the United States. Therefore, it is vital to note the historical and cultural gender and race relations from which the stereotypical images emerged (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Gammage, 2016; Mullings,

1997; Sims, 2006). Due to societal conditions in the United States being integrally connected to media representations of Black Women, Black actresses attempted to claim power within these confined images to ultimately communicate their power in society with an established Black female identity.

The Mammy. Upheld as one of the most widely recognized media representations of Black Women, the Mammy character appeared primarily in the 1930s (Bogle, 2016; West, 1995). Deriving from the slavery time period of the Antebellum South, the Mammy is an overweight Black Woman whose primary role is to perform domestic responsibilities and serve her white family (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Mullings, 1997; West, 1995). During the 1930s, the Great Depression greatly affected much of American society. The Mammy character along with other Black servant images were prominent during this era in which Black actresses' and actors' depictions of servants served as a reminder for Americans to persevere through difficult times, as Black servants did during the era of slavery (Bogle, 2016). Scholars assert that the Mammy image is portrayed as submissive, nurturing, obedient, and selfless (Collins, 2000; Mullings, 1997; West, 1995). However, the Mammy representation is also associated with the characteristics of being independent, assertive, argumentative, and stubborn (Bogle, 2016; Sims, 2006). Embodying the archetype of the perfect slave or servant, the Mammy image is characterized as asexual, primarily due to her deviation

from the Western standards of beauty (Collins, 2000; Gammage, 2016; Mullings, 1997). Displaying the physical characteristics of dark skin tones, prominent, large African features, and kinky, course textured African hair, usually covered by a bandanna, do not conform to the ideal Western standard of beauty (Collins, 2000; Sims, 2006; West, 1995). This Western standard of beauty has largely influenced the lack of self esteem, confidence, and love Black Women have for themselves (West, 1995). Similar to that of the Mammy image was another Black female servant media representation in the 1930s known as Aunt Jemima (Bogle, 2016). Both the servitude role and time period of this representation provides an explanation as to why the Mammy character and the image of Aunt Jemima possess similar qualities. Similar to the Mammy character, the Aunt Jemima image of the 1930s portrays a heavy, jolly, religious, and nurturing Black Woman whose primary concern is to perform domestic responsibilities for her white family and typically fulfills the role as a trustworthy confidant to her white family (Bogle, 2016).

Echoing Bogle's (2016) assertion to focus not on the stereotype but rather emphasize the talent of Black actresses, one can look at actress Hattie McDaniel in her representation of the Mammy (Sims, 2006). While the representations of the Mammy and Aunt Jemima are alike, certain Black Women who personified these characteristics in the media subverted these stereotypes, made the character their own, and defined their Black

female identity (Bogle, 2016). Receiving an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, Hattie McDaniel portrayed the Mammy character in the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind* (Bogle, 2016). Despite the media's attempt to dehumanize and devalue Black Women, McDaniel's performance of "Mammy" communicated an assertive Black Woman who spoke out unapologetically to her white family and others, protected and advised her white children, and rejected the ideological concept of Black female inferiority (Bogle, 2016). Along with McDaniel's success, Ethel Waters was a Black actress who was also a force to behold with her widely-praised performances in *Pinky* and *The Member of the Wedding* as well as her role as Beulah in the televised series "Beulah." Waters' performances were transformative in that she did not solely re-present the image of the strong-willed Black Woman, but rather she presented audiences, both Black and white, with an image of a heroic, proud, and insightful Black Woman through her characters. Thus, Waters' character portrayals inspired Black audiences from within and provided them with a sense of hope and pride (Bogle, 2016).

The Jezebel. Black Women have often been represented as promiscuous, seductive, and overtly sexual, characteristics that are communicated through the second traditional stereotype, the Jezebel image. Like the Mammy character, the Jezebel representation emerged from slavery and often was depicted as mixed-race Women who possess "beautiful" European characteristics—"thin lips, straight hair, and a slender

nose" (Mullings, 1997; West, 1995, p. 462). Commonly referred to as the "bad-Black-girl," the Jezebel's sexuality is exploited and objectified. This image aligns with the historical view of Black Women's sexuality during the Civil War era in the United States. During the time of slavery, both white and Black men objectified Black Women by sexually assaulting and raping them to assert their dominance and power over them (hooks, 2015; West, 1995, p. 462).

Due to the notion that media re-presents society, this representation exploits Black Women's sexuality to justify the sexual assault and rapes that occurred during that time period. The Jezebel image stereotyped Black Women as overly sexualized individuals who initiated sexual encounters with men. By applying this representation to all Black Women, this essentially excused and rationalized the sexual assaults and rapes of Black Women (Mullings, 1997). Not only was the Jezebel's sexuality objectified, but her motherhood was also exploited. While "motherhood was a powerful and central symbol of gender definition" for white Women, Black Women were not afforded this same liberty in that their motherhood was exploited for the white man's financial gain, as their children were either sold or used as forced labor (Mullings, 1997, p. 112). Throughout history, the Jezebel representation has transitioned its stereotype through various labels, such as the Tragic Mulatto, Exotic Other, Hot Momma, or Hoochie (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Emerson, 2002). Despite the label classification, these stereotypes of

sexual animalistic behavior and predatory nature of Black Women are a means to justify the oppressive and immoral acts committed against them (Mullings, 1997).

The Sapphire. Interestingly, the third stereotypical depiction of Black Women is slightly similar to its predecessor, the Mammy character, and is referred to as the Sapphire image. Also commonly termed as the Matriarch, this representation depicts the Black Woman as a rather loud, angry, rambunctious, and dramatic Black Woman whose main priority is to verbally attack and insult Black men, in an attempt to weaken them. The Sapphire image is often perceived as "pushy," "hostile," and "aggressive" (Bogle, 2016; West, 1995, p. 461). Originating in the 1930s and popularized on both the radio and television versions of *Amos 'n' Andy*, the Sapphire has no specific physical characteristics like the other representations exhibit (Bogle, 2016; Mullings, 1997; Sims, 2006). Though the Sapphire image was produced in the 1930s, it became a dominant re-presentation of Black Women in the media in the 1950s. Similar to that of the previous media representations, the social and cultural climate of the time period in which these images reproduced greatly affected the characteristics associated with this representation. Despite the political triumphs of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s, Black families found it difficult to obtain and maintain well-paying jobs after World War II, particularly Black men. High levels of frustration with their spouses resulted in Black Women either separating or divorcing their husbands; consequently, creating a matriarchal household.

The notion of a matriarchy was deemed deviant from the white patriarchy which represented the "normal" American family structure (Collins, 2000). Thus, the stereotype of the Sapphire objectified not only the Black Woman but the Black family structure as well, exploiting that it was somehow incomplete, broken, or abnormal.

The Heroine. The media representation of Black Women in the 1960s and 1970s was transformative in comparison to the previous images portrayed by Black actresses on film and television. With the proliferation of television in the 1950s, movie ticket sales declined. Identifying that a large portion of audiences were comprised of Black Americans, film studios restructured their approach in filmmaking with their representation of Black characters. To appease audiences and remain financially stable, media images of Black actresses and actors became varied. No longer strictly confined to stereotypes by specific physical characteristics, American audiences began to view new, transformed representations of the Black Woman. Categorized as the Heroine or Black Superwoman, these representations redefined and embraced Black beauty and femininity (Bogle, 2016; Sims, 2006). The Heroine representation is a combination of characteristics of the traditional stereotypes, which include being assertive, calculating, nurturing, and verbally argumentative. Much of this structural change to these characters and films were associated with both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Nationalism Movement. With the powerful mantra, "[B]lack is beautiful" being proclaimed in the 1960s by Black

communities, this sentiment was also re-presented in mediated texts, often personified in the performances of Cicely Tyson (Sims, 2006; p. 15).

Transforming the media representation of Black femininity and beauty, Cicely Tyson and her Afro revolutionized the ways in which Black Women were portrayed in media texts, due to the rejection of the traditional Western standards of beauty that upheld European characteristics as the "most beautiful," thus making Black Women femininity and Black beauty deviant (Sims, 2006). Along with Tyson, Pam Grier emerged as the "Queen of Blaxploitation" with her performances in *Coffy, Foxy Brown, Friday Foster,* and *Sheba Baby* (Sims, 2006, p. 17). Black actresses like Grier during the Blaxploitation period were unlike other previous stereotypes. The Heroine representation depicted Black Women as attractive, strong, empowered, and glamourous. Willing to use violence and confrontation, these Black actresses were essentially re-presenting the valiant and highly visible Black female activists during this time period such as Angela Davis (Sims, 2006).

The Welfare Recipient. Furthering the character depictions of Black Women, Emerson (2002, p. 117) asserts that along with the traditional mediated images, Black Women are also represented through the image of a "welfare recipient" or "baby-momma" (see also, Gammage, 2016). Like other stereotypes, the social and political climate of the United States during the 1980s and 1990s greatly influenced this specific

media representation of Black Women. Plagued by an unstable, static economy, increase in unemployment, and the rise of matriarchs, Women, particularly Black Women, utilized the federal social and welfare programs that emerged with President Ronald Reagan's administration in the 1980s (Bogle, 2016; Collins, 2000; Mullings, 1997). According to Collins (2000), the Welfare Recipient is a lazy Black Woman who is not self sufficient; therefore, she relies heavily on the government to financially assist her and her children's livelihood. This media representation portrays these Black unwed mothers as integrally connected to the negative behavior and actions of Black children. Therefore, this stereotypical image of Black Women further justifies the marginalization and oppression of Black Women by reallocating responsibility and blame to them individually rather than the structures, institutions, and programs in the United States that are embedded with a racist and sexist ideology (Collins, 2000).

Despite the progress mainstream media have made in the representation of Black Women with increased visibility and varied character portrayals, Black Women still remain marginalized (Gammage, 2016). Producing and reproducing these images in mediated texts is a hegemonic tactic to maintain white patriarchal power and control. Representing Black Women as the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Heroine, or the Welfare Recipient is a means employed by white mainstream media to justify and rationalize the racist and sexist messages communicated in film and television, by

making these stereotypes appear as natural, inherent characteristics of Black Women (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015; Mullings, 1997). The historical and cultural exploitation and objectification of Black Women have influenced how Black Womanhood, femininity, and sexuality is represented, or rather misrepresented in mediated texts (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015).

The representation of Black Women in visual media has transformed and evolved. Originally, mediated texts often represented Black Women with stifling, stereotypical images that further advanced the dominant ideological perspective of Black Women in the United States. However, the media representation of the Black Woman is continuously changing and transforming, specifically in regards to female sexuality, female autonomy, and female empowerment. This modification of the representation of Black Women is largely in part due to the rise of Black female writers and directors (Bogle, 2016). As shown in the 1990 film *Daughters of the the* Dust written, directed, and produced by Julie Dash demonstrates the power Black Women possess in writing and creating a story with transformative representations of Black Women that both entertain and connect with the Black community, specifically Black Women (Bogle, 2016). Therefore, with the growth of Black female actors, writers, producers, and directors, it may ultimately lead to more accurate depictions of what it truly means to be a Black Woman in America.

Black Women and Music Videos

Mediated texts such as music videos are embedded with the hegemonic messages and devices that communicate the dominant ideology of the culture, which in turn produces and reproduces stereotypes and representations of groups, particularly minority groups (Emerson, 2002). Research shows that music videos' representations of Black Women maintain and perpetuate the dominant ideological perspective, which further reinforces the oppression and subjugation of Black Women (Emerson, 2002; Gammage, 2016; Rose, 1994). Because reality is socially constructed through communication, the messages communicated in mediated texts have immense power to communicate aspects of Black Womanhood to both Black Women and to society (Carey, 1988; Emerson, 2002; Gammage, 2016; hooks, 1992). Noted in Brown, Campbell, and Fischer's (1986) study, Women and Blacks most frequently and consistently watched music videos in comparison to other teenagers. Therefore, Black Women may be greatly influenced and affected by both the racial and gendered messages re-presented in the music video representations of Black female artists, which further indicates the importance of studying such a subject.

Despite their marginalization in society and the music industry, Black Women possess immense power in liberating themselves and the Black community in that they are often viewed as "culture-bearers" (Mullings, 1997, p. 124). Therefore, it is significant

to identify the music video representations of Black female artists from a variety of genres, specifically those within the hip-hop culture to gain an understanding of Black Women's identity in both society and the music industry. Regardless of the genre or artist, heterosexual relationships, empowered Black female voices, emphasis on lyrical abilities and control of their bodies and sexuality are prominent themes within Black female artists' messages through their lyrics and images in music videos (Rose, 1994). With an emphasis in conveying and exploiting their sexuality, independence, and Womanhood, they, in turn, recover from the racial and gendered wounds that have historically and culturally oppressed them. In essence, they redefine and reconstruct their sense of self; thus, Black Women claim their identity and power in society.

Quite often, the representation of Black female sexuality is portrayed in contemporary popular music and music videos (hooks, 1992). As defined by the white, androcentric ideology in the United States, Black Women are sexually loose, immoral, and available (hooks, 1992). Historically and culturally, Black Women's bodies and sexuality have been exploited, objectified, and commodified as a result of male dominance and power in the United States (hooks, 1992). While the notion of Black Women as sex objects was first sold on the auction block, it has transcended also into the music industry (Gammage, 2016). As hooks (1992) asserts, Black Women in popular music, regardless of the quality of their voice, to some degree portray the sexually-free

image. By looking at the musical careers and music videos of Black female musical artists, it is interesting to note that while their representation as Black Women in music videos communicate hegemonic messages of the dominant ideology, they do not perpetuate the androcentric stereotypes of the Black Woman. Rather, Black female musical artists are more in control of their image that is communicated to the public and their fan base, which in turn allows them to determine their Black female identity (Emerson, 2002; hooks, 1992; Pough, 2007). Tina Turner, Salt-N-Pepa, and Lil' Kim are particularly noteworthy for the ways in which they define themselves sexually. To better interpret Black Women's sexual representations in music videos, it is first important to understand both the racial and gendered contexts in which these representations were formed and communicated. Therefore, it is significant to understand the culture of hip hop.

Cultivated in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Bronx, New York, hip-hop culture signified a powerful musical movement for marginalized minority groups in the United States, particularly Black Americans (Emerson, 2002; Price, 2006). Plagued by social, economic, and political disparity in America, the Black youth in urban cities created this movement in an attempt to liberate their communities (Price, 2006). In doing so, they essentially created a unique culture of language, fashion, dance, art, and new genres of music (Price, 2006; Roberts, 1991).

The hip-hop culture constructed a new identity for Black people—one that was not crafted and distorted by white supremacy, but rather one that empowered them (Price, 2006). While Black Americans' voices echoed with pride, resistance, and power in hip-hop culture, Black Women still faced oppression within their own community (Pough, 2007; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Re-presenting Black Women's marginalization within the Black community, scholars note the implicit and explicit misogynistic messages embedded in hip-hop and rap music that demean, exploit, and dominant Black Women through sexual exploitation (Collins, 2000; Gammage, 2016). However, Weitzer & Kubrin's (2009) findings posit that while these messages are pervasive and thematic in rap music, they are infrequent. Challenging the notion of traditional sexual exploitation of Black Women, Lorde (1984) discusses the significance of Black Women embracing their erotic. Socially constructed to suppress and ignore their erotic results in their lack of power in society. By recognizing and expressing their erotic, they, too, can become powerful and free in that "[they] begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in…society" (Lorde, 1984, p. 90). Through the expression and exploitation of their erotic and sexuality, Black Women reclaim their power in a white patriarchal society, as demonstrated specifically in Tina Turner's music video representation.

The musical career of Tina Turner was cultivated initially by her abusive and oppressive husband, Ike Turner, in which he stereotyped and represented her as the wild, hypersexual Black Woman. After years of being sexually exploited and physically abused, Tina Turner divorced Ike Turner; however, she remained married to the persona and image he constructed for her. Rather than simply embracing her "wild [W]oman" image, Turner continuously exploited this representation visually with her nonverbal communication such as the wild, blonde wigs she wore and her overall communication presented in music videos, which in turn advanced her career greatly (hooks, 1992, p. 68). Tuner's popular music video "What's Love Got To Do With It" further exploited the representation of Black Women as seductive sexual savages, with her nonverbal messages of body movement and eye gaze. Through this exploitation, Turner transformed the representation of Black Women by communicating the notion that while Black Women are sexually free and available, they are not available to anyone at any time. She further advances the notion that Black Women are strong and have the power to choose whom they decide to be with sexually. The concept of the power to choose and being sexual hunters who are not submissive and at the will of the white or Black man, as shown in the historical context of Black Women and sexuality, was wildly transformative to what it means to be a Black Woman (hooks, 1992). Turner's use and exploitation of Black female sexuality was done in such a way to exert dominance and control over men

to essentially gain both power and money. This exploitation of Black female sexuality was the first of many ways in which Black Women transformed these images to take back control of the representations of themselves (hooks, 1992).

Differing from mainstream Black female artists such as Tina Turner, female rappers similarly employ sexual exploitation in their music videos but tune their message for a more specific audience—a Black female audience (Roberts, 1991). The popular female rap trio Salt-N-Pepa clearly communicate their female sexuality and erotic through the lyrics and visuals in their music videos (Keyes, 2000; Rose, 1994). With the songs entitled "Shoop" and "Shake Your Thang," Salt-N-Pepa employ traditional masculine language to essentially subvert this exploitation; therefore, they assert their power and erotic in objectifying female sexuality and sexualizing themselves (Keyes, 2000; Oware, 2009; Rose, 1994). Specifically, Salt-N-Pepa communicate their sexual desires through the return of the male gaze in the "Shoop" music video. Using Black men as sexualized objects directly poses a challenge to the dominant ideological views of femininity in that Women are passive and reactive to the opposite sex (Bem, 1993; Keyes, 2000; Wood, 2013). Moreover, Salt-N-Pepa also claim their power as Black Women by communicating sole control over their bodies in their music video "Shake Your Thang" (Roberts, 1991; Rose, 1994). Both the lyrics and the visuals in the music video clearly demonstrate the declaration of power by the female rap group. Sexually

suggestive dance moves and verses such as "Don't tell me how to party, it's my dance, yep, and it's my body" express a resistance to the notion that men have the power to dictate and control their bodies and behaviors (Rose, 1994, p. 167). Another masculine tactic Salt-N-Pepa appropriate in their music is sexualizing women, specifically themselves. Rather than being at the sexual mercy of men and their desires, Salt-N-Pepa explicitly communicate their sexual and erotic desires in the following lyrics: "And I'm freak you till you pass out…baby tear your back out" (Oware, 2009, p. 796). While some may view this strategy as contradictory to their overall purpose in advancing a Black feminist agenda, the female rappers exploit their sexuality to ultimately claim power and own their sexuality unapologetically—a notion deemed by the white patriarchy as inappropriate and unfeminine.

Lil' Kim, a Black female rapper in the 1990s, also conveyed a representation of Black female sexuality (Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007). While the message remains consistent with the music of the Black female artists, the approaches in which they use to communicate their power and female sexuality are slightly different from one another. This is specifically demonstrated in Lil' Kim's explicit raps of sexual and erotic desires (Oware, 2009). Though Women are stereotypically socialized to deny themselves of sexual pleasure, Lil' Kim strongly opposes this traditional feminine construct in the lyrics of her song entitled "Not Tonight" (Lorde, 1984; Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007). Through

the exploitation of raunchy and vulgar lyrics such as, "I know a dude named Jimmy used to run up in me, I didn't mind it, when he fucked me from behind, it felt fine," Lil' Kim aggressively rejects the dominant ideological views of female sexuality (Oware, 2009, p. 795). Furthermore, she objectifies the stereotype of Black female sexuality in that they are sexual savages and predators. In doing this, Lil' Kim owns her sexuality in that she personally benefits from and enjoys sexual encounters with men—not simply satisfying their desires but also and primarily her own (Oware, 2009).

Marginalized, stereotyped, and oppressed by the white, patriarchal dominant ideology, Black Women have historically and culturally struggled to find their identity in society. While Black Women's sexuality is often objectified in asserting that they are sexually promiscuous and immoral in an attempt to diminish their power, self worth, and significance, Black Women, particularly Black female musical artists, respond by exploiting these stereotypes themselves. Thus, through communicating and representing sexual and erotic desires in music, Black Women "embrace the sexuality of the self…[which] exhibit[s] a kind of freedom"; a freedom towards cultivating and communicating their own sense of Black female identity in society (Pough, 2007, p. 44).

Black female musical artists not only exploit the white patriarchal stereotypes of female sexuality but also those of Black Womanhood. Communicating their power in music and in society, Black Women depict a true Black female identity through

affirmation and reclamation of independence, motherhood, and sisterhood in music videos (Emerson, 2002; Keyes, 2000; Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007; Roberts, 1991; Roberts, 1994; Rose, 1994; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). These images are portrayed through the musical representations of artists such as Erykah Badu, Queen Latifah, Missy Elliot, Lil' Kim, and Suga.

Erykah Badu transformed and exploited the representation of Black Women by communicating a strong, independent voice. In her popular music video "Tyrone," Badu expresses her discontent with her significant other in that her relational needs are not being met to her satisfaction. Badu's communication is essential in her transformative exploitation of the representation of Black Women in music videos. Throughout the music video, Badu's nonverbal messages further reinforce the explicit messages she is communicating to her lover. While wearing a traditional headdress, Badu's assertive communication as a Black Woman is exploited with her "gestures, inflections, and facial expressions" that vividly express her feelings of being an independent, strong Black Woman (Emerson, 2002, p. 126). While the image of the loud, assertive Black Woman has been culturally represented in the media from an androcentric perspective, Badu exploits this representation to ultimately claim her independence, autonomy, and power in the relationship over her male counterpart (Emerson, 2002). Interestingly, Badu's lyrics express frustration with the financial status of her significant other and his broke,

unemployed friends. Quite often, hip hop and rap music depict Black Women in heterosexual relationships as Gold Diggers who cannot be trusted (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). While some female musical artists exploit this stereotype by adopting the image of a Gold Digger, Badu strategically objectifies this stereotype by associating this label not with Black Women but with Black men.

Like Badu, both Black female rappers Lil' Kim and Suga both explicitly and overtly communicate their financial independence (Oware, 2009; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Contrasting from Badu, rather than resenting their male counterparts for their lack of financial support, Lil' Kim and Suga exploit the Gold Digger image and assert their dominance over men in that they can afford designer clothes and pay for their dates. For example, Suga in her song entitled "What's up Star," the artist states, "…Let's have drinks at the bar, and if I like what I see, then drinks on me" (Oware, 2009, p. 794). The image of a strong, independent Black Woman, while represented initially as a stereotype, has become a badge of honor of agency opposing a racist and sexist ideology (hooks, 2015; Oware, 2009).

Not only do Black female artists express their independence and autonomy through assertive communication in heterosexual relationships, but they also reflect the stereotype of a strong Black Woman in the reclamation of the term "bitch" (Keyes, 2000; Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007). For Black female rappers such as Lil' Kim and Missy

Elliott, they embrace this term that is often considered derogatory and demeaning (Keyes, 2000). Performing a content analysis of 44 *Billboard* charting songs, Oware (2009) found that most female hip hop and rap artists expressed this term to refer to themselves or to other Women. Though some may view the usage of "bitch" in their lyrics contradicts the strength of Black Womanhood and independence, Pough (2007) asserts that "some feel the reclamation of the word 'bitch'…is an empowering act" which is similar to the ways in which hip hop artists re-appropriate the term "nigger" or "nigga" (p. 39). Varying in definitions, "bitch" represents an expert lyricist who encourages, empowers, and provokes their audience and listeners (Oware, 2009). Similar to other stereotypes represented in music videos, these Black female artists are exploiting and objectifying this term to ultimately weaken hegemonic masculinity, construct and establish their identity, and claim their power in society.

Another noteworthy Black female artist who presented audiences with a landmark music video that provided a strong Black female voice is demonstrated in Queen Latifah's song entitled "Ladies First" (Roberts, 1994; Rose, 1994). Both the lyrics and the visual images in the music video communicate the strength of Black culture and of Black Women. Donning military-inspired clothing and Afrocentric colors, Queen Latifah exemplifies resistance and power of Black Women in their historic and cultural struggles against both racism and sexism. Not only does Queen Latifah assert Black female

autonomy and independence, but she also attempts to challenge the stereotypes afforded to Black Women in music videos in that the images are typically one-dimensional. Queen Latifah proclaims her power and significance in society not only as a musical artist but also as a mother, which provides another dimension for Black Women. Featuring the aspect of motherhood in music videos is significant for Black Women in that they are stereotypically deemed as bad mothers or not considered mothers at all, an image that emerged from their historical and cultural oppression as Black Women. Like Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu also communicates motherhood in her video "Tyrone" with her physically being pregnant. Thus, the image of a pregnant Badu and the explicit lyrics rapped by Queen Latifah represent motherhood which is a rare representation for Black female musical artists to portray (Emerson, 2002; Roberts, 1994; Rose, 1994).

The affirmation of both a strong, independent Black female and of motherhood further the construction of a true Black female identity in music and in society. According to Emerson (2002), the aspect of sisterhood and collaboration is also an empowering strategy employed by various Black female artists to ultimately communicate their power and establish their identity. Representing sisterhood in her video "Sock It to Me," Missy Elliott, Lil' Kim, and Da Brat collaborate to communicate a feminist message to their audiences. The notion that Black Women can accomplish their objectives but rely on another can evidently be demonstrated in the visuals of this music

video. Trying to escape from robots, both Missy Elliott and Lil' Kim are rescued by Da Brat. Thus, the music video communicates the individual power of Black Women but that true success and rescue from hardships and obstacles are achieved when Black Women collaborate and work together (Emerson, 2002). Sisterhood is also depicted in the music video of Queen Latifah's "Ladies First." Collaborating with fellow rapper Monie Love and including female dancers in the video evidently communicate the importance of sisterhood (Roberts, 1994). To truly be liberated from both a racist and sexist ideology that pervades the United States, Black Women must empower, assist, and celebrate one another.

All of these female musical artists represent the stereotypical images of Black Women in their music videos. However, it is significant to note that while they are depicting these images, they as Black Women are taking control of representations that are historically and culturally produced by an androcentric and dominant ideological perspective and overturning them to place Women, particularly Black Women in a place of power and control. This idea is communicated in hooks' (1992) *Black Looks* in which she states, "contemporary fiction by Black Women focusing on the construction of self and identity breaks new ground in that it clearly names the ways structures of domination, racism, sexism…make it practically impossible for Black women to survive…" (p. 50). With the lyrics and visuals of their music videos, Black Women are

communicating to "[B]lack men, [B]lack [W]omen, and dominant American culture as they struggle to define themselves…" (Rose, 1994, p. 148). Through the exploitation of representations of Black Women that music videos depict, it allows both the musical artist and their Black female listeners to heal and recover from historical and cultural marginalization and oppression to ultimately define and construct for themselves their identity and what it means to them to be a Black Woman in society (Emerson, 2002).

Beyoncé: Making the Personal Political

Beyoncé's messages about being a Black Woman build on previous Black female musical artists' influences. Beyoncé Giselle Knowles, born on September 4, 1981, in Houston, Texas, already has been recognized as one of the most popular performers of all time in contemporary music ("Beyoncé Biography," 2017; "Beyoncé Knowles," 2016). At the beginning of her musical career, Beyoncé teamed up with her cousin and classmates to form the all-female musical group *Destiny's Child*, in which she was featured as the female lead vocalist. After signing with Columbia Records in 1997, *Destiny's Child* became a huge success with their top-charting songs and large fan base ("Beyoncé Knowles," 2016). While the group did not officially break up until 2004, Beyoncé emerged as a solo artist in 2001—trying to explore various avenues as an artist with both acting and music ("Beyoncé Knowles," 2016).

Evidence of Beyoncé's popularity, influence, and power includes the number of awards and titles received, the top-charting albums and singles, and the number of opportunities she has had. As a solo artist, Beyoncé has received various awards and has accomplished a great deal in the span of her musical career and continues to do so today ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016; "Beyoncé Biography," 2017; "Beyoncé Knowles," 2016). In 2003, Beyoncé's first solo album entitled *Dangerously in Love* made history in that it recognized her as the first female artist to have a number-one single, "Crazy in Love," simultaneously on the charts in both the United States and the United Kingdom ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016). Furthermore, in 2009 with the release of her album, *I AM…SASHA FIERCE*, Beyoncé was selected by *Billboard* magazine as Woman of the Year as well as recognized as the Top Female Artist of the Decade ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016). Awarded with 20 Grammys, Beyoncé holds the unofficial title as the "most-nominated woman in Grammy history" with a total of 53 Grammy nominations (Gottesman, 2016, p. 9).

The widespread popularity of and obsession with Beyoncé escalated with the 2016 Video Music Awards in which she received 8 Moonmen awards, totaling to 25 Moonmen, surpassing the historic record of 20 Moonmen accumulated by Madonna (Chen, 2016). Selling more than 120 million albums and breaking iTunes Store records with her 2013 self-entitled album, her influence and domination of popular culture is

undeniable ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016; Gottesman, 2016). The influence and respect Beyoncé has accumulated throughout her musical career was communicated recently at the 59th Annual Grammy Awards. Despite receiving awards for Best Music Video for "Formation" as well as Best Urban Contemporary Album for *Lemonade*, Beyoncé did not receive the most respected and most prestigious award at the Grammy's which is Album of the Year. While Adele's *25* received Album of the Year, Adele emotionally communicated her admiration and respect for Beyoncé stating that Beyoncé was "the artist of [her] life" and how "monumental" her *Lemonade* album was (France, 2017, p. 2). As demonstrated at the Grammy's, Beyoncé is recognized as a powerful force regardless of the number of awards she receives. Moreover, Beyoncé's mass popularity and inspiration is not only identified through the awards or nominations she's received but the opportunities she's been afforded, such as performing at the second inauguration ceremony for President Obama and the Super Bowl halftime show in 2013, and the 50th Annual Country Music Awards (CMAs) in 2016 ("Beyoncé Bio," 2017; "Beyoncé Biography," 2016; Roberts, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). Because these pivotal events that represent power, control, and historically masculine values, it is significant to note that Beyoncé, a Black Woman, is featured during these nationalized events (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016).

Beyoncé's widespread popularity, power, and mass appeal is due in large part to how she conducts both her personal and professional lives. While Beyoncé is a public figure and a famous musical artist and performer, she personally does not contribute to the sensationalized aspects of publicity to enhance her power and celebrity status in society. She remains relatively silent to her fans, the general public, and the media. Beginning in 2013, Beyoncé refused to participate in magazine interviews, even with the highly-respected and hallowed fashion magazine *Vogue*. Gracing the cover of their September issue, Beyoncé did not provide any commentary to be featured in the magazine. The act of allowing celebrities and famous public figures to appear on the magazine cover without conducting an interview is highly unusual and rarely done; however, Beyoncé proves that she is the exception (Schneier, 2015; Swift, n.d.).

This vow of silence to the media and the general public demonstrates the power Beyoncé's wields in society. Organized media institutions, inherently embedded with hegemonic messages of the dominant ideology in Western culture, typically control the images and representations for celebrities and public figures. As a Black Woman primarily represented through mediated communication, Beyoncé's silence takes back that control and power from the media. By controlling messages and images about her communicated through the media, she shapes and influences how she as a Black Woman is perceived and represented (Schneier, 2015; Swift, n.d.). Moreover, it is interesting to

note that when she does communicate to her fans, the general public, and the media, it is through visual communication and music that is written, produced, and directed by her. While Beyoncé uses social media, such as Twitter, she is inconsistently active or vocal on this platform with only 14.1 million followers. In contrast to Twitter, Queen Bey has accumulated 43.5 million followers on Instagram, a social media site that communicates with images. She is present and active on Instagram with the many images and photographs posted of her professional and personal life. However, her Instagram posts are rarely accompanied by a caption or text, which reinforces her powerful silence in society (Schneier, 2015). Furthermore, her power in controlling how she is represented can be seen in the dissemination of her music, in which she states, "I feel like I am able to speak directly to my fans. There's so much that gets between the music, the artist, and the fans" ("Beyoncé Biography," 2016, n.p.). In controlling the release of her music, she ensures that her messages and her representation as an artist and a Black Woman are not influenced or manipulated by the ideological perspectives of the media.

Even though Beyoncé remains relatively silent to her fans and the media, her music and music videos have made great waves of noise. With the number of iconic albums and top-charting-hit songs, Beyoncé's music and music videos have generally been for everyone and anyone, regardless of race, class, gender, or geographic location. However, the 2016 release of her "Formation" music video generated controversy within

the mainstream audience. Following the days after the release of "Formation," a great deal of Facebook and Twitter posts appeared with comments about how Beyoncé's "Formation" video was too militant and too racist. This commentary was primarily generated by white individuals.

The controversial political messages communicated in Beyoncé's "Formation" music video as well as her 2016 Super Bowl 50 halftime performance garnered a great amount of praise and criticism, which in turn shifted her mainstream appeal as a musician and performer. Before the release of "Formation" and her controversial Super Bowl performance, Beyoncé's fans and the general public were in a sense color blind to her Blackness, due to her mainstream popularity (France, 2016). The writers, producers, and directors of the popular satirical comedy television show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) even produced a segment that depicted the outrage of white males and females who finally came to the realization that Beyoncé is indeed Black (France, 2016). And the "Formation" music video and her Super Bowl 50 halftime performance is very Black and militant, not something they typically expected from her as a musical artist.

Like the social media commentary that I witnessed personally, most of the outrage of "Formation" and her halftime performance were from white individuals. The people angered by the racial and gendered messages Beyoncé communicates are interestingly predominantly white males. According to the dominant ideology in Western

culture in the United States, white, upper-class males have the most power and control in society (Barker, 2012). The individuals who opposed "Formation," such as white police officers, politicians, and conservative political broadcasters, were angered in that these messages challenged the status quo and their dominance and power in society (Kohn, 2016). Dressed in militant Black leather outfits and donning their ethnic afros with Black berets, the halftime performance referenced messages of Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. Outraged and offended, many critics perceived Beyoncé's performance and music video as anti-police, an attack on the police, or simply did not understand the messages communicated (Ex, 2016; France, 2016; Kohn, 2016). Following her controversial half time performance, unions of police officers urged other officers in the United States to not assist with security for Beyoncé's upcoming "Formation" tour (Harris-Perry, 2017). In response to the negative reactions of the "Formation" music video and halftime performance, Beyoncé clarified and communicated to the public that she is not attacking police officers that serve and protect Americans, but rather the police brutality and injustice that has pervaded these institutions in the United States (Gottesman, 2016). Furthermore, Beyoncé not only provided clarification but appropriated the negative reactions by selling "Boycott Beyoncé" merchandise on her tour (Harris-Perry, 2017; Kornhaber, 2016). It is significant to note that typically when boycotts are held, it is to denounce and criticize a large, powerful institution. Thus, the

act of boycotting Beyoncé communicates the immense power she holds in music and in society. By exploiting this slogan that was essentially meant to offend her and damage her career, Beyoncé objectifies this slogan and profits from it which further communicates the power she holds (Kornhaber, 2016).

While some viewers and listeners' responses resulted in protest and objection to the musical artist's messages about race and gender in the United States, others embraced the politically-fueled verbal and nonverbal messages that communicates the power of Blackness and Black women (Jacobsen, 2016). According to Jacobsen (2016), it was an anthem that inspired Black Women to rejoice in their Blackness and claim their power in society—not to ask for it but to take it. While her music and performances may not be strictly mainstream anymore, it is apparent that her powerful, controversial, and political statements have not hindered her "Formation" World Tour ticket sales, which further reinforces the notion that despite her silence, despite her militant and radical messages, Beyoncé is a force of power in an androcentric society (France, 2016).

Beyoncé's controversial performances that resulted in both celebration and backlash did not cease with the Super Bowl halftime show. Performing alongside the infamous music trio, the Dixie Chicks, Beyoncé embraced her Southern culture and Texas roots by singing "Daddy Lessons," a country-style song from her 2016 album *Lemonade*. With lyrics that discuss the Second Amendment and whiskey and

accompanied by fiddles, “Daddy Lessons” does not veer from the country music genre; however, this performance also incited a great amount of discussion. Not only was the location of the performance highly unusual for Beyoncé in that the Country Music Awards rarely are accustomed to having Black musicians perform at their award shows, but also performing with musical artists who have a difficult and controversial reputation with the country music industry and community (Roberts, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). In 2003, the Dixie Chicks declared a political stance opposing the invasion of Iraq and communicated that “[they] were ashamed that the President of the United States is from Texas” (Zimmerman, 2016, p. 4). These political remarks resulted in country music shunning the Dixie Chicks, transforming their musical career. However, the Dixie Chicks decided to shake things up in the country music scene once again by performing with Beyoncé. While the Dixie Chicks dressed in all black, Beyoncé, the band, and her back-up singers donned all white while clapping, singing, and swaying to the country rendition of “Daddy Lessons” on stage. Following their Wednesday night performance at the 50th Annual Country Music Awards (CMAs), the general public’s reaction consisted of both excitement and anger (Roberts, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016).

The polarizing effect of the CMAs performance resulted in a social media backlash with traditional country music fans communicating their anger and outrage with Beyoncé performing at this awards show. Due to the backlash that ensued, speculation of

the CMAs removing the performance from their website were made by various media platforms; however, they have denied all claims against this accusation stating that the performance is online and available for viewers. Despite these claims, the CMAs admitted to the removal of a promotional video which included Beyoncé, due to consent and approval issues (Roberts, 2016; Strachan, 2016). Though there were many upset country music fans, country music singer Brad Paisley stated: "Frequently, country crosses over. But every now and then a major pop superstar wants to be a part of this. Welcome, Beyoncé" (Roberts, 2016, p. 4-5). While some viewers shared in Paisley's sentiments, others did not. Furthermore, Zimmerman (2016) interestingly notes that Beyoncé's performance was unique in a sense that she did not don her usual leotard, fierce stares and expressions, or precise and creative choreography, but rather she remained "authentic [and] strictly country" (p. 6). Thus, the negative reactions from and discomfort with Beyoncé's performance at the CMAs stems not from genre-related issues but rather communicate the institutional and structural racism that is embedded within the music industry in the United States (Zimmerman, 2016). Regardless of the controversy or backlash, it is significant to recognize the immense power Beyoncé has as a musical performer. Performing at a country music award show that is comprised of predominantly white, conservative audience members who uphold masculine gender views proves that Beyoncé's music transcends genre and is universal. Though her performance was not

overtly political like the Super Bowl halftime show, Beyoncé implicitly communicates her power in which she represented country music with a different race which in essence was a political message to audiences about the power she has not only as a musical performer but as a Black Woman.

Media representations of Black Women once reflected inaccurate, stereotypical images that further reinforced the dominant ideological perspective. However, these media representations are continuously changing and transforming as society changes and evolves. Although the images of the Mammy, the Jezebel, the Sapphire, the Heroine, and the Welfare Recipient may still exist, the image itself is transformed, and Black Women are no longer being exploited by these representations but are the exploiters. Through the objectification and exploitation of these historical and cultural media representations, Black Women gain a sense of identity, voice, and power they did not have before.

References

About the Black Lives Matter network. (n.d.). *Black Lives Matter*. Retrieved from http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/

Baker, A., Goodman, J.D., & Mueller, B. (2015, June 13). Beyond the chokehold: The path to Eric Garner's death. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/14/nyregion/eric-garner-police-chokehold-staten-island.html?_r=0

Barker, C. (2012). *Cultural studies*: *Theory and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bem, S.L. (1993). *The lenses of gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Beyoncé Bio. (2017). *Rolling Stone.* Retrieved from http://www.rollingstone.com/music/artists/beyonce/biography

Beyoncé Biography. (2017). *Billboard*. Retrieved from http://www.billboard.com/artist/281569/beyonce/biography

Beyoncé Biography. (2016). *TIDAL*. Retrieved from https://listen.tidal.com/artist/1566

Beyoncé Knowles Biography. (2016). *Bio.* Retrieved from http://www.biography.com/people/beyonce-knowles-39230#awards-and-accolades

Bierria, A., Liebenthal, M., & Incite! (2007). To render ourselves visible. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 31-47). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Biondi, M. (2016, August 15). The radicalism of Black Lives Matter. *In These Times*. Retrieved from http://inthesetimes.com/features/black-lives-matter-history-police-brutality.html

Bobo, J. (1995). *Black women as cultural readers*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Bogle, D. (2016). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of blacks in American films*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Bouie, J. (2015, August 23). Where Black Lives Matter began. *Slate*. Retrieved from http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2015/08/hurricane_katrina_10th_anniversary_how_the_black_lives_matter_movement_was.html

Bradley, R.N. (2016, February 7). Getting in line: Working through Beyoncé's "Formation." *Red Clay Scholar (blog)*. Retrieved from https://redclayscholarblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/07/getting-in-line-working-through-beyonces-formation/

[Brotha Doug]. (2016, June 26). Jesse Williams' Speech (BET Awards 2016). [Video File]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orXogk3euMA

Brown, T. (2007). Wade in the water. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 48-53). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Brown, J.D., Campbell, K., & Fischer, L. (1986). American adolescents and music videos: Why do they watch? *Gazette*, *37*, 19-32.

Caramanica, J., Morris, W., & Wortham, J. (2016, February 6). Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, activist, both? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/arts/music/beyonce-formation-super-bowl-video.html?_r=4

Carey, J. W. (1988). A cultural approach to communication. In C*ommunication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Chen, J. (2016, August 29). The 2016 MTV VMAs: Beyoncé makes history, surpasses Madonna with most Moonmen awards. *US Weekly*. Retrieved from http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/beyonce-makes-history-has-more-mtv-vmas-than-madonna-w436693

Collins, P.H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Cook, B. (2015). *Flood of images: Media, memory, and Hurricane Katrina*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Elliot, J.R., & Pais, J. (2006). Race, class, and Hurricane Katrina: Social differences in human responses to disaster. *Social Science Research, 35*, 295-321.

Emerson, R.A. (2002). Where my girls at? Negotiating black womanhood in music videos. *Gender & Society, 16(1)*, 115-135.

Ex, K. (2016, February 10). Why are people suddenly afraid of Beyoncé's black pride? *Billboard*. Retrieved from http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/6873899/beyonce-formation-essay

Flaherty, J. (2007). Corporate reconstruction and grassroots resistance. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 100-119). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Forman, T.A., & Lewis, A.E. (2006). Racial apathy and Hurricane Katrina: The social anatomy of prejudice in the post-Civil Rights era. *Du Bois Review Social Science Research on Race, 3(1),* 175-202.

France, L.R. (2016, February 24). Why the Beyoncé controversy is bigger than you think. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/23/entertainment/beyonce-controversy-feat/

France, L.R. (2017, February 13). Grammys 2017: Adele and Beyoncé's big moments. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/12/entertainment/grammys-2017/

Funke, D., & Susman, T. (2016, July 12). From Ferguson to Baton Rouge: Deaths of black men and women at the hands of police. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-police-deaths-20160707-snap-htmlstory.html

Gammage, M.M. (2016). *Representations of black women in the media: The damnation of black womanhood.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Garza, A. (2014, October 7). A herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement by Alicia Garza. *The Feminist Wire*. Retrieved from http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/

Geir, B. (2016, July 8). Black Lives Matter speaks out against Dallas shooting. *Fortune*. Retrieved from http://fortune.com/2016/07/08/black-lives-matter-speaks-out-against-dallas-shooting/

Gordon, R. (2009). Katrina, race, refugees, and images of the Third World. In J.I. Levitt & M.C. Whitaker (Eds.), *Hurricane Katrina: America's unnatural disaster* (p. 226-254). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Gottesman, T. (2016, April 4). Exclusive: Beyoncé wants to change the conversation. *Elle*. Retrieved from http://www.elle.com/fashion/a35286/beyonce-elle-cover-photos/

Greene, L.S. (2009). Governmental liability for the Katrina failure. In J.I. Levitt & M.C. Whitaker (Eds.), *Hurricane Katrina: America's unnatural disaster* (p. 206-225). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Harriot, M. (2017, February 16). Whatever happened to Black Lives Matter? *The Root*. Retrieved from http://www.theroot.com/whatever-happened-to-black-lives-matter-1792412728

Hartman, C., & Squires, G.D. (2006). Pre-Katrina, post-Katrina. In C. Hartman & G.D. Squires (Eds.), *There is no such thing as a natural disaster: Race, class, and Hurricane Katrina* (p. 1-11). New York, NY: Routledge.

Harris-Perry, M. (2017). Beyoncé: Her creative opus turned the pop star into a political force. *Time*. Retrieved from http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2016-beyonce-runner-up/

Hilderbrand, S., Crow, S., & Fithian, L. (2007). Common ground relief. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 80-98). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation.* Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (2001). *Salvation: Black people and love*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

hooks, b. (2015). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Jacobsen, M.E. (2016, February 6). Beyoncé's "Formation" lyrics are a reminder of my own #blackgirlmagic. *Romper*. Retrieved from https://www.romper.com/p/beyonces-formation-lyrics-are-a-reminder-of-my-own-blackgirlmagic-5186

Kellner, D. (2003). Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race and class in the media: A text reade*r (p. 9-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Keyes, C.L. (2000). Empowering self, making choices, creating spaces: Black female identity via rap music performance. *The Journal of American Folklore, 113* (449), 255-269.

Kohn, S. (2016, February 15). Beyoncé a political superhero with rhythm. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/15/opinions/beyonce-protest-misses-point-kohn/

Kornhaber, S. (2016, April 28). Why Beyoncé is embracing her own backlash: The "boycott Beyoncé" merchandise on sale at her concerts affords her a new kind of appeal. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from

https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/boycott-beyonce-merchandise-formation-tour-opposition/480318/

Lapham, L.H. (2007). Slum clearance. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 7-14). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Levitt, J.I., & Whitaker, M.C. (2009). Truth crushed to Earth will rise again: Katrina and its aftermath. In J.I. Levitt & M.C. Whitaker (Eds.), *Hurricane Katrina: America's unnatural disaster* (p. 1-21). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Liebelson, D., & Reilly, R.J. (2016, July 13). Sandra Bland died one year ago: And since then, at least 810 people have lost their lives in jail. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from http://highline.huffingtonpost.com/articles/en/sandra-bland-jail-deaths/

Lorde, A. (1984). The uses of the erotic: The erotic as power. *Sexualities and Communication*, 87-91.

Mather, K., Queally, J., & Gerber, M. (2017, January 24). No charges against LAPD officers who shot and killed Ezell Ford, D.A. say. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-ezell-ford-no-charges-20170124-story.html

Miller, D.S., & Rivera, J. (2007). Setting the stage: Roots of social inequity and the human tragedy of Hurricane Katrina. In K.A. Bates & R.S. Swan (Eds.), *Through the eye of Katrina: Social justice in the United States* (15-35). Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.

Mullings, L. (1997). *On our own terms: Race, class, and gender in the lives of African American women*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Nunn, K.B. (2009). "Still up on the roof": Race, victimology, and the response to Hurricane Katrina. In J.I. Levitt & M.C. Whitaker (Eds.), *Hurricane Katrina: America's unnatural disaster* (p. 183-205). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Oware, M. (2009). A "man's woman"? Contradictory messages in the songs of female rappers, 1992-2000. *Journal of Black Studies, 39* (5), 786-802.

Patterson, B.E. (2017, February 7). How the Black Lives Matter Movement is mobilizing against Trump. *Mother Jones*. Retrieved from http://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/02/black-lives-matter-versus-trump

Pough, G. (2007). Hip-hop soul divas and rap music: Critiquing the love that hate produced. In E.M. Hayes & L.F. Williams (Eds.), *Black women and music: More than the blues* (p. 23-50). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Pouncy, C.R.P. (2009). Hurricane Katrina and the "market" for survival: The role of economic theory in the construction and maintenance of disaster. In J.I. Levitt & M.C. Whitaker (Eds.), *Hurricane Katrina: America's unnatural disaster* (p. 50-80). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Powell, J.A., Jeffries, H.K., Newhart, D.W., & Stiens, E. (2006). Towards a transformative view of race: The crisis and opportunity of Katrina. In C. Hartman & G.D. Squires (Eds.), *There is no such thing as a natural disaster: Race, class, and Hurricane Katrina* (p. 59-84). New York, NY: Routledge.

Price, E.G., III. (2006). *Hip hop culture*. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO.

Roberts, R. (1991). Music videos, performance and resistance: Feminist rappers. *Journal of Popular Culture*, *25*, 141-152.

Roberts, R. (1994). "Ladies First": Queen Latifah's Afrocentric feminist music video. *African American Review, 28* (2), 245-257.

Roberts, R. (2016, November 3). Conservative country music fans lash out at CMA performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks. *Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-conservative-cma-beyonce-dixie-chicks-20161103-htmlstory.html

Rodriguez, D. (2007). The meaning of "disaster" under the dominance of white life. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 133-156). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Salaam, K.Y. (2007). Below the water line. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. ix-xviii). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Schneier, M. (2015, August 19). Beyoncé is seen but not heard. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/20/fashion/beyonce-is-seen-but-not-heard.html

Sexton, J. (2007). The obscurity of black suffering. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 120-132). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Sidner, S., & Simon, M. (2015, December 28). The rise of Black Lives Matter: Trying to break the cycle of violence and silence. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/28/us/black-lives-matter-evolution/

Sims, Y. (2006). *Women of Blaxploitation: How the black action film heroine changed American popular culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

Stacks, D. W., & Hocking, J.E. (1992). Evaluating sources: Historical/critical methodology. In *Essentials of Communication Research* (p. 100-116). New York: HarperCollins.

Strachan, M. (2016, November 4). Did the CMA awards really delete all mention of Beyoncé to appease racists? *The Huffington Post.* Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/beyonce-cmas-dixie-chicks_us_581b9ebbe4b0aac62483218f

Swift, N. (n.d.). Why Beyoncé has stopped giving interviews. *Nicki Swift*. Retrieved from http://www.nickiswift.com/2814/beyonce-stopped-giving-interviews/

The Black Lives Matter network advocates for dignity, justice, and respect. (n.d.). *Black Lives Matter*. Retrieved from http://blacklivesmatter.com/the-black-lives-matter-network-advocates-for-dignity-justice-and-respect/

Weitzer, R., & Kubrin, C.E. (2009). Misogyny in rap music: A content analysis of prevalence and meanings. *Men and Masculinities, 12* (1), 3-29.

West, C.M. (1995). Mammy, sapphire, and jezebel: Historical images of black women and their implications for psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Theory Research & Practice, 32*(3)*,* 458-466.

Wilson, C.C., II., Gutiérrez, F., & Chao, L.M. (2003). *Racism, sexism, and the media: The rise of class communication in multicultural America*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Wood, J. (2013). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture.* Boston, MA: Wadsworth.

Zimmerman, A. (2016, November 2). Beyoncé slays the Country Music Awards—a political statement unto itself. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/02/beyonce-slays-the-country-music-awards-a-political-statement-unto-itself.html

Invisible No More: Critiquing the Lenses of Sex, Gender, and Power

In order to appreciate the messages communicated in "Formation," it is essential to explain the theoretical framework of the critical/cultural studies perspective. I employ a critical/cultural studies approach to examine both the lyrical and visual messages Beyoncé communicates in her "Formation" music video.

Theoretical Framework of Critical/Cultural Studies

The critical/cultural studies approach is a qualitative methodology that encompasses five significant concepts: culture, power, ideology, dominant ideology, and hegemony (Barker, 2012). First, culture is vital to the critical/cultural studies, hence its name. The concept of culture is multifaceted in that there is not only one definition of culture. Culture is comprised of a community's shared practices and meanings, and culture is intricately produced, reproduced, and communicated in everyday life. Analyzing a culture is a complex understanding because of its transformative nature in which it negotiates, struggles, and changes with its context. Due to the qualitative nature of critical/cultural studies, this methodology focuses on the ways in which we see the world, others, and ourselves. Culture is socially constructed through shared meanings (Barker, 2012; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Fiske, 1989; Giroux, 2004; Hall, 1980). Therefore, our culture is symbolically produced and reproduced through communication which is fluid, ever-changing, and active (Fiske, 1989).

Another central component of critical/cultural studies is the concept of power, and it is directly related to culture. Fiske (1989) asserts the idea that "popular culture always is part of power relations; it always [indicates] the constant struggle between domination and subordination, between power and various forms of resistance to it or evasions of it…" (p. 19). Therefore, the notion of power relations and the representation of power is significant to critical analyses of culture. Critical/cultural studies researchers examine mediated texts and pose questions of power, identifying who has power and who wants power (Barker, 2012; Giroux, 2004). Interrogating the question of power and identifying a hierarchy of power within a culture reveals privilege and oppression, which provides insight to a culture's historical and social power structures in society (Barker, 2012; Giroux, 2004; Hall, 1980; Lister & Wells, 2001).

Not only does power directly relate to various cultures within society, but more specifically to the ideology or dominant ideology people subscribe to within that culture. Thus, the power dynamics communicate a culture's ideology and dominant ideology, which are both essential to the critical/cultural studies approach. The question of power is vital to the discovery and understanding of *how* and *why* a mediated text perpetuates or challenges a culture's ideology or dominant ideology. Critical/cultural studies researchers in this field seek to recognize and understand the dominant system of beliefs that shape and influence attitudes, beliefs, and values of the people in the culture who consume the

communication. In Western cultures, the dominant ideology asserts that white, upper-class males have the most power and control in society. Oppositionally, the dominant ideology in Western cultures upholds that minority groups, such as Women and Blacks, do not possess this same power and therefore are marginalized and oppressed in society (Barker, 2012).

Once an ideology becomes dominant, it engages in practices that maintain its authority, a concept that Gramsci first utilized critically, termed hegemony (Hall, 1996). Hegemony is the dominance of one particular group over other groups. Therefore, the group that has the most authority and dominance over others has hegemonic power. Groups that possess hegemonic power directly correlates to their dominance within the economic, social, and political spheres of their culture in society (Barker, 2012). The concept of ideological hegemony is one that is contradictory (Gitlin, 1985). According to Fiske (1992), it is through both the conscious and unconscious acts of the dominant group members and marginalized group members that produce and reproduce hegemonic power in everyday life. Culture is not static; it is intricately woven within the fabric of society and the resources individuals use daily. Therefore, culture comes in various forms and communicates multiple meanings, both intentionally and unintentionally (Fiske, 1989). Contributing to the maintenance of hegemonic groups in society, Fiske (1989) posits that "every act of consumption is an act of cultural production, for consumption is always the

production of meaning" (p. 35). Therefore, the marginalized groups both consume the cultural commodities and produce and reproduce the means of oppression that subjugate them, which maintains the hegemonic group's authority (Fiske, 1992).

Through the identification, recognition, and understanding of these key concepts and their relationship to one another, critical/cultural researchers are able to better understand and examine the implications of representations of race, gender, and class depicted in mediated communication (Barker, 2012).

Mediated Texts and Critical/Cultural Studies

Mass media and culture are integrally connected. Through media and their representations of race, gender, and class, consumers of communication form their sense of identity within their culture. Whether it is their linguistic vernacular, style of dress, characteristics, or behavior, the mass media wield a great amount of power influencing how individuals construct their self identity, cultural identity, and their attitudes, beliefs, and values (Cramer, 2009; Kellner, 2003; Real, 1989). Furthermore, it is through media representations that communicate individuals' or groups of people's power in society or lack thereof, essentially revealing those who are either included in or excluded from the dominant ideology of a culture (Cramer, 2009; Fiske, 1989; Kellner, 2003; Real, 1989). In essence, individuals define their self and cultural identity in society by defining who they are *not*, thus emphasizing differences amongst individuals and groups of people—

particularly those with power and those without (Cramer, 2009; Fiske, 1989). Since communication and culture are active, continuous, and ever-changing, the identities individuals construct from media representations can evolve and change as well, which is directly and indirectly related to their positions of power in society. Therefore, "we create our media and culture, and our media and culture create us" (Fiske, 1989; Real, 1989, p. 40). This reciprocal process of creation, communication, and meaning is significant to the qualitative and interpretative nature of the critical/cultural studies methodology.

Through this particular methodological lens, the objective of critical/cultural studies researchers is to critically examine and analyze power and the ways in which identity and power are communicated within various forms of media, such as books, films, photographs, music, videos, etc. (Barker, 2012; Kellner, 2003). The critical/cultural studies methodology is inherently political, as are all mediated forms of communication (Barker, 2012; Kellner, 2003; Nelson, Treichler, & Grossberg, 1992). Due to its political nature, critical/cultural studies analyses of culture and mediated texts must consider both the time period in which the communication was produced and consumed and also the historical power structures and settings of the text to provide an insightful, clear, and holistic perspective of the culture's communication and meanings (Fiske, 1989; Kellner, 2003; Nelson et al., 1992).

Critical/cultural studies as a method is highly contextual (Cramer, 2009; Giroux, 2004; Nelson et al., 1992; Stacks & Hocking, 1992). Without context, researchers cannot clearly discover and understand a culture's shared meanings and what those meanings communicate about that culture. Context is vital to researchers' interpretations of power and how it is communicated, in that the questions critical/cultural studies researchers ask vary according to the artifact's context (Giroux, 2004). Therefore, the identification and examination of history in a mediated text is vital to understand to better interpret and explain the ways in which identity, culture, and power are communicated, lived, and experienced (Hall, 1980). Considering and analyzing the historical context of a media text furthers understanding of a culture's shared meanings and communicates how and why the text is either perpetuating or challenging the culture's dominant ideology (Cramer, 2009). Providing context of time and location within analyses of mediated texts communicate and reveal a culture's historical domination, subordination, and representation of individuals (Giroux, 2004).

Utilizing the critical/cultural studies method, researchers also must consider the time period in which the media text is produced and consumed (Kellner, 2003; Nelson et al., 1992; Stacks & Hocking, 1992). It is not only significant to understand the history of the mediated text but equally important to identify and analyze the social power structures and settings of the media text's production time period. Similarly, Lister and

Wells (2001) assert that "…the production of texts is seen as in itself a social practice" (p. 61-62). Examining the media text's production time period and location also communicates the ways in which the contemporary social culture influences a culture's shared meanings, identity, and power relations within society. It also serves to answer the primary question of critical/cultural studies researchers in understanding how power is communicated and whether the artifact perpetuates or challenges the dominant ideology (Cramer, 2009; Lister & Wells, 2001; Stacks & Hocking, 1992). Critical/cultural studies researchers include both the historical and social contexts within their analyses of mediated texts to communicate a better understanding and interpretation of that culture's ideology and power dynamics; therefore, researchers are able to describe and understand the ways in which power is communicated within cultures.

The critical/cultural studies methodology is both complex and multifaceted. This is perhaps primarily due to the subject of study—mediated texts and the cultures that produce them. As previously discussed, critical/cultural studies researchers seek to identify and analyze a mediated text carefully, interpreting not only the text itself but the context as well. Another aspect that contributes to this method's complexity is the polysemic nature of mediated texts in that there are multiple ways to interpret and understand artifacts (Kellner, 2003; Real, 1989). Media texts do not mirror or reflect society; they are a re-presentation of it. There is no singular, "accurate" interpretation or

meaning of a text. Thus, one text may possess numerous analyses with different interpretations. This is primarily because of the researchers themselves, who bring their own biases and standpoints, which includes their cultural ideology, position of power, age, gender, sexual orientation, race, class, ethnicity, etc. (Kellner, 2003; Real, 1989). Additionally, the critical/cultural studies perspective is performed using a variety of methods. Researchers simultaneously engage and utilize methodologies which include but are not limited to ethnographic research, historical research, content analysis, textual analysis, semiotics, etc. (Kellner, 2003; Nelson et al., 1992; Real, 1989). Due to the researcher's ability to combine methods as well as perform self reflection within the interpretation of the mediated text, this perspective is subjective and does not seek to explain or predict, but rather aims to discover and understand (Hall, 1980; Kellner, 2003; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Lister & Wells, 2001; Nelson et al., 1992; Real, 1989).

Objective of Critical/Cultural Studies

Similar to the ways in which the mass media are cultural artifacts, so, too, is the critical/cultural studies methodology (Kellner, 2003). While this particular method is interpretative, subjective, and has no step-by-step guidelines or process, researchers often analyze and critique the text as a message by identifying the relationship of power and culture ultimately to "expose, intervene in, and transform oppressing structures" in the culture they are studying and evaluating (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 53). Although

critical/cultural studies researchers' bodies of work are to create political agency within individuals to challenge and resist the dominant ideology and to empower and free marginalized groups in society, the conclusions and results of their academic studies are not generalizable, but rather are specific to contextual situations (Kellner, 2003; Nelson et al., 1992).

Despite researchers' unwillingness to utilize one form of methodology and generalize results, critical/cultural studies researchers offer a holistic, contextual, and multicultural approach to mediated forms of communication. In essence, researchers provide analyses of interpretations that aim to not only provide insight as to how communication challenges the dominant ideology but to essentially make a difference (Kellner, 2003; Nelson et al., 1992). According to Carey (1988), "communication is the symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed" (p. 23). Critical/cultural studies researchers identify and critique the communication in mediated texts and examine whether these messages maintain, perpetuate, repair, or transform the status quo and dominant power structures in society (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Thus, critical/cultural studies methodology is comprised of both a theoretical and practical approach to transform society, as researchers uncover and communicate the ubiquitous messages embedded within cultures to ultimately liberate marginalized groups in society (Kellner, 2003).

Looking through the lens of a critical/cultural studies perspective, I analyze visually and lyrically how Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology in her "Formation" music video. This multicultural approach aims to identify and decipher the messages Beyoncé communicates about power and what that indicates about the culture of production and consumption. Furthermore, this study provides a thorough understanding of how Beyoncé communicates what it means to be a Black Woman in the United States. Mirroring Emerson's (2002) study, I conduct an in-depth analysis of both the lyrics and the visuals, attempting to answer the questions of how Black Women's power is communicated through autonomy, sexuality, and Womanhood. Historically and culturally, Black Women in the United States have been oppressed, stereotyped, objectified, and marginalized on the basis of their autonomy, sexuality, and Womanhood, which is the reasoning for why the author is particularly identifying and analyzing these three features (Emerson, 2002; hooks, 2015; Keyes, 2000; Oware, 2009; Pough, 2007; Roberts, 1994; Rose, 1994; Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Therefore, this study seeks to discover and understand how Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology of Western culture both lyrically and visually in her "Formation" music video.

"Formation" Synopsis

"Formation" is the last song on Beyoncé's visual album entitled *Lemonad*e. The majority of *Lemonade* is directed primarily to Black Women, both lyrically and visually

(Knowles-Carter, 2016). *Lemonade* is an album that communicates the journey of a scorned Black Woman who has been betrayed by her cheating husband. Through the stages of grief, she learns to heal and love again (Battan, 2016). Beyoncé's songs follow the journey of a marriage betrayal and depicts the historical and cultural representations of Black Women in the United States. It is through information and these stages of grief that Black Women can learn from their past and present to gain power and identity in their future (Knowles-Carter, 2016).

Directed by Melina Matsoukas, a Grammy-winning female music video director, Beyoncé's "Formation" music video is visually-captivating artistry embedded with both explicit and implicit messages about race and gender and the controversial social and political issues that are highly prevalent in present-day America (Caramanica, Morris, & Wortham, 2016; Sangweni, 2016). Unlike Beyoncé's previous mainstream music, "Formation" is an anthem for Black Americans, specifically the Black Woman in America (Jacobsen, 2016). This video celebrates Black Womanhood and reflects on the historical and cultural representations of Black Americans' experience (Bradley, 2016). Both the lyrics and the visuals of "Formation" communicate the importance of culture and the role it plays in self-identity and position of power in society. With urban slang terms for lyrics, such as *slay* and the culturally-infused images of Southern Black culture, it is evident that these messages were produced by Black people for Black people. At a

time during which white supremacy rules the institutions and power structures in American society, “Formation” provides an inspiration for Black individuals to mobilize and stand together as one to challenge those who historically and culturally oppress and marginalize them (Doubek, 2016; Jacobsen, 2016).

With social and political references to Hurricane Katrina and the Black Lives Matter Movement, Beyoncé challenges the power structures that are embedded with institutionalized racism, in which they favor one group, upper-class white males, over other groups in society, specifically the Black Women. The lyrics echoed in the song are powerful, bold lines and words that explain the identity, or lack of self-identity, of the Black Woman. She encourages Black Women to embrace their African, large ethnic features as well as challenges them to demand for their place of power and dominance in society (Bradley, 2016; Caramanica et al., 2016; Doubek, 2016; Jacobsen, 2016;). Furthermore, the graphic and powerful visual imagery communicated in Beyoncé’s “Formation” music video is thought provoking and eye opening. The visuals of the music video further reinforce and supplement the lyrics of the song. The vivid colors, scene settings, actors, choreography, and clothing choices all combine to communicate a holistic message to Black Americans and particularly Black Women. Visually, “Formation” is a compelling narrative that communicates the historical and cultural image of the Black Woman in the United States and represents the transformative Black

Woman in America that claims her identity, loves herself, and gains power and dominance in society (Bradley, 2016; Caramanica et al., 2016; Doubek, 2016; Jacobsen, 2016).

Research Question and Sub-questions

The purpose of this study is to critically analyze and evaluate the messages Beyoncé communicates in her "Formation" music video. Overall, I want to know both *what* and *how* Beyoncé communicates what it means to be a Black Woman in the United States in 2016. I critically dissect and examine both the lyrics and the visual images of "Formation" to further understand the mediated messages of this text. To explain how Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist ideology in the United States, I analyze the language choices in the lyrics as well as the visuals, including color, composition, lighting, setting, and movement.

Language. Specifically looking at the lyrical elements of "Formation," I ask the following sub-questions: What does Beyoncé communicate through her language choices? What does Beyoncé communicate about Black Women's power, authority, and position in heterosexual relationships? What is the significance of these terms to the overall message of "Formation"? How do these terms challenge a white androcentric society in the United States? How does Beyoncé challenge white patriarchal power through her lyrics?

Beyoncé's unabashed, prideful lyrics reverberate throughout the music video. Analyzing the mediated text from a critical perspective, the rhetoric and language employed in "Formation" communicates significant messages to viewers that challenge the sexist and racist dominant ideology in Western cultures. The lyrics pay homage to Black Americans, particularly Black Women, and Black culture. Through the formation of Black culture in the United States, the creation, production, and reproduction of linguistics and terminology, such as the use of slang, have permeated both interpersonal and mediated communication in society. "Formation" lyrics are embedded with cultural slang such as, *slay, albino alligators, Texas Bama,* and *twirl*. The understanding and explanation of these terms are essential in order to properly critique the lyrics; therefore, I consider the meanings explained on Urban Dictionary as they provide insight to the symbolic messages Beyoncé communicates in her lyrics. Furthermore, I also explain how Beyoncé poses a direct threat to white androcentric power in her re-appropriation of the terms *bitch* and *negro*. Black individuals who use derogatory, sexist, and racist terms such as these communicate their power and status in society by exploiting and objectifying the terms themselves. Thus, through the act of re-appropriation, individuals proclaim, exploit, and take back power from the stereotypes, language, and oppressive hegemonic structures that have historically and culturally subjugated Black Americans in society (hooks, 1992; hooks, 2015). Critically analyzing the lyrical elements of

"Formation," it is significant to mention the use of repetition and particularly the repetition of the term *slay*. Rose (1994) states that "…especially the use of repetition and musical breaks, are part of rich history of New World [B]lack traditions and practices" (p. 64). Therefore, Beyoncé's use of repetition demonstrated in her lyrics communicate symbolic messages about Black culture, while they also challenge white patriarchal power in the United States.

Along with the terminology and repetition of lyrics echoed in "Formation," the ways in which the lyrics are recited and sung is an important aspect to critically examine. Early analyses of the lyrics suggested a challenge to the dominant ideology in the United States not only in the lyrics but Beyoncé's vocal variety and performance of the "Formation" song. Vocal variety also referred to as paralanguage are essential to analyze to understand how Beyoncé challenges sexist and racist ideological views in Western cultures. Women and men are socially constructed to uphold certain ways of speaking and behaving in society, according to their gendered stereotypes. In Western cultures, Women are socialized to speak softer, vary their inflection, and increase their pitch; whereas, men often speak louder with a lower pitch (Wood, 2013). Identifying and explaining the gendered and racial stereotypes represented through the combination of the words recited in the lyrics along with the musical and vocal elements represented in "Formation" are significant to the critical analysis of the "Formation" lyrics and

Beyoncé's performance of these lyrics. Examining these critical elements will further understanding on how Beyoncé communicates what it means to be a Black Woman as well as how she challenges sexist and racist dominant ideological views in the United States.

Color. I analyze the messages communicated through the dominant colors of the actors' clothing for the different scenes in the music video. From previously analyzing "Formation," the colors most often featured were red, Black, and white. What do these colors symbolize and why were they used in particular visual frames? What do the colors red, Black, and white communicate about gender and race?

Given that "the eye [is] the chief...leader of all other senses," color plays a significant role in communicating literal and symbolic messages visually (da Vinci as qtd. in Lester, 2006, p. 16). Similar to the ways in which mediated texts are polysemic and may possess multiple meanings, color, too, communicates a multitude of subjective meanings that are dependent upon the culture and context in which it is produced and consumed (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006). The use and placement of color is a powerful visual element that possesses the ability to arouse and evoke particular emotions within viewers (Lester, 2006). Early analyses of Beyoncé's "Formation" music video revealed particular color schemes that explicitly and subtly pose a direct challenge to a white patriarchal society. The representation of red, Black, and white within the visual frames

interpellate the identity and power of Black Women and Black culture in "Formation." To explicate the ways in which hegemony, power, culture, and identity are communicated in "Formation," understanding the meanings of color is essential to this analysis.

Red is represented frequently and prominently in "Formation" through its use in clothing, make-up, nail polish, lighting, and images. Red conveys meanings of love, strength, rage, sexuality, war, courage, and passion (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006; "Color Meaning," 2015). The hues of red, which consists of light red, dark red, pink, and brown, vary in meaning but all relay messages effectively to viewers even from a distant view. Immediately engaging viewers' attention, the color red creates a sense of urgency and focus on the messages communicated visually ("Color Meaning," 2015). Furthermore, red is also the only color that remains the longest in viewers' eyes, which communicates the power and impact it possesses to not only attract the viewers' concentration but to hold their interest when listening and viewing messages depicted in a music video (Lester, 2014). The use of red is strategically placed in many of the visual frames of "Formation" which strengthens the message Beyoncé communicates to Black individuals, particularly Black Women, to not only consider the messages but to later reflect upon them and follow her commands. Thus, red compliments the resistant, powerful, and call-to-arms emotion Beyoncé evokes through both her visuals and lyrics in "Formation."

Another color that influences and supplements the messages Beyoncé communicates in "Formation" is Black. Historically, Black conveys negative connotations in society communicating messages of guilt, crime, and evil (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Even the images of darker skin tones communicate negative messages, as once visually depicted in *Time's* front-page cover of O.J. Simpson in which they darkened his skin tone (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Moreover, the color Black communicates messages of grief, death, power, authority, elegance, and strength ("Color Meaning," 2015). Viewed as powerful and dominant colors, both Black and red combined visually communicate messages of aggression and hostility ("Color Meaning," 2015). Thus, both colors create and awaken intense, volatile, and combative emotions and feelings within viewers. The aggressive nature of the color Black and its varied shades are represented in not only the clothing and images portrayed but also the skin tones of the Black back-up dancers and actors in the music video. Therefore, the variations of the color Black specifically communicate multiple meanings that communicate power, culture, ideology, and hegemony.

Accentuating the messages of "Formation," the color white is a prominent shade depicted in the music video. Previous analyses of "Formation" suggest the use of white to communicate traditional notions of femininity, given the context with which the color was placed. However, the color white can often symbolize goodness, virginity,

perfection, light, and purity ("Color Meaning," 2015). Challenging the sexist and racist dominant ideology in the United States, the incorporation of white may communicate notions of Black female sexuality and true Womanhood in this mediated text. To explicate the meanings of color, it is also imperative to analyze the ways in which the color is displayed historically and culturally in the United States. Understood within Christianity, Women who get married traditionally wear white wedding dresses to convey their pure nature to their partner and society, communicating that their male counterpart will receive their gift of virginity in the consummation of the marriage. Also within the religious context, individuals baptized in the Christian faith often wear white to symbolize their purity and goodness, renouncing their sinful past and looking to the light and love of God in their future. The representation of white in "Formation" is significant to critique how Beyoncé transforms the ways in which the dominant ideology communicates Black Women's power, sexuality, femininity, and Womanhood.

Composition: Camera angles. Not only does color contribute to the overall message Beyoncé communicates in "Formation" but also the camera lens angles in this music video. Matsoukas' directing and shooting of "Formation" is intricately woven with subtle and explicit messages that visually communicate power, authority, ideology, and hegemony. Critically evaluating the camera lens angles of "Formation," I examine the composition of camera angles, positioning, and lighting of Beyoncé, the back-up dancers,

and the actors in the visual frames. Previous observations of "Formation" revealed the camera's frequent use of low angle shots, camera zooms, and camera pans from right to left. The ways in which the camera angles and camera lenses are manipulated in mediated texts are significant. When composing a music video or visual art, the artist has an intended message to communicate to audiences. The visual elements of the message the artist highlights are often executed through the use of camera manipulation, due to the attention it garners from viewers as well as the particular emotions that it may stimulate within audiences. First, camera angles, such as the long shot, close-up, medium shot, pans, and Dutch tilt are commonly used in mediated visual art (Freer, 2013; Lester, 2006). Long shots are visual frames that exhibit not only the character's full body in the shot but also the background setting. Corresponding with its name, a close-up shot solely focuses on the character's face presented in the frame, while a medium shot is a combination of both the long and close-up shots, as it exhibits some background and some form of the character's body in the visual frame (Freer, 2013). Furthermore, visual art often includes camera pans, a manipulation in which the lens moves horizontally across the frame from left to right or vice versa. And lastly, Dutch tilts are quite similar to pans. Dutch tilts are manipulations in which the camera lens may vertically move right to left or left to right, or the tilt can remain static. The use of the Dutch tilt often suggests messages of imbalance, confusion, or uncertainty (Freer, 2013; Lester, 2006).

Accompanying the length of the visual shots are the camera zooms and angles. According to Lester (2006), camera zoom-ins may induce feelings of closeness, while a camera zoom out signals the end of the mediated text as well as creates feelings of detachment and space between the viewer and the visual. Along with these emotions, a sense of conflict and opposition amongst characters is communicated through slow camera zoom-ins (Lester, 2006). As indicated with camera zooms, the ways a camera is manipulated may communicate a variety of messages and emotions, which include messages of power. To communicate an individual's power, authority, and status, low angles are often employed, while high angle shots frequently convey meanings of inferiority, weakness, and passivity (Huang, Olson, & Olson, 2002).

The notion of high and low camera angles also influence the amount of eye contact exhibited by the characters in visual communication. To understand the ways in which Beyoncé poses a threat to the dominant ideology, it is significant to note the traditional stereotypes of gendered nonverbal communication, such as eye contact. Western cultures uphold the notion that men are "inherently" more powerful and dominant in society. Therefore, both men and Women are socially constructed to subscribe to certain patterns of nonverbal communication in society. Typically in conversations, Women generally engage in more direct eye contact while men do not. However, men often employ direct eye contact to assert their dominance and control as

well as to defy others (Wood, 2013). Sustaining eye contact is often a strategic tactic men employ to communicate their power and authority over others (Wood, 2013). Thus, the ability to gaze or look at individuals communicates the amount of power individuals possess in society. In terms of heterosexual relationships, men stereotypically hold the power to freely gaze upon Women, often viewing them as sexualized objects. This is referred to as the *male gaze* (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Not only can individuals gaze at others, but they can also employ scopophilia and voyeuristic gazes. Indulging in the sexual satisfaction of looking as well as being gazed upon, individuals utilize the scopophilia gaze. However, individuals may also employ a voyeuristic gaze in which they secretly gaze upon others though they are not visible themselves (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Thus, the notion of the male gaze and eye contact communicates messages of power, dominance, ideology, status, and authority in the United States.

Composition: Camera positioning. Along with the messages of power communicated through eye contact, positioning is also significant to the critical analysis of the visuals in the "Formation" music video. The traditional ways in which individuals read a text from left to right and top to bottom is also how they view a mediated text (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996; Lester, 2006). Visuals positioned on the left and the right are significant to the critical analysis of "Formation." Featured on the left, these visuals indicate the "given" or widely held and accepted views, while images on the right

represent the "new," which are challenging views that are not yet acknowledged or accepted (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996). Looking at the camera movements, specifically panning, and the positioning of Beyoncé in "Formation" repeatedly challenge the standard way of looking and perceiving images, thus making viewers uncomfortable. Essential to this critical analysis of positioning represented in "Formation" is the identification and application of the rule of thirds. Applying the rule of thirds, a visual technique in which the shot is vertically and horizontally divided into thirds, is often utilized to facilitate the balance of a visual. A visual is noted as balanced when the images in the text align with the six horizontal and vertical lines created ("Composition," 2017).

Further exploring the application of the rule of thirds in visuals, it is noteworthy to this critique to explain the positioning of the back-up dancers and the actors in relation to Beyoncé. Analyses of the "Formation" visuals often included Beyoncé as the front or middle central point of the shot, as she shares the visual frame with both Black female and male dancers and actors. Central positioning within a visual text symbolically communicates power and significance as the image is "…placed in the foreground [of the visual frame]" (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996, p. 108). The positioning of Beyoncé in the forefront of the frame challenges and contradicts the rule of thirds in that the image does not align with the illusionary lines ("Composition," 2017). Not only does the visual

frames in “Formation” break with this visual technique but also gendered stereotypes in Western cultures. According to Wood (2013), the use of space communicates significance and privilege within cultures. Those designated to a large and prominent position of space communicates their status and power in society, which is often afforded to men in the United States. The frequent positioning of Beyoncé featured on the right side of the frame rather than the left and the central positioning of Beyoncé in the visual shots of “Formation” all communicate critical messages of power, dominance, hegemony, and ideology.

Lighting. Another way in which this analysis explains how the “Formation” music video challenges white androcentric power is through the use of lighting. Kress & Leeuwen (1996) posit that power is symbolically communicated visually when the subject or image is notably illuminated. Previous analyses of the “Formation” music video revealed Beyoncé repeatedly positioned under or near some form of natural or artificial light. Illuminating her physical features, such as her hands and face, communicate a challenge to the sexist and racist ideology of Western cultures. The lighting of Beyoncé’s features may symbolically represent her as heroic and present her as a role model for others (Tyler, 1992). Not only does lighting symbolically communicate power and status but also represents life and truth (Lester, 2006). According to Lester (2006), “religious leaders equate light with life” (p. 9). It is through

the illumination of light that truth can be seen and communicated as cultural phrases such as “bring light on the subject” and “seen the light” have indicated in society (Lester, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, visuals illuminated by light may symbolically communicate truth, life, hope, and the divine (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996; Lester, 2006).

Understanding how lighting communicates meanings visually is significant to explain how Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology. The camera’s focus and brightness of lighting in visuals also communicate symbolic messages to viewers. The level of brightness depicted in a visual often creates the representation of shadows and light in a visual shot, thus the level of brightness may often force viewers to focus their attention to specific areas of the visual, communicating the significance of the visual elements represented in the shadows and the light (Lester, 2006). Furthermore, the camera’s focus of the image symbolically communicates messages through the representation of either a sharp or soft focus. Sharp focus suggests the use of capturing the image in a clear, dominant light, color, and position in the visual frame; whereas, a soft focus reduces the vibrant coloring and lighting of images. The use of a soft focus on visuals softens the edges of the image, concealing the detailed visual elements of the subject. Often viewed as a creative visual technique, the soft focus is aesthetically pleasing to viewers (“Sharpness,” 2017). Identifying the lighting, brightness, and focus of the visual images depicted in “Formation” are essential to critique the ways in which

Beyoncé challenges white patriarchal power and communicates Black Women's power in society.

Setting and movement. Visually challenging the sexist and racist dominant ideology in Western cultures, the settings, such as the location of New Orleans, and the movements represented in "Formation" communicate symbolic and literal messages to viewers. The "Formation" music video visually and lyrically represents the city of New Orleans through the explicit representation of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Lower Ninth Ward community. Furthermore, the music video lyrically and visually conveys Southern cultural references of New Orleans, such as the plantation homes, second lines, parades, and authentic, Creole cuisine (Brown, 2007; Flaherty, 2007). Early analyses of the visuals in "Formation" often indicate the Reconstruction era—a time period in which Black Americans were no longer confined to the shackles of slavery, as they were during the Antebellum era in the United States. To understand the ways in which the location and setting of New Orleans in "Formation" poses a direct challenge to white patriarchal power, it is essential to understand the cultural landscape of New Orleans, Louisiana during the Reconstruction era for Black Americans. It was during this time that Blacks received financial independence but were confined to certain restrictions in society. The white hegemonic structures of New Orleans gave Blacks the opportunity and freedom to work and earn money but essentially restricted their success and

autonomy, thus ensuring that Black Americans could not become too powerful in society (Blassingame, 1973). Another way Black Americans, specifically Black Women, remained under the control of white androcentric power were the jobs afforded to Black Women during this time period. Often Black Women became prostitutes for white men to earn money, which placed them in an all too familiar position, as they had experienced being sexually exploited as slaves by both white and Black men (Blassingame, 1973). Therefore, the setting of the "Formation" music video being located in New Orleans and representing numerous time periods both explicitly and subtly communicate messages of race and gender. The choice to film "Formation" through its re-presentation of a New Orleans' setting conveys the historical and cultural oppression and marginalization of Black Americans during the time periods depicted in the music video. With the representation of New Orleans, Beyoncé clearly communicates critical messages of power, hegemony, and ideology.

Early analyses of "Formation" suggest the frequent representation of the X image, as demonstrated in the movements, choreography, and positioning of Beyoncé, the back-up dancers, and actors in the music video. The X shape communicates multiple symbolic messages which may include but are not limited to the messages of choice, betrayal, unknown identity, Christ, cross, multiplication, cancellation, a mysterious element as seen in examples such as, X-Men, Malcolm X, X-files, etc (Girvin, 2010; "Meanings,"

n.d.). Interrogating the form and shape of the X is essential to understand the critical messages the X communicates. The X is composed of two diagonal lines. According to Lester (2006), the use of lines, whether they are vertical, horizontal, or diagonal, in visuals convey messages of power and inflexibility. However, curved lines while they are dynamic and active, symbolically communicate messages of elegance and poise, thus lessening the lively messages they may represent visually (Lester, 2006). Due to the X image being repeatedly featured in the choreography and movements of "Formation," it is significant to analyze the ways in which the X symbolically and literally poses a challenge to the sexist and racist notions upheld in the United States.

Not only is the X image represented often in the "Formation" visuals but also the movement of the domino or ripple effect, as communicated through the choreography of Beyoncé and the back-up dancers' bodies and positioning, along with Beyoncé's hand movements. Identifying the messages that domino and ripple effects communicate are significant to the understanding and explanation of critiquing this visual in "Formation." The ripple effect represents the brave and bold actions of an individual to inspire others to follow suit and "…to cause a revolution" ("The ripple," n.d., p. 1). Similar to the ripple effect, the domino effect refers to "a chain reaction" of one situation or action affecting another ("The domino," n.d., p. 3). The analysis of the ripple or domino effect in "Formation" provides a deeper explanation to the overall messages Beyoncé

communicates about gender and race in the United States. Noting the domino and ripple movements represented in "Formation," it is significant to discuss the symbolic messages they convey as Beyoncé and the Black female back-up dancers are positioned closely to one another while performing these movements. The close distance and positioning of Beyoncé and the dancers in the different forms of lines communicate unity to viewers, which is important to reflect upon in the analysis when examining and critiquing the overall message Beyoncé communicates in "Formation" (Bates, 1960).

To understand how Beyoncé challenges white androcentric power, it is noteworthy to analyze both the aggressive and docile nonverbal movements performed by not only her but also the other Black Women featured in "Formation." The depiction of tight-clenched fists, the middle finger, open-leg body movements, soft, delicate finger curls, and posture represented all symbolically communicate messages of power, ideology, and hegemony. Therefore, it is significant to identify these representations and movements and how they challenge or align with the notions of true Womanhood—passive, coy, beautiful, nurturing, submissive, quiet, and small (Wood, 2013). Analyzing Beyoncé and the Black female back-up dancers' movements and choreography through the critical lens of true Womanhood further convey the ways in which Beyoncé challenges white patriarchal power visually in "Formation."

This critical study answers the primary research question and sub questions by analyzing both the visuals and lyrics represented in Beyoncé's "Formation" music video. As indicated from early analyses of "Formation," many of the visual and lyrical elements are frequently repeated throughout the music video. The use of repetition whether in visual or lyrical compositions communicate structure and significance (Brainard, 1991). Grounded in the theoretical framework of critical/cultural studies perspective, this analysis explains the ways in which power, ideology, and hegemony are communicated through the critique of language, color, composition, lighting, setting, and movement. Through an in-depth understanding and explanation of the "Formation" music video's visual and lyrics, this study reveals *how* and *what* Beyoncé communicates about being a Black Woman in the United States in 2016.

References

Baldwin, J., & Roberts, L. (2006). *Visual communication: From theory to practice*. London: AVA Publishing.

Barker, C. (2012). *Cultural studies: Theory and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Battan, C. (2016, April 24). Beyoncé's "Lemonade" is a revelation of spirit. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/beyonces-lemonade-is-a-revelation-of-spirit

Bates, K.F. (1960). *Basic design: Principles and practice*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Blassingame, J.W. (1973). *Black New Orleans*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Bradley, R.N. (2016, February 7). Getting in line: Working through Beyoncé's "Formation." *Red Clay Scholar (blog)*. Retrieved from https://redclayscholarblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/07/getting-in-line-working-through-beyonces-formation/

Brainard, S. (1991). *A design manual*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Brown, T. (2007). Wade in the water. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 48-53). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Caramanica, J., Morris, W., & Wortham, J. (2016, February 6). Beyoncé in 'Formation': Entertainer, activist, both? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/07/arts/music/beyonce-formation-super-bowl-video.html?_r=4

Carey, J. W. (1988). A cultural approach to communication. In *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society.* Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Color meaning. (2015). *Color Wheel Pro*. Retrieved from http://www.color-wheel-pro.com/color-meaning.html

Composition: Rule of thirds. (2017). *Cambridge in Colour*. Retrieved from http://www.cambridgeincolour.com/tutorials/rule-of-thirds.htm

Cramer, J.M. (2009). *Media/history/society: A cultural history of U.S. media*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Doubek, J. (2016, February 7). With 'Formation,' Beyoncé lights up the internet. Here's what people are saying. *National Public Radio (NPR)*. Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2016/02/07/465934070/with-formation-beyonc-lights-up-the-internet-heres-what-people-are-saying

Emerson, R.A. (2002). Where my girls at? Negotiating black womanhood in music videos. *Gender & Society, 16* (1), 115-135.

Fiske, J. (1989). *Understanding popular culture*. Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman.

Fiske, J. (1992). Cultural studies and the culture of everyday life. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P.A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural Studies* (p. 154-173). New York, NY: Routledge.

Flaherty, J. (2007). Corporate reconstruction and grassroots resistance. In The South End Press Collective (Eds.), *What lies beneath: Katrina, race, and the state of the nation* (p. 100-119). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Freer, I. (2013, December 16). Film studies 101: The 30 camera shots every film fan needs to know. *Empire*. Retrieved from http://www.empireonline.com/movies/features/film-studies-101-camera-shots-styles/

Giroux, H.A. (2004). Cultural studies, public pedagogy, and the responsibility of intellectuals. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 1*(1), 59-79.

Girvin, T. (2010, December 15). The symbolism of the X. *Girvin*. Retrieved from https://www.girvin.com/blog/the-symbolism-of-the-x/

Gitlin, T. (1985). Prime time ideology: The hegemonic process in television entertainment. In H. Newcomb (Ed.) *Television: The critical view* (p. 426-454). New York: Oxford University Press.

Hall, S. (1980). Cultural studies: Two paradigms. *Media, Culture, and Society, 2*, 57-72.

Hall, S. (1996). Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity. In D. Morley & K.H. Chen (Eds.), *Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (p. 411-440). New York, NY: Routledge.

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation.* Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (2015). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Huang, W., Olson, J.S., & Olson, G.M. (2002). Camera angle affects dominance in video-mediated communication. *Short Talk: Communication Media*, 716-717.

Jacobsen, M.E. (2016, February 6). Beyoncé's "Formation" lyrics are a reminder of my own #blackgirlmagic. *Romper*. Retrieved from https://www.romper.com/p/beyonces-formation-lyrics-are-a-reminder-of-my-own-blackgirlmagic-5186

Kellner, D. (2003). Cultural studies, multiculturalism and media culture. In G. Dines & J. M. Humez (Eds.), *Gender, race and class in the media: A text reader* (p. 9-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Keyes, C.L. (2000). Empowering self, making choices, creating spaces: Black female identity via rap music performance. *The Journal of American Folklore, 113* (449), 255-269.

Knowles-Carter, B. (Producer). (2016). *Lemonade* [streaming video]. Retrieved from https://listen.tidal.com/search/beyonce%20lemonade

Kress, G., & Leeuwen, T.V. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lester, P.M. (2006). *Visual communication: Images with messages.* Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Lester, P.M. (2014). *Visual communication: Images with messages* (6th ed.). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Lister, M., & Wells, L. (2001). Seeing beyond belief: Cultural studies as an approach to analyzing the visual. In T. Van Leeuwen & C. Jewitt (Eds.), *Handbook of visual analysis* (p. 61-91). London: Sage Publications.

Meanings of the letter x, esoteric, and otherwise. (n.d.). *The Open Scroll*. Retrieved from http://www.theopenscroll.com/theEsotericLetterX.htm

Nelson, C., Treichler, P.A., & Grossberg, L. (1992). Cultural studies: An introduction. In C. Nelson, P.A. Treichler, & L. Grossberg (Eds.), *Cultural studies* (p. 1-7). New York, NY: Routledge.

Oware, M. (2009). A "man's woman"? Contradictory messages in the songs of female rappers, 1992-2000. *Journal of Black Studies, 39* (5), 786-802.

Pough, G. (2007). Hip-hop soul divas and rap music: Critiquing the love that hate produced. In E.M. Hayes & L.F. Williams (Eds.), *Black women and music: More than the blues* (p. 23-50). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Real, M.R. (1989). *Super media: A cultural studies approach.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Roberts, R. (1994). "Ladies First": Queen Latifah's Afrocentric feminist music video. *African American Review, 28* (2), 245-257.

Rose, T. (1994). *Black noise: Rap music and black culture in contemporary America*. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Sangweni, Y. (2016, February 6). Here's everything we know about Beyoncé 'Formation' video. *Essence*. Retrieved from http://www.essence.com/2016/02/06/beyonce-formation-video-everything-we-know

Sharpness. (2017). *Steve's Digicam*. Retrieved from http://www.steves-digicams.com/knowledge-center/sharpness.html#b

Stacks, D. W., & Hocking, J.E. (1992). Evaluating sources: Historical/critical methodology. In *Essentials of Communication Research* (p. 100-116). New York: HarperCollins.

Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2009). *Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

The domino effect. (n.d.). *Influence*. Retrieved from http://influencemjc.weebly.com/the-rippledomino-effect.html

The ripple effect. (n.d.). *Influence*. Retrieved from http://influencemjc.weebly.com/the-rippledomino-effect.html

Tyler, A.C. (1992). Shaping belief: The role of audience in visual communication. *Design Issues*, *9* (1), 21-29.

Weitzer, R., & Kubrin, C.E. (2009). Misogyny in rap music: A content analysis of prevalence and meanings. Men and Masculinities, *12* (1), 3-29.

Wood, J. (2013). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture.* Boston, MA: Wadsworth.

X Marks the Spot: Black Women Learning to Love, Heal, and Demand Power

"I did not come to play with you hoes, I came to slay bitch." And slay is indeed what Beyoncé does and communicates in her "Formation" music video. As Big Freedia's voice echoes these lyrics, they reflect the empowering messages Beyoncé communicates to Black Women—she motivates Black Women to slay, get in formation, and challenge white patriarchal power in the United States. This study analyzes the historical and cultural marginalization and misrepresentation of Black Women that Beyoncé communicates both visually and lyrically in her "Formation" music video. Using Emerson's (1992) research as an analytical tool, I explain how Beyoncé communicates Black Women's autonomy, sexuality, and Womanhood through both the visuals depicted and the lyrics recited in this music video. It is important to identify both of these video elements within each section to provide a thorough, critical, holistic, and comprehensive explanation of *how* and *what* Beyoncé communicates about what it means to be a Black Woman in her "Formation" music video.

It is important to first note the title of the song "Formation" and its significance to the overall message of the music video. Throughout the music video, Beyoncé, her back-up dancers, and others featured in the music video perform choreography or are positioned in particular formations, often in the image of an X. In the art of dance, an individual possesses "good form" when the individual's body "works together as a unit,

rather than as a collection of parts" (Jarlo, 2015, p. 3). This idea of good form and getting in formation communicates Beyoncé's basic message to Black people, specifically Black Women. Through communication we receive information, and once we recognize the marginalization and oppression in the United States, we can mobilize and work together as one collective unit. That is when a movement is strong, stable, and effective. The visual and lyrical messages Beyoncé conveys in the "Formation" music video are powerful, thought provoking, and significant to Black people but particularly Black Women.

Black Women's Autonomy & Sexuality—Unknown Identity (X)

Various visual concepts including imagery, color schemes, and camera angles in the images re-presented in this music video are designed intricately and performed to supplement the lyrics of this song, ultimately communicating messages about the power of Black Women in the United States and the independence and autonomy they possess. Despite a white patriarchal society that has historically and culturally undermined, negated, and disregarded their existence, Beyoncé communicates Black female identity, often through the visual image of an X (hooks, 2015; Sims, 2006). The image of the X can often symbolize an unknown identity (Girvin, 2010; "Meanings," n.d.). The X representing unknown identity also explicitly references a well-known Black social and political activist in the United States—Malcolm X. Once known as Malcolm Little, he

changed his surname, deeming the name "Little" as his slave name. Adopting X as his last name, Malcolm X celebrated and commemorated "the unknown name of his African ancestors," thus challenging white patriarchal power and reclaiming his and his ancestors' power in society ("Biography," 2015; "Malcolm X," 2017, p. 3; "Meanings," n.d.). Frequently depicted visually in "Formation," the X is a symbolic representation of the radical, resistant, and defiant messages Malcolm X communicated in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. Similar to how Malcolm X communicated power through an unknown identity, Beyoncé proudly proclaims her pride as a Black Woman visually and lyrical through the exploitation of Black Women's identity, by conveying Black Women's autonomy and sexuality. It is through the exploitation of Black Women's unknown identity that Beyoncé reclaims power from the dominant ideology that has historically and culturally disregarded or misrepresented their identity.

Getting answers to questions: Confronting the aftermath of what happened at the New Orleans? The opening scene of "Formation" depicts a long frame shot of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina with houses submerged under murky, dark waters filled with debris. Wearing a long, red-striped dress and Black combat boots, Beyoncé stands on top of a flooded New Orleans police car. Initially, this visual frame compellingly communicates a powerful message about Beyoncé, Black Women, Hurricane Katrina, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. Positioned on the right side of the frame shot,

Beyoncé crouches down as Messy Mya's sentiments are echoed as narration, "What happened at the New Wil'ins?" The combination of these lyrics and the visuals communicate Beyoncé's status of power, autonomy, and sexuality. Dissecting the visual frame, Beyoncé is positioned on the right side of the visual shot, creating an uncomfortable tension for the viewer, due to the Western cultural norm and standard of reading a text from left to right and top to bottom (Lester, 2006). Beyoncé's positioning on the right side of the frame communicates a powerful message by deviating and challenging the traditional norm of texts, which symbolically challenges the hegemonic power structures in society. Further, she explicitly communicates her power and autonomy by being elevated on top of a sinking police car. While the police car is often viewed as a symbol of authority, power, masculinity, and safety, the image of Beyoncé positioned on top of the police car as it gradually sinks lower into the polluted, toxic waters symbolizes the power she and Black Women possess in society to combat the racist and sexist injustice in the United States.

The camera angle of the long shot is essential, forcing viewers to look at the both the current images and its context, which produces a holistic perspective. Placed in the setting of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the Black Lives Matter Movement, Beyoncé's positioning as well as the re-presentation of the police car slowly descending further into the water communicates a clear and direct opposition to police officers'

corruption and unjust killings of Black Americans in the United States, while also specifically referencing the New Orleans police officers' convictions for murdering Black men during Hurricane Katrina. This visual conveys an explicit challenge to the police brutality and injustice that has pervaded Black Americans' lives in the United States. Viewed as a traditional power structure in the United States that is often primarily composed of white males, the flooding of the police car is symbolic for the flooding of an oppressive, white, androcentric system in society to ultimately liberate Black Americans from the visible and invisible handcuffs that have historically and culturally chained them to an inferior status of power in the United States.

Looking through a critical gender and race perspective, it is significant to note the clothing Beyoncé wears, the camera angles, and her gestures and movements to identify and interpret how she challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology in Western culture. The colors used in this visual frame are significant to Beyoncé's message in the opening scene to communicate Black Women's autonomy, power, and sexuality in society. The red, long, button-down dress is important to the messages she conveys in the music video. Red is a dramatic and energetic hue that evokes emotions of urgency and resistance, while also symbolizing love, strength, power, and war (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006; "Color Meaning," 2015). The color choice of a red dress is purposefully implemented in "Formation" to invoke strong emotions within the viewers, particularly

Black Women, to motivate them to prepare for their battle against injustice to ultimately liberate Black people in the United States. Due to the dominant nature of a red tone, this visual conveys the hostile and aggressive stance Black Women must take to win this battle. No longer can they sit idly by waiting for society to transform and change—they must change it themselves and the time is now.

Additionally, Beyoncé's shoes are significant as well. Dressed in Black combat boots, Beyoncé's footwear explicitly challenges the Western dominant ideology. Historically, combat boots symbolize masculinity, war, violence, and life and death. Through this lens, Beyoncé not only wears this style of shoe to convey violence and war, but the term of the shoe itself is to combat, or to oppose. Culturally, women who wear combat boots are often viewed as rebellious and assertive, which upends the gender stereotypes for Women upheld by the dominant ideology in Western culture (Wood, 2013). Holistically, Beyoncé's attire communicates messages of aggression, violence, and resistance, which also channels Malcolm X's hostile messages during the 1950s and 1960s. It is significant to note that the term *formation* is also a military term used to describe the coordination and organization of troops, planes, ships, and vehicles to carry out a specific agenda (Rubicon Planning, 2011). The militaryesque style of organizing and using violence as a means to achieve goals was often employed by Malcolm X. Unlike the messages of peace and nonviolence Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached

during the Civil Rights era, Malcolm X asserted "there's no such thing as a peaceful revolution" ("Biography," 2015; "Malcolm X," 2017, p. 4). For true change and transformation to occur in society, Malcolm X voiced the need to use violence if necessary to accomplish their objectives. Similarly, Beyoncé represents this militant style in her "Formation" music video, along with her 2016 Super Bowl performance as she and her back-up dancers don Black berets and military-style clothing (Ex, 2016; France, 2016; Kohn, 2016). Thus, Beyoncé communicates a call to arms for Black people, particularly Black Women, to unite, to get in formation, and to fight the sexist and racist hegemonic structures in society that oppress them.

The combination of colors depicted in this visual shot signify the violent messages of war and Malcolm X. The color Black is symbolic for grief, death, power, authority, and elegance ("Color Meaning," 2015). Understood within the context of this setting in the opening scene, the pairing of these two dominant colors—the red dress and the Black combat boots—visually communicates that Black Women are at war with the dominant ideology in the United States. The Black color of the combat boots reveals the struggles, conflicts, and potential death Black Women may face when getting in formation, covertly foreshadowing the concluding scenes of the "Formation" music video. The use of color in visuals are polysemic and communicate multiple meanings. The light red color can communicate messages of love and sexuality ("Color Meaning,"

2015). Beyoncé's light red dress not only communicates Black Women's power in society but also their sexuality. In this scene Beyoncé virtually desexualizes herself completely, thus transforming the hyper-sexualized, promiscuous sexuality that Black Women have been plagued with for centuries. Along with the color of the dress, the style of the dress is a direct challenge in that Beyoncé's figure is not accentuated and does not show any skin. She is fully covered thus shielding her body from being gazed upon sexually, which conflicts with the tight, form-fitting clothing that is often re-presented by Black Women in music videos.

The camera angles and positioning of Beyoncé are essential to understand the ways in which she challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology. In this opening scene of "Formation," the camera lens is angled in an upward position of Beyoncé as she crouches down on top of the police car. Often in Western culture, individuals perform movements such as these to engage in direct eye contact with the receiver of their communication. Typically, individuals' primary goal with this gesture is to communicate or receive the truth during communication exchanges. Shooting from an upward angle, the camera lens does not make direct eye contact with Beyoncé, further communicating her high position of power and authority in society. In order to communicate the truth about the sexist and racist injustice that pervades the United States, Beyoncé must come down to the level of her fans, viewers, and haters to convey these messages. This

movement represents Beyoncé sharing the truth and getting "real" with her audiences to educate, inform, and motivate viewers, particularly Black Women, to rise together and get in formation. Along with her body movement representing the difficult, yet truthful conversation she shares with her audience, this gesture also exploits the historical and cultural representations of Black Women's sexuality. As Beyoncé crouches on top of the police car, her upper body is hunched over and her legs are spread open, communicating a masculine position. Though her legs are spread, which some may interpret as being sexually available and accessible, she opposes this stereotype because her dress strategically drapes over her vaginal area. This nonverbal movement is a re-appropriation of Black Women being sexual hunters and savages, while also an adoption of masculinity which poses a threat to the dominant ideology in Western culture.

Image 1

Analyzing the lyrics that accompany this visual shot also presents an uncomfortable tension for the viewer when examining the voice of the lyrics recited. Hearing the heavy Creole accent and words of Messy Mya, a local beloved, yet controversial figure in the city of New Orleans, listeners are posed with the serious, painful question “What happened at the New Wil’ins?” (“What happened at the New Orleans?”) in the opening scene of “Formation.” Well known for his comedy and YouTube segments, Messy Mya was a victim of gun violence and murdered on November 14, 2010. From a critical perspective, using his voice over, Beyoncé celebrates and honors the memory of Messy Mya, while also reminding viewers and listeners of the violence that permeates the city of New Orleans and its community (Syfret, 2016).

It is significant to critical/cultural studies perspective to examine the rhetoric of a message. The lyrics accompanied with the visuals form a question, rather than a statement. In Western cultures, asking questions challenge traditional standards and norms in society. Posing questions may threaten those in positions of power and privilege because it demands a new answer—one that is different from the previously accepted responses. Looking through a critical/cultural studies perspective, the employment of Messy Mya’s question, "What happened at the New Wil’ins?” confronts and challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideology in the United States in which the dominant power structures must provide more information and new answers so that viewers can learn and

understand. Although the act of questioning may elicit uncomfortable reactions and responses, it is through the process of questioning that individuals can seek and understand truth, which is complimented through Beyoncé's nonverbal gestures and positioning in this visual shot. Through incorporating Messy Mya's question, Beyoncé rhetorically demands that the dominant ideology confront the painful memories and realities Black Americans have historically and culturally endured for centuries. It is through the painful recognition and understanding of the past and present in which Black Americans, specifically Black Women, are able to heal, restore, and recover from their historical and cultural oppression and marginalization in the United States.

Throughout the "Formation" music video, Beyoncé communicates numerous messages about Black Women's autonomy and sexuality in the United States while also challenging the dominant power structures in society. The ways in which she does this visually and lyrically are through the exploitation, objectification, and re-appropriation of the stereotypes for Black Women communicated through mediated texts such as television, film, and music videos.

Twirling and serving the albino alligators on the plantation. Another visual frame that communicates Black Women's autonomy and sexuality depicts Beyoncé and four female dancers inside an old plantation home, which communicate the Reconstruction era in the South. For example, Beyoncé visually exploits two

stereotypical media representations of Black Women that emerged during this time period. Interestingly combining the representations of the Mammy and the Jezebel, Beyoncé visually communicates her autonomy and sexuality through her clothing, hairstyle, movements, and the lyrics she sings.

Image 2

Positioned in the narrow hallway of the house, Beyoncé proudly proclaims "I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow bone it. I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it. I twirl on them haters, albino alligators," as she and the back-up dancers perform choreography in the formation of an X. Donning a dark red leotard with a deep-plunging neckline and Black thigh-high striped stockings, Beyoncé's attire communicates a clear message of strength, dominance, and sexuality which is reinforced by the choreography. The choreography represents the stereotype of the Jezebel character through the action of

them opening and elevating their legs, communicating an open sexual position along with the "twerk" or "booty pop" movement they perform. Re-appropriating the image of the Jezebel through clothing and choreography is a way for exploited individuals to reclaim their power and identity, thus challenging the dominant ideological stereotypes produced in and by a white, androcentric perspective. Another way in which Black Women's sexuality is communicated is demonstrated by the lyrics Beyoncé recites that accompany this visual frame in which she states, "I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow bone it. I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it. I twirl on them haters, albino alligators." The Jezebel's sexuality during the Reconstruction era represented Black Women as sexually promiscuous as they were often employed as prostitutes for white men particularly in Southern New Orleans (Blassingame, 1973). The vernacular recited in "Formation" is a re-presentation of Black Southern culture. Therefore, it is significant to understand the meanings of specific terms to understand the interpretative analysis of this visual shot. According to Urban Dictionary, the term *twirl* references the sexual act of fellatio often performed by prostitutes and *albino alligators* is a term used to represent a white man's genitals. In the context of the setting of Reconstruction in the South and the attire Beyoncé wears, Beyoncé powerfully re-appropriates the mediated stereotypes of Black Women by visually and lyrically conveying that Black Women are sexual hunters and are to sexually satisfy the desires of white and Black men. Reclaiming her power and identity

through these lyrics and visuals, Beyoncé opposes the dominant ideology in the United States by dismantling the historical and cultural notion that Black Women are sexual objects to be bought, sold, and exploited for the financial gain and sexual desire of men.

Another mediated stereotype Beyoncé exploits in this visual frame is the image of the Mammy. From a close textual analysis of Beyoncé's appearance, it is evident that her hairstyle is a re-presentation of the Mammy character's hairdo. The Mammy character is often depicted with a bandanna, thus covering her ethnic and kinky hair (Collins, 2000; Sims, 2006; West, 1995). Like the Mammy character, Beyoncé's hair is pulled up and is braided in a circular fashion around her head, re-presenting the image of a bandanna. Moreover, it is also through her gestures and lyrics in which Beyoncé communicates Black Women's autonomy that re-present the Mammy character. The gestures and choreography Beyoncé and her back-up dancers perform communicate determination, strength, and defiance with the X formation they are positioned in as well as the balled fists they make while dancing. This choreography conveys the sentiments of the Black Nationalist Movement, Malcolm X, and the Black Panther Party. The image of X's and fists raised over their heads directly references the messages of Black power. This visual frame's messages of autonomy align with the lyrics Beyoncé articulates proudly in which she states, "I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow bone it. I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it." Lyrically, Beyoncé conveys not only Black Women's autonomy and Black

power, but she represents the image of the Mammy character through her aggressive, vocal, hard working, and stubborn demeanor as echoed through the lyrics. Beyoncé communicates to the dominant ideology that despite the historical and cultural oppression and marginalization of Black Women, there is nothing she and Black Women cannot achieve.

Slaying and paying: Taking his ass to Red Lobster. The "Formation" music video's visuals further exploit and re-present the traditional mediated images of Black Women. Objectifying the stereotype of the Sapphire/Matriarch image, the close-up visual frame positions Beyoncé in the center, while five Black men, all dressed in Black suits of different styles, are in the peripheral view of the frame, thus communicating her power and dominance. The positioning of the male actors in the peripheral view of the frame communicates their lack of importance and power, thus emasculating them which is similar to the actions of the Sapphire/Matriarch image. Also, these Black men are positioned in the background—essentially re-presenting them as sexual objects, a stereotypical image often portrayed by Black Women in mediated texts (Gammage, 2016; hooks, 1992). The camera angles and movements of this visual shot provide a holistic analysis of this frame. Unlike many of the dynamic and distant visual frames in the music video, the camera lens is static and provides a close-up of Beyoncé's face, which forces the audience to pay attention to her (Lester, 2006). In regards to challenging the sexist

and racist dominant ideology in the United States, this close-up visual is representative of the male gaze. Typically, those who gaze directly at or upon others possess more power is society. Therefore, in Western culture, men have been socially constructed to have that power. However, this close-up visual communicates Beyoncé's power to directly gaze at her viewers—both men and women. Not only does Beyoncé communicate her power and autonomy as a Black Women in society through the re-appropriation of the male gaze, but she also challenges the dominant ideology in that she adopts a position of masculinity by demonstrating a voyeuristic gaze. Re-presenting the voyeuristic gaze, Beyoncé conveys the immense power she possesses in that she has the ability and pleasure to gaze and look at others but they cannot look at her (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Wearing a wide-brim Black hat, Beyoncé's face is concealed. In fact, the only facial feature visible to viewers is her mouth, thus conveying the importance of the words she proclaims in this visual. Dissecting this particular image, it is important to look at the colors portrayed, gestures made, and the lyrics recited in this image.

Image 3

In this visual frame, Beyoncé specifically references her financial autonomy and sexuality. Wearing an all-Black dress, Black hat, and an excessive amount of extravagant silver jewelry, Beyoncé visually depicts her financial independence, thus dispelling the traditional notions of gender stereotypes as men being the "bread-winners" in society (Bem,1993; Wood, 2013). In this visual frame, Beyoncé and the male actors wear black, which denotes messages of authority and strength ("Color Meaning," 2015). Along with this color, it is significant to note that Beyoncé's lipstick color is a dark red which conveys anger, rage, leadership, and courage. Combining these colors communicates hostility and aggression ("Color Meaning," 2015). These color combinations symbolize the assertive, loud, and demeaning nature of the stereotypical image of the Sapphire/Matriarch (Bogle, 2016; West, 1995). This image is also depicted due to the

financial independence Beyoncé references through her clothing, jewelry, and lyrics. With this particular mediated image, the Sapphire/Matriarch is often portrayed with a Black Woman humiliating men, specifically Black men, for not contributing financially to their household (Collins, 2000).

Further communicating financial independence and sexuality, Beyoncé assertively gives two middle fingers to the camera while she sings “When he fucks me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster. When he fucks me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster. If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper. Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J’s, let him shop up.” Culturally in hip hop music, Women—both white and Black—are often depicted as gold diggers who are individuals that date or marry people with a great amount of money (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). Within this relationship dynamic, gold diggers often receive materialistic items, while the other person receives sex and intimacy. Thus, hip hop music often communicates the sexist ideological beliefs of the Western culture. However, Beyoncé's lyrics overtly challenge these sexist notions. Not only does she position herself of a higher financial status than her male counterpart but defines him as a sex object whose primary goal is to satisfy her erotic and sexual desires. Holistically, these visuals and the lyrics communicate a clear and defiant response to the sexist and racist dominant ideology, further re-presenting and exploiting the image of the Sapphire/Matriarch.

Black Women's autonomy and sexuality in the United States are prominent themes communicated to viewers in Beyoncé's "Formation" music video. To provide a holistic analysis of Black Women and their power in society, the historical and cultural context plays a significant role in understanding and explaining as to *why* and *how* Beyoncé communicates these messages in "Formation." The majority of the scenes in "Formation" re-present the city of New Orleans which includes their history, traditions, and culture. With a general understanding of New Orleans, specifically within this visual frame, Beyoncé directly communicates Black Women's autonomy and sexuality.

Pure and possessive: Flying from the cage of conditional freedom. The visual frame in which Beyoncé is evidently positioned in a room of an old plantation house in New Orleans depicts the Reconstruction era in the South. To the right of Beyoncé in this visual shot stands a tall, empty, and illumined bird cage. Sitting in a chair exhibiting an upright posture, Beyoncé wears a short, white lace dress paired with a tight-laced corset holding a white umbrella singing, "I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress. I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces." It is significant to note first the image of Beyoncé—the attire Beyoncé wears, how she is positioned, and the movements she makes. First, Beyoncé's all-white outfit depicts the dominant Western standards of female sexuality communicating that Women "should" appear and behave in a demure, pure, innocent, and virginal manner (Bem, 1993; "Color Meaning," 2015; Wood, 2013).

Paired with her short, white dress, Beyoncé's hour-glass figure is both accentuated, yet constricted by the tight-laced corset, which is representative of Black Women's social reality during the Reconstruction era in New Orleans. Although many Black Women enjoyed various freedoms in society, some Black Women remained confined, limited, and pained not only from the tight laces of the corsets they wore but also from the circumstances that plagued them during this time period. In addition to the slavery era, Black female sexuality was often exploited during the Reconstruction period as free Black Women became prostitutes for white men (Blassingame, 1973). Interestingly, the messages re-presented through Beyoncé's dress and the visuals presented in this shot are contradictory and complex as was and is the "freedom" of Black individuals in the United States.

Image 4

Combining the visual elements of color, images, and camera angles, Beyoncé opposes the dominant ideology by communicating the contradictory messages of Black Women's autonomy and sexuality in the United States. Using a critical lens, Beyoncé clearly opposes these notions of female sexuality, while she also challenges Western culture in her re-appropriation of Black female sexuality. Shooting from an upward angle, the camera slowly zooms in on the profile of Beyoncé's face and her slow, delicate, and graceful hand movements. While others may interpret the profile of Beyoncé's face and hand movements as perpetuating the standards of female sexuality in that Women should be coy and docile, the following movement she makes in this visual shot directly and explicitly communicates an opposition to these dominant ideological views. Spreading her legs apart, Beyoncé holds her gaze with the camera as she uses her hand to pull down her short, white dress to cover her vaginal area—an area that explicitly symbolizes female sexuality. The acts of separating her legs and maintaining eye contact are all powerful gestures, often associated with men rather than Women. In addition to these nonverbal, swiftly shielding her vaginal area from the camera by pulling down her dress, Beyoncé communicates her ability and power to choose regarding her sexuality, contrary to historical views of Black female sexuality. This visual shot is also powerful in that not only does Beyoncé challenge the traditional views of female sexuality but doubly does so by addressing and exploiting the stereotype of the hypersexualized Black Woman.

There are three other visual features depicted in this shot that are vital to mention in how Beyoncé communicates Black Women's autonomy and sexuality, which is through the re-presentation of the tall, empty, well-lit bird cage, the wallpaper pattern of the room, and the framed pictures hanging on the walls. Visibly illuminated, the bird cage symbolically references Maya Angelou's poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings," a transformational work of art that depicts Angelou's struggles as a Black Woman in a racist and oppressive society ("I know why," 2017). Freeing them from the shackles of slavery, the Reconstruction era ushered in a new reality for Black slaves in New Orleans, Louisiana in which they gained their freedom. Despite the hegemonic structures and systems that confined and restricted their autonomy and power in society, many free Blacks prospered financially but did not surpass the wealth and opportunities afforded to white individuals (Blassingame, 1973). Therefore, free Blacks' freedom, autonomy, and sexuality in society were conditional. To further support this notion, the wallpaper in this visual shot is compelling. The vintage damask design's pattern forms the image of birds opening their wings, a metaphorical re-presentation of free Black individuals striving to "fly" on their own now that they are no longer enslaved. Furthermore, hanging on the patterned walls are framed pictures of Black men—one photograph appears to depict the image of two Black people on the auction bloc, thus representing the plantation era. In the other picture, there are four Black men in Black suits, signifying the Reconstruction

period. Through a critical lens, the juxtaposition of all three visual features communicate that although Black individuals were and are freed, they are still essentially caged and oppressed by the dominant ideology.

Analyzing these three visual elements in the context of Black Women's autonomy and sexuality, this visual frame communicates that Black Women are caged by the dominant ideology in regards to both. The distorted mediated images of Black Women as animalistic, sexual savages, are cages representative of the stereotypes and labels that pervade media and society. In order to free themselves sexually, Black Women must rise together to challenge and exploit these re-presentations, thus claiming their power and identity. Along with sexuality, the cage is also representative of the confinements and restrictions the hegemonic social, political, and economic structures impose upon them daily. In an attempt to maintain power and authority, the dominant structures cage and marginalize minority groups, such as Black Women so that they are not self sufficient, independent, and powerful. To combat this ideological view, Beyoncé recites, "I'm so reckless when I rock my Givenchy dress. I'm so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces." To free herself and other Black Women in society, Beyoncé communicates her financial autonomy through these lyrics in which she references her ability to buy and wear designer labels—Givenchy and Rocawear. These lyrics compliment the visuals in that Beyoncé directly conveys her financial independence and autonomy, which

communicates the autonomy Black Women can and will have in society. Closely studying the terms Beyoncé uses to describe herself, the words "reckless" and "possessive" pose a direct challenge to the dominant power structures about Black Women's autonomy and sexuality. Mediated texts often re-present the images of the controlling, wild Black Woman who should be caged. Through her re-appropriation and exploitation of the stereotypical images that cage Black Women's independence and sexuality, Beyoncé sings as a form of agency to motivate, encourage, and free Black Women from their historical and cultural cages of subjugation.

Black Womanhood—Multiplication (X)

Along with challenging the dominant ideology's unknown and misrepresented identification of Black Women regarding their autonomy and sexuality, Beyoncé also communicates Black Womanhood in society. The X formation can also symbolize multiplication—representing the mobilization of Black Women and Black Women as mothers (Girvin, 2010; "Meanings," n.d.). Traditionally in Western culture, a Woman's *most important* job in society is to procreate, to multiply, and bring forth more life (Bem, 1993). Furthermore, in Western culture, mothers nurture and protect their children both emotionally and physically. It is often the mother that teaches and reinforces the notions of Womanhood such as femininity and physical beauty to her children, primarily to her female children (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2013).

In public and proud: Negro nose, ethnic afros, and all. Communicating visually and lyrically the aspects of Womanhood, beauty, and motherhood of Black Women, Beyoncé poses a direct threat to the dominant ideology in the United States by combating the notions of "true Womanhood" as well as dismantles the idea that exhibiting European physical characteristics inherently equates to being more beautiful in society. This visual frame is shot from an empty in-ground pool which contextually refers to the 1950s and 1960s historical references of public pools being drained immediately after Black people swam or touched the water. This setting also references the racial tensions of America during those time periods in which public pools banned Black Americans (Botchey, 2016). Choosing this environment to shoot scenes for the "Formation" music video communicates and establishes the rights and power Black Americans possess to be in a public pool, and indirectly *in public*, despite the racist dominant ideology that once forbad it.

Image 5

In this visual shot, Beyoncé's back-up dancers don large afros and Black eye glasses. This visual signifies a tribute to Angela Davis, a Black female activist who championed the economic, social, and political rights for Black people and Black Women in the United States during the 1960s. Davis was both an activist and a proud, vocal member of the Black Nationalist Movement whose defiant and aggressive messages proudly proclaimed their mantra "Black is beautiful" (Sims, 2006, p. 15). Significantly, Davis was one of the few Black Panthers who defeated the federal government's attempts to imprison her. Power is explicitly and implicitly communicated when Black Women liberate their natural hair from their historical and cultural bandannas, displayed often in the form of an afro. Deviating from "normal" and traditional standards, Black Women expose their true selves, thus placing them in a vulnerable position to be criticized and

stereotyped from a sexist and racist dominant ideological perspective. Subjecting themselves to stares and inquiries of how their puffy, kinky, and wild hair texture feels demonstrates their power from within to assert their beauty and Womanhood in a society that virtually communicates that they are not beautiful enough daily.

Differing from her back-up dancers, Beyoncé fiercely and fearlessly embraces her Blackness by wearing waist-length braids, the artificial hair often termed in Black culture as "weave" that is culturally associated primarily with Black Women in the United States. There is power in this hairstyle. Along with the the afro and braids, Black Women have created and worn wigs and weaves of different styles, colors, and lengths that challenge typical Western definitions of beauty equating with straight hair, slender noses, and thin, skinny physiques. Beyoncé and her back-up dancers challenge this mentality visually in the re-presentation of authentic, ethnic, Black hairstyles.

The choreography, camera angles, and colors depicted in the visual shot are enhanced with the lyrics Beyoncé aggressively articulates. Situated in the empty swimming pool stands two lines of Black Women with Beyoncé positioned in the center. Echoing the sentiments "Black is beautiful," Beyoncé and her back-up dancers take a fighter's stance as they rock back and forth with balled fists as if they are preparing to throw a punch. The lyrics that accompany this visual are aggressive as well as Beyoncé states, "My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana. You mix that negro with that Creole,

make a Texas Bama. I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros. I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils. Earned all this but they never take the country out me. I got hot sauce in my bag, swag." As Beyoncé sings these lyrics proudly, the camera slowly zooms in creating an emotion of conflict with the contrast between the light and shadows in the visual frame. Panning to the right of the shot, the camera further communicates conflict by focusing on the well-lit image of Beyoncé aggressively swinging her waist-length braids, which visually represents the hostile and violent messages of the Black Nationalist Movement, Angela Davis, and Malcolm X. The colors in this visual frame also challenge the sexist and racist dominant ideology. As Lester (2006) indicates the significance of lines and color, it is important to note that once again red is presented as a thick line shape displayed on the waistbands of their outfits, which appear to resemble the representation of a uniform. Thus, the thick red line on their uniforms symbolize the assertive, proud, and hostile nature of Angela Davis, Malcolm X, and the Black Nationalist Movement, which are all significant to the overall messages Beyoncé communicates in "Formation." Not only is the red hue an important color communicated through their clothing but also Beyoncé's lipstick—a deep brown color which conveys strength, solidity, and masculinity. Looking at the visual closely, Beyoncé and the dancers' choreography merges into an X formation as she sings, "I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros. I like my negro nose with Jackson Five nostrils." Through these

lyrics and the visual of her daughter with her natural hair, Beyoncé clearly communicates the message that "Black is beautiful" while also addressing the criticism she and her husband Jay-Z have received from the media in keeping their daughter's hair natural, rather than straightening it (Kale, 2016). This visual frame and the lyrics combined communicate Black Women's power, Womanhood, and affirm Black self-love.

Beyoncé's use of the term "negro" is significant to note. Culturally, this term is deemed as inappropriate and racist by much of Western society largely due to the negative connotations the word holds. The term "negro" is connected to derogatory terms white people often used to refer to Black people such as "nigger" and "nigga." Historically and culturally used to demean Blacks during the slavery era and time period of Jim Crow, the word held an immense amount of power—the power to injure and offend. The power of the word "negro" is evident in which I as well as others noticed the term being censored or bleeped out on radio stations when they played "Formation" (Bryant, 2016). Incorporating the word "negro" into her lyrics, Beyoncé exploits and re-appropriates this pejorative label from one that wounded Black people to one that is a badge of honor. Not only through the objectification of the term "negro" does Beyoncé reclaim power but also through expressing her love for her African or "negro" nose. Beyoncé takes back the power by communicating that to be powerful in society, you must love yourself—inside and out. Rather than adopting the mainstream standards of

beauty, she inspires Black Women to love, celebrate, and embrace *all* of their ethnic and African features. Moreover, she indirectly encourages and motivates Black mothers to educate and inform their daughters to also accept and love their Blackness. It is through knowledge and information that Black Women, both mothers and daughters, can learn to heal from the oppressive hegemonic messages that communicate their lack of beauty, self worth, and significance in society. Beyoncé communicates that there is power in identity—in knowing yourself, accepting yourself, and loving yourself. This is how Black Women can reclaim their sense of Womanhood and power in society, thus challenging the dominant ideology in Western culture.

Workin' it in wigs and weaves—you besta' believe it. The lyrics and visuals of "Formation" often vibrantly echo the message "Black is beautiful," as seen in the visual frame that depicts three Black Women standing in a hair supply store. As the camera lens slowly moves in, both sides of the frame are lined with mannequin head displays with wigs showing various styles, lengths, and colors. This visual shot displays three Black Women sporting Black fashion. Wearing Black sliders—a type of footwear that is generally popular in the Black community—with socks, extra-large gold hoops, blue hair, and various styles of ethnic or hip hop dress all convey the message of Blackness—real and authentic Blackness. This visual frame communicates explicitly Black beauty and femininity, thus challenging the dominant ideology in that Black Women do not have to

succumb to Eurocentric pressures and standards of beauty in the United States.

Image 6

Accompanying this frame is the lyrical voice-over of Big Freedia, a bounce-rap musical artist from New Orleans, Louisiana. Often referred to as the "Queen of Bounce," Big Freedia's contribution to the "Formation" track pays homage to Black Southern culture as the artist states, "I like cornbread and collard greens, bitch. Oh, yes, you besta' believe it" (Lambe, 2016). These lyrics communicate Black Southern roots by referencing Southern-style cooking, often a staple of Black Women's meal preparation. Combining the lyrics and the visuals, the slow camera zoom-in of this frame creates a feeling of confrontation between the viewer and the three Black Women in the beauty shop and their bold, resolute facial expressions (Lester, 2006). These visuals and lyrics communicate the essence of being unapologetically Black; Black Women do not need

permission nor approval to embrace their Black culture, whether through their choice of fashion, hair, jewelry, or cuisine. Thus, "Formation" conveys the steadfast, unwavering efforts of Black Women in celebrating, embracing, and loving their Blackness.

Shining bright and ready to fight. Challenging the traditional notions of Womanhood, Beyoncé transforms the idea that Women are to be passive, quiet, and submissive (Bem, 1993; Wood, 2013). Located inside a parlor of an old plantation house during the Reconstruction era, Beyoncé sits in a central position as the light reflects upon her face. Sitting on each side of her are other Black Women crossing their legs wearing long white dresses, stereotypically re-presenting feminine attire. Crossing her arms in an X formation, Beyoncé dons a long, all-white, lace dress that reveals a significant amount of cleavage, as she states "Sometimes I go off (I go off), I go hard (I go hard). Get what's mine (take what's mine), I'm a star (I'm a star)." The visuals and the lyrics both exploit and challenge traditional standards of femininity and beauty.

Image 7

Lyrically, Beyoncé exemplifies themes of masculinity in that she is hostile, aggressive, and is active in achieving her goals. These lyrics reference Beyoncé as a star in which she proudly proclaims and brags about her abilities and power in society, which is often a staple of female hip hop artists' lyrics (Weitzer & Kubrin, 2009). As the camera lens slowly zooms in this frame, the visual image of Blue, Beyoncé's daughter, standing with her hand on her hip communicates a direct challenge to ideological views of femininity and motherhood. Positioned in the middle of the frame and directly under the light, Blue proudly smirks under her natural afro as the line "I'm a star" is repeated. This frame communicates that not only will Beyoncé challenge stereotypical notions of Womanhood but will teach and educate her daughter to do so as well. Thus, through the

multiplication of Black Women becoming mothers comes the power to educate and mobilize their Black children, a message Beyoncé communicates often throughout "Formation."

Image 8

Slaying together: Kill it or be killed. Directly following this scene, viewers are presented an image of Beyoncé displaying her natural afro, a transformative hairstyle that she infrequently uses in her mainstream music videos. In combination with the choreography in this scene depicting X formations, closed fists, aggressive head nods, and the domino effect, this visual frame is fueled with violent and aggressive emotions as the camera angle abruptly shifts diagonally on each side, communicating the formation of an X. Not only are the visuals hostile but the lyrics as well as Beyoncé states:

> "Cause I slay (slay), I slay (hey), I slay (okay), I slay (okay). All day (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay), I slay (okay). We gon' slay (slay), gon' slay (okay), we slay (okay), I slay (okay) I slay (okay), okay (okay), I slay (okay), okay, okay, okay, okay. Okay, okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay. Okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, 'cause I slay. Prove to me you got some coordination, 'cause I slay. Slay trick, or you get eliminated."

It is significant to note the term "slay" as Beyoncé recites it frequently throughout "Formation." According to Urban Dictionary, slay is the action of "killing it or dominating." Through the slang she uses, Beyoncé mobilizes Black Women to challenge the hegemonic structures in the United States. In this visual frame, the Black female back-up dancers position themselves in a curved line as Beyoncé stands in the middle of the semi-circle. As she recites "slay trick, or you get eliminated," Beyoncé twirls around the semi-circle as each one of the back-up dancers performs a ripple effect. The re-presentation of this curved line along with the soft focus of the camera lens alleviate the intensity of the lyrics, thus objectifying and exploiting the traditional stereotypes of Womanhood and in turn dismantling white patriarchal power. Curved lines symbolically communicate messages of grace and poise which are frequently represented as notions of "true" Womanhood. The soft focus of this visual shot softens and blurs the images of

Beyoncé and her back-up dancers, which aligns with the lyrical message Beyoncé recites. Beyoncé urges Black Women to start *slaying* and getting in formation because if they do not, they will be eliminated—disregarded, rendered invisible, or killed. The objectification of the messages conveyed by the curved line and soft focus of this visual shot further enhances the defiant, resistant, and empowered nature of the lyrics and the overall message Beyoncé communicates in her "Formation" music video to challenge white androcentric power.

Image 9

Through a critical lens, this visual depiction of the domino effect communicates the symbolic messages of multiplication and mobilization of Black Women. Conveying the urgency of all Black Women mobilizing, Beyoncé makes reference to the consequences of passivity and complacency in society which is elimination or death, as

the last back-up dancer falls to her knees. Lyrically, Beyoncé cautions Black Women that they must "kill" or "dominate" ideological views as she repeats "I slay" and "we slay," thus demonstrating Black Women's power in society. Therefore, Black Women need to mobilize to "kill" or "dominate" the hegemonic structures in society that oppress and marginalize them, or it may result in their demise—death of their identity, culture, power, and children.

This message of demise is re-presented in the visual of a Black boy in a Black hoodie breakdancing in front of 10 white police officers wearing SWAT gear. Beyoncé communicates the message of mobilization to Black mothers so they can inform and educate their Black children to get in formation to stop the unjust hegemonic structures in society from oppressing and murdering them. It is through the mobilization of Black mothers that Black life can be preserved and salvaged. Standing firmly with his feet a part, the little Black boy raises his hands and forms the image of an X. In response to the little boy, the 10 police officers raise their hands one by one, demonstrating a ripple effect. This visual frame and lyrics are powerful by referencing the police brutality of Black Americans, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the "hands up, don't shoot" slogan (Santos, 2016). With this visual image, Beyoncé communicates to Black Women and mothers that they need to mobilize and resist the dominant ideology by presenting a transformed visual idea—a reality in which Black mothers can know that encounters with

the police do not have to result in the death of their children. Furthermore, this visual conveys a direct challenge to the dominant power structures, such as the police departments, to demonstrate a new way of policing that does not involve eliminating Black lives which is depicted in the graffiti visual that states “stop shooting us.” The “Formation” music video intricately presents visuals that depict Black Women’s past and present realities of Womanhood, while also communicating better, possible futures for Black Women regarding gender and race relations in the United States (Bradley, 2016).

Image 10

Opening the gates of freedom for Black Women. Similar to the transformative view of police departments serving and protecting *all* Black lives, Beyoncé opposes the ideological standards of Womanhood in society by communicating her power as a Black Women as she stands on top of the police car with both of her arms stretched out to the

side. Positioned in the image of a cross or X, she echoes “I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making.” As the camera angles upward, Beyoncé is illuminated as she equates herself to Bill Gates, the wealthiest and arguably most powerful man in the world. These visuals and lyrics challenge the stereotypical notion of Black Womanhood as poor and powerless, and assert that Beyoncé is on her way to becoming comparable to Bill Gates. It is through this frame’s lyrics and visuals that Beyoncé communicates her transformative determination to become the wealthiest and most powerful person in the world, and to encourage Black Women and Black people in the world to challenge the structures that oppress and subjugate them. In doing this, she and other Black Women dispel and challenge ideological views of Womanhood to claim their power and dominance in society.

Image 11

Beyoncé as Deity—Christ (X)

This close textual analysis of Beyoncé's "Formation" reveals a thought-provoking understanding of how Beyoncé communicates her power as a Black Women in society. Throughout the music video, there are countless times in which Beyoncé, her back-up dancers, and actors position themselves or perform choreography in the formation of an X. While the letter X can reference unknown identity or multiplication, it also symbolizes and represents Jesus Christ (Girvin, 2010; "Meanings," n.d.).

The way, the truth, and the life to salvation. Associating the visuals and the lyrics with the Christian doctrine, Beyoncé positions herself as a deity in "Formation." Throughout the video, the camera angles place Beyoncé in a high position of power and authority throughout the music video, thus symbolizing her as a deity or possessing godlike status (Huang, Olson, & Olson, 2002). Due to the upward camera angles with the exception of one visual frame, the camera does not directly look into Beyoncé's eyes. The camera's lack of direct eye gaze and eye contact with Beyoncé communicates the immense power she has. Culturally speaking, the eyes are the windows to a person's soul—it is through eye contact individuals can detect deception as well as view pain and emotion. Not only is direct eye contact associated with power because of the truths we can see, but direct eye contact can occur when both parties are on the same level. Visually depicted as a person one must look up to such as a deity, direct eye contact is

practically impossible. Therefore, viewers are unable to see Beyoncé directly unless she allows it, reflecting how she conducts both her personal and professional life. Controlling what and how much individuals can view of her and her lifestyle through social media and music videos directly communicates her control and power over the image that the public receives. Therefore, Beyoncé's begotten image and messages are meticulously planned and executed in its creation, production, and distribution to individuals.

Whoever follows will have the light of life. The notion that these visual messages depict Beyoncé as a savior for Black people, particularly Black Women, is also demonstrated through the lighting of the visuals, which further communicates the powerful messages about Black Women's power in the United States. Throughout the video, there are visual frames that communicate the themes of light and dark. Clearly communicating her power and Black Women's power in society, Beyoncé's face within each frame is surrounded by light, whether it is natural or artificial light. This illumination effect on Beyoncé's face is not only through camera angle positioning, but she is positioned frequently either near or under some form of light to communicate the illusion that her face is well lit. The concept of light is significant to this analysis of Beyoncé as a deity in that the Christian religion associates the term light with positive connotations such as truth or veracity (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996; Lester, 2006). The light

illuminated on Beyoncé's face provides a halo effect, thus connecting the artist to angels, heaven, and God.

Linking the message of Beyoncé as deity to the lyrics is also significant to the re-presentation of light as truth. Throughout "Formation," Beyoncé provides viewers and listeners with information or truths she desires to spread to Black communities, particularly Black Women. These historical and cultural truths focus on Black Women's autonomy, sexuality, and Womanhood in the United States. Similarly, the Bible essentially is a collection of historical truths and information that individuals need to learn how to follow Christ. In order for Beyoncé's listeners to become motivated and follow her message of getting in formation, Black people, specifically Black Women, must first be educated about the historical and cultural truths of the systemic oppression and marginalization of Black Women. Moreover, the ways in which she sings her lyrics also re-present truth to her audiences. Differing from her traditional mainstream music, Beyoncé's lyrics are not masked or sugar coated by her usual jaw-dropping vocal range and techniques. Rather her lyrics are sung clearly and directly, as if she is speaking to them by articulating every word which communicates the importance of the lyrical message. The simple and candid lyrics she recites in "Formation" re-present truth—a conscious, resounding truth ***all*** viewers need to listen to and understand in order to prosper in the future as a society in the United States.

Healing and restoring: Loving yourself and thy neighbor. Along with the camera positioning and lighting of the visuals and lyrics, Beyoncé is re-presented as a deity in that the central messages of love and healing echoed in "Formation" are also found within the Bible. Throughout the lyrics of "Formation," Beyoncé informs Black Women to embrace, celebrate, and love their African physical features communicating acts of self love. Furthermore, the concept of healing is evident in both texts. It is through the act of forgiving and healing in which we as humans can learn to love ourselves and others. Interestingly, Beyoncé's "Formation" communicates painful, difficult events and truths regarding Black Americans and Black Women. However, it is through this information and acceptance that Black Women can heal and forgive the racist and sexist dominant ideology to ultimately claim their power, identity, and Womanhood in the United States. Aligning this concept to the Bible, individuals must confront the sins and hardships of their past and present, commonly referred to as judgement day, before they are able to attain eternal and everlasting life in Heaven in their futures. Accepting and forgiving themselves and others for their sins allows Christians to heal, thus giving them the ability to love themselves and their neighbor.

Communicating the messages of healing from pain is not only depicted in the lyrics but the visuals as well. Once individuals heal from the pain, they are able to learn, forgive, and move forward enabling them to love again. With the use of raw, powerful

documentary footage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the camera pan movements from right to left as scenes of the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhoods are portrayed communicate painful memories to viewers. These camera pans from right to left are initially uncomfortable in that they oppose traditional standards of reading a text left to right (Kress & Leeuwen, 1996; Lester, 2006). Purposefully placing viewers in an uncomfortable position as these images pervade their screens reminds individuals of the death, destruction, and heartache Black Americans experienced. It is through this struggle of pain that Black Americans can be liberated which is similar to the experiences believers of Christianity must face to receive salvation. Re-presenting herself as a deity, Beyoncé communicates the grief and healing process in which all Americans must be able to learn information about the historical and cultural oppression of Black people in the United States, process and heal from being either the oppressors or the oppressed, and to love and liberate themselves and others by accepting and adopting her message of getting in formation.

Go into all the world and preach the Gospel. Interlocking the re-presentation of Beyoncé as a deity in the "Formation" music video, Beyoncé and her back-up dancers often perform a domino or ripple effect with their movements and choreography. Positioned in a line, whether it is horizontal, vertical, or curved, the image of one person affecting another is communicated in this music video. Moreover, Beyoncé specifically

performs a domino or ripple effect in her hand movements as she gracefully curls her fingers one by one eventually depicting a closed Black fist. Further supporting this analysis of Beyoncé as a deity, the notion of prophesizing and spreading the Word of God can be connected to these nonverbal movements Beyoncé and her female back-up dancers perform. It is significant to note that initially the ripple effect movements are demonstrated by Beyoncé through her hand gestures solely but as the music video continues, it is both Beyoncé and the other Black Women performing this movement. In Christianity, the Bible communicates the importance of spreading the Gospel so that people may receive salvation and redemption. It is through prophesizing that individuals come to know and understand the message of God. Once the message is accepted, the Bible conveys that all Christians should be messengers that seek out and inform others about the Gospel so they can be liberated and saved. Therefore, the Black female dancers symbolize prophets who are spreading Beyoncé's message of getting in formation to the Black community, specifically to other Black Women. After Black Women receive, accept, and adopt this message for themselves, they are instructed by Beyoncé to seek out others and relay this message as well. Once all Black Women get in formation and continue to spread this message to others, both they and the Black community are essentially freed and liberated.

The ultimate act of love: Laying down one's life for others. The final scenes of "Formation" are profound and thought provoking in their re-presentation of Beyoncé as deity. As the rising water indicates throughout the music video, the police car eventually sinks. Positioned in the image of an X, Beyoncé's body lays stretched out on the hood of the New Orleans police car wearing the conservative, long red dress and combat boots. As the water engulfs Beyoncé and the police car, Beyoncé's face is illuminated. Accompanying this visual, the lyrics state, "Girl, I hear some thunder. Golly, look at that water, boy, oh Lord." This visual shot of Beyoncé drowning with the police car directly references the Black lives claimed by the waters of the Hurricane Katrina disaster but also communicates religious concepts communicated in the Bible. To absolve people from their sins, Jesus died on the cross as an act of sacrificial love. For others to be liberated and receive eternal life in Heaven, Jesus faced persecution for the greater good. Wearing a red dress, representing love, Beyoncé sacrifices herself for the greater good of society, specifically for Black Women. Demonstrating the ultimate act of love, Beyoncé communicates her love for Black people and their future in the United States by sacrificing herself. In Christianity and other religions, suffering death for the greater good of spreading the Word of God classifies those individuals as martyrs. Thus, Beyoncé is martyred throughout the music video in spreading this politically-fueled message and in sacrificing her life which presents her as a holy, divine deity. Moreover, much of this

mediated text makes reference to Malcolm X, a well-known and martyred social activist of the 1950s and 1960s. Through the act of sacrificing herself in the shape of an X, she essentially pays homage to the martyred efforts of Malcolm X in his attempts to liberate Black Americans "by any means necessary" ("Biography," 2015, p. 1). Re-presented as a deity, Beyoncé's sacrificial act symbolizes the salvation of Black Americans now and for future generations to come in the United States. Connecting the messages depicted in this visual shot to Christianity, the water that claims Beyoncé also symbolizes a rebirth or baptism for Black Americans. Proclaiming the doctrine of getting in formation, Beyoncé sacrifices, liberates, and frees Black Women and Black people so that they, too, can oppose the dominant ideology to ultimately revive, renew, and restore the United States.

Image 12

Raising and resurrecting others up through power. Directly following the sacrificial visual frame, the final scene of "Formation" also communicates Beyoncé as a deity. Applying the rule of thirds to this visual shot, Beyoncé is located in a privileged position, communicating her powerful and godlike status. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the scene of Beyoncé drowning is not the concluding scene. Viewers are once again presented with the Reconstructionist image of Beyoncé in the short, white, lace dress and corset as the light illuminates her hand gesture of the domino effect and an empty bird cage. Beyoncé rises from the dead as Christ did after crucifixion, which is further supported by the color of white clothing she wears which symbolizes a new, fruitful beginning ("Color Meaning," 2015). The conditional freedom allocated to free Blacks in New Orleans during the Reconstruction era is similar to the conditional freedom Black Americans possess currently. Clearly illuminated by light, Beyoncé slowly performs a ripple effect with her fingers that ultimately form the shape of a Black fist. The slow gesture of the domino effect communicates Black Women's ability to prophesize the message of getting in formation to eradicate the structural and institutional racism in the United States. Beyoncé communicates that it will be a difficult and hard-fought struggle to challenge the hegemonic structures that pervade every facet of American life, but when *every* Black person—Women, men, and children—get in formation, true change and transformation can occur. Furthermore, the hand movement transforms into the shape of a

Black fist, thus explicitly referencing a cultural symbol of Black power that sparks messages of resistance, determination, strength, and power. Though Black Americans are plagued with conditional freedom, together they can get in formation to liberate themselves and assert their Black power in society, which directly opposes the dominant ideology of Western culture.

Image 13

It is finished. The combined messages of the lyrics echoed in the final scenes of "Formation" are important to mine as well. As the camera slowly pans to the right and zooms out, Beyoncé raises her Black hat revealing her eyes that have been concealed the entire music video. As she states, "You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation. Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper," Beyoncé lowers her head down, shielding her eyes from the camera. Following these lyrics, Beyoncé is

claimed by the water as the lines "Girl, I hear some thunder. Golly, look at that water, boy, oh Lord" resound in this visual shot. Holistically analyzing the combination of these lyrics to the message of "Formation" foreshadows the amount of controversial attention this music video will incite. Regardless of the haters and opponents of "Formation," Beyoncé communicates her holy, divine power in that the she will rise up against the thunderous disputes made against her and her music. Communicating the dominant ideology's inability to prevent or halt her political efforts, she conveys that she will stay true to who she is and what she believes no matter what. This is an interesting position Beyoncé makes in that she knows people will have issues with the messages she presents, but she remains gracious and humble—characteristics often associated with Christ—refusing to stoop to their level. Moreover, she recites "best revenge is your paper." Despite the controversy that will ensue, this video and the *Lemonade* album will connect to and be purchased by her listeners. This communicates that no matter what the ideological views on "Formation" is, Beyoncé will remain a powerful force in society and will continue to resist and challenge the dominant ideology to liberate Black Americans—Women, men, and children—in the United States, just as Christ did for his people.

Beyoncé's "Formation" music video encapsulates the reality and treatment of the Black Woman in the United States both historically and culturally. From analyzing the

lyrics and the visuals of "Formation," Beyoncé explicitly and implicitly challenges the dominant ideology in her re-presentation of Black Women's autonomy, sexuality, and Womanhood. Through the analysis of the X formation as unknown identity, multiplication, and Christ, Beyoncé conveys the immense power she possesses in society, despite the dominant ideology that oppresses and marginalizes Black people and Black Women in the United States. Claiming and owning their true identity, mobilizing together and multiplying educated and informed children, and healing from the grief and painful memories of oppression, Black Women in the United States become liberated to ultimately demand and assert their power in society.

References

Baldwin, J., & Roberts, L. (2006). *Visual communication: From theory to practice*. London: AVA Publishing.

Bem, S.L. (1993). *The lenses of gender*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Biography: An abridged biography of Malcolm X. (2015). *Malcolm X*. Retrieved from http://malcolmx.com/biography/

Blassingame, J.W. (1973). *Black New Orleans*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Bogle, D. (2016). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of blacks in American films*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.

Botchey, J. (2016, September 27). Black people can't swim. *LAPP*. Retrieved from http://www.lappthebrand.com/2016/09/27/black-people-cant-swim/

Bradley, R.N. (2016, February 7). Getting in line: Working through Beyoncé's "Formation." *Red Clay Scholar (blog)*. Retrieved from https://redclayscholarblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/07/getting-in-line-working-through-beyonces-formation/

Bryant, Y. (2016, March 11). Radio doesn't want you to hear Beyoncé say "negro" in "Formation." *DJ Booth: The authority in hip hop*. Retrieved from http://djbooth.net/news/entry/2016-03-11-beyonce-formation-radio-censorship

Collins, P.H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Color meaning. (2015). *Color Wheel Pro*. Retrieved from http://www.color-wheel-pro.com/color-meaning.html

Emerson, R.A. (2002). Where my girls at? Negotiating black womanhood in music videos. *Gender & Society, 16* (1), 115-135.

Ex, K. (2016, February 10). Why are people suddenly afraid of Beyoncé's black pride? *Billboard*. Retrieved from http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/6873899/beyonce-formation-essay

France, L.R. (2016, February 24). Why the Beyoncé controversy is bigger than you think. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/23/entertainment/beyonce-controversy-feat/

Gammage, M.M. (2016). *Representations of black women in the media: The damnation of black womanhood.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Girvin, T. (2010, December 15). The symbolism of the x. *Girvin*. Retrieved from https://www.girvin.com/blog/the-symbolism-of-the-x/

hooks, b. (1992). *Black looks: Race and representation.* Boston, MA: South End Press.

hooks, b. (2015). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Huang, W., Olson, J.S., & Olson, G.M. (2002). Camera angle affects dominance in video-mediated communication. *Short Talk: Communication Media*, 716-717.

I know why the caged bird sings by Maya Angleou. (2017). *Poem Analysis*. Retrieved from https://poemanalysis.com/i-know-why-the-caged-bird-sings-maya-angelou-analysis/

Jarlo. (2015, March 30). Finally, a clear and useful definition of what "good form" means for exercise technique. *GMB*. Retrieved from https://gmb.io/good-form/

Kale, S. (2016, February 9). Why should we care about Beyoncé's hair? *Dazed*. Retrieved from http://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/29705/1/why-should-we-care-about-beyonce-s-hair

Kohn, S. (2016, February 15). Beyoncé a political superhero with rhythm. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/15/opinions/beyonce-protest-misses-point-kohn/

Kress, G., & Leeuwen, T.V. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Lambe, S. (2016, February 10). How Big Freedia helped Beyoncé return to her roots on "Formation." *ET*. Retrieved from

http://www.etonline.com/news/182032_big_freedia_on_how_she_helped_beyonce_return_to_her_roots_on_formation/

Lester, P.M. (2006). *Visual communication: Images with messages.* Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.

Malcolm X: Civil rights activist, minister (1925-1965). (2017). *Biography*. Retrieved from http://www.biography.com/people/malcolm-x-9396195

Meanings of the letter x, esoteric, and otherwise. (n.d.). *The Open Scroll*. Retrieved from http://www.theopenscroll.com/theEsotericLetterX.htm

Rubicon Planning, LLC. (2011). Military terms and definitions. *Military Terms and Definitions*. Retrieved from http://www.militaryterms.net/f

Santos, A.A. (2016, February 6). Listen: Beyoncé's new song "Formation." *Vox*. Retrieved from http://www.vox.com/2016/2/6/10927952/beyonce-formation

Sims, Y. (2006). *Women of Blaxploitation: How the black action film heroine changed American popular culture*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.

Sturken, M., & Cartwright, L. (2009). *Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Syfret, W. (2016, February 9). The story of Messy Mya, the tragic voice on Beyoncé's new track. *i-D*. Retrieved from https://i-d.vice.com/en_us/article/the-story-of-messy-mya-the-tragic-voice-on-beyoncs-new-track

Weitzer, R., & Kubrin, C.E. (2009). Misogyny in rap music: A content analysis of prevalence and meanings. *Men and Masculinities, 12*(1), p. 3-29.

West, C.M. (1995). Mammy, sapphire, and jezebel: Historical images of black women and their implications for psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy Theory Research & Practice, 32*(3)*,* 458-466.

Wood, J. (2013). *Gendered lives: Communication, gender, and culture.* Boston, MA: Wadsworth.

Exalted and Exonerated: Seeking Justice and Liberation for All

Beyoncé's "Formation" music video is a bold, prideful proclamation and tribute to Black people, specifically Black Women in the United States. Through the lyrics and visuals, this musical composition pays homage to Black culture, Black beauty, Black Womanhood, and real, authentic Blackness. Making no apologies, Beyoncé challenges the dominant ideology of Western cultures that assert that white, upper-class males wield the most power and significance in society (Barker, 2012). Analyzing "Formation" through a critical lens, Beyoncé communicates messages of power, ideology, and hegemony as well as what it means to be a Black Woman in the United States both visually and lyrically. Visually captivating viewers' attention through the color scheme, camera angles, movements, settings, and lighting, Beyoncé reawakens the nation's consciousness to the historical and cultural injustice and oppression Black Americans have faced for centuries. Furthermore, the lyrical elements of "Formation" such as the linguistics, repetition, and paralanguage Beyoncé demonstrates communicates a straightforward message of strength, love, power, dominance, and authority. Beyoncé's powerful acts of re-appropriation and exploitation visually and lyrically poses a direct challenge to the hegemonic structures that systematically marginalize the "Other" in society. Embracing and celebrating Blackness in every form, Beyoncé educates viewers

while simultaneously demanding that they follow her and unite together to resist and oppose the sexist and racist dominant ideology in the United States.

The critical/cultural studies perspective of this research is significant to the expansion of study on subjects of race and gender in the Communication field. This study demonstrates the pervasive and powerful nature of mediated texts. While Beyoncé, as an individual and an artist, remains relatively silent to her fans, the media, and the general public, the lyrical and visual elements of her "Formation" music video loudly communicate the controversial social and political issues in the United States. Beyoncé amplifies the uncomfortable, painful conversations about race and gender in the United States to better inform people, both Blacks and non-Blacks, so they can mobilize and stand up against the oppression, marginalization, and unjust treatment of Black Americans in the United States. Beyoncé challenges the sexist and racist dominant ideologies in the United States, and makes a powerful call to all those individuals who are considered "Other" or not considered at all to ultimately transform the oppressive dominant ideological perspective in society.

Essential to the critical/cultural studies perspective is the identification of shared meanings. Both the "Formation" music video and Beyoncé have received a great deal of anger and opposition, primarily from white people—specifically white men. This is noteworthy due to the fact that often the people who oppose "Formation" simply do not

understand the cultural messages or shared meanings Beyoncé communicates to viewers and listeners (Ex, 2016; France, 2016; Kohn, 2016). Directly challenging the dominant ideology, the "Formation" music video was not created for mainstream viewers—it was created for Black people and Black Women. The authentic and unique aspects Beyoncé expresses visually with Black fashion, Black hairstyles, and Black culture along with lyrically echoing Black vocabulary such as the terms *slay, albino alligators, twirl, and Texas Bama* explicitly communicate that this music video was created and produced for Black people by Black people. Historically and culturally subjugated to be satisfied with their "inherent" inferior status and power in society, Beyoncé commands that Black Women mobilize and celebrate themselves and one another to challenge white androcentric power. Communicated through the ripple and domino movements, Beyoncé shares the message that resistance to their oppression is going to be a process and dependent on every person's actions. First, in order to demand respect and power, Black Women, themselves, must unapologetically love themselves and claim their identity. Then, it is through the act of self love that Black Women can celebrate, love, and uplift one another to succeed. Once they love themselves and others, they then can educate and inform their children to do the same so they, too, can get in formation. The combination of Black Women and the Black community loving themselves and their culture is imperative so they can aggressively assert and demand their power and rightful place in

society. No longer asking to be accepted in society and given power or freedom, they demand it. The explicit and subtle depictions of Black culture and heritage, Black history, Black social and political activists, and Black life all communicate Black Americans' social reality in the United States. Thus, the visual and lyrical messages Beyoncé communicates in "Formation" are shared meanings within the Black community. Defying the notion that Beyoncé is for everyone, Beyoncé not only challenges the dominant ideology of Western cultures in the messages of "Formation" but essentially challenges the stereotypical representation the white patriarchy has categorized her as, thus communicating her power and dominance in challenging and re-appropriating these images.

Though the "Formation" music video was made for Black Women to celebrate and honor them, Beyoncé subtly communicates that "Formation" is also for individuals considered "Other" in the United States, as demonstrated by her call to "ladies" getting in formation as well as Big Freedia's voice over on the "Formation" track. Marginalized by race, gender, or sexual orientation, "Formation" explicitly and subtly communicates messages of love, justice, and power for these individuals. Teaching and preaching from a New Orleans police car platform in "Formation," Beyoncé demands the recognition and celebration of *all* life in society—every shade, every gender, every sexual orientation, every culture. Through the messages of the ripple and domino movements, Beyoncé

communicates that through each individual's action to celebrate and embrace *every* life can produce a ripple and domino effect to ultimately save and preserve American life in society. Thus, she communicates that once *every* person—Women, men, and children—get informed and in formation, change, transformation, and restructure of a white patriarchal society can occur in the United States.

Along with the explication of the shared meanings communicated, critical/cultural studies researchers posit that mediated texts simply "re-present" reality; they do not mirror or reflect. They are mediated messages that re-present what is currently happening in society through an ideological lens. If this assertion is upheld, then the reality of the "Formation" music video shows that the dominant ideology in the United States is, indeed, transforming and getting in formation. An instance that re-presents the transformation of society is the significance of the 2016 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs). Winning the most honored award for "Video of the Year," Beyoncé's "Formation" music video evidentially signifies that the ideological views of Black people and of Black Women are changing in society (Chen, 2016). The acceptance and recognition of "Formation" by a mainstream music awards show, despite its social and political controversy, demonstrates the power Beyoncé wields in the music industry and in society. Moreover, Beyoncé's performance of "Daddy Lessons" at the Country Music Awards (CMAs) alongside the Dixie Chicks demonstrates her power to invade another

musical genre's award show and stage to communicate her cultural messages to an audience that is predominantly white (Roberts, 2016; Zimmerman, 2016). Demonstrating Beyoncé's power and influence on the music industry and society, Adele's acceptance speech for Album of the Year at the Grammy's reflected the transformative nature of "Formation" and the *Lemonade* album. Though Beyoncé did not covet the most prestigious award at the 59th Annual Grammy's, the majority of Adele's speech recognized and praised Beyoncé for her musical genius on this album, thus communicating her power not only over her fans and the music industry but fellow musical artists as well (France, 2017).

Arguably one of the most talented and influential musical artists of the decade, Beyoncé's power is vividly communicated by fans of all different races, genders, and sexual orientations. The "Formation" music video is Beyoncé's platform to visually and lyrically provoke, incite, empower, and mobilize *all* Americans to fight the sexist and racist injustice that pervade marginalized groups' realities in society, specifically Black people and Black Women. Beyoncé's "Formation" music video echoes notions of love, justice, resistance, and power throughout the music video both lyrically and visually. Prompting Black people, particularly Black Women and children, to embrace their authentic and Afrocentric features, I witnessed my Black female friends as well as others in my community embrace their natural hair by donning their afros or celebrating their

Black culture by wearing weaves of all different styles. Expressed in conversations, I witnessed a white heterosexual Woman state: "If Beyoncé says I should do it, I will." Along with this statement, a white homosexual man asserted that Beyoncé is the religion he subscribes to and worships. These first-hand accounts are significant to note in understanding Beyoncé's cultural significance to society and the power she wields. To thoroughly explain the ways in which Beyoncé influences American culture, it is vital to reference the contextual social and political events after the creation and distribution of the "Formation" music video. In November 2016, Donald Trump was elected as the 45th President of the United States. Throughout the election season, Trump's rhetoric represented sexist and racist dominant ideological views along with those of Richard Spencer, a self-proclaimed white supremacist in the United States. It is significant to note these two individuals in that the language and behaviors of these men represent and communicate white androcentric power. While the "Formation" music video is in no way the sole reason for the massive groups and protests organized throughout the country and at public universities, such as Auburn University, Beyoncé's "Formation" is a significant act of courage that helped further a ripple and domino effect in society for those oppressed to unite, march, and speak out against the hegemonic structures that seek to dominate and marginalize them.

The recognition and celebration of "Formation" and Beyoncé at award shows and their impact on individuals of *every* race, gender, culture, and sexual orientation protesting against a sexist and racist dominant ideology in the United States communicates the cultural significance of this musical artist and mediated text. This also signifies that people, both Blacks and non Blacks, are embracing the messages communicated in Beyoncé's "Formation" and becoming more informed so they can recognize the marginalization and racial injustice of Black people, mobilize and get in formation, and challenge the dominant ideology in the United States. The widespread and mainstream success of "Formation" communicates the immense power Beyoncé holds in society. Getting in formation, Black Women and all Americans are opposing white patriarchal power, uniting together to work as one structure—one structure and formation of love, justice, power, acceptance, and salvation of *all* life in the United States.

With the concluding lyrics of "Formation," Beyoncé states, "you know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation, always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper." Interrogating the final lyrics Beyoncé recites is significant to note the importance of her communicating the messages of "Formation" to both Black and mainstream audiences. According to Urban Dictionary, the term "that bitch" is a woman who is not afraid to act on things that others will not but wish they could and is considered "the most exalted one." Referencing herself as "that bitch" demonstrates that while others may not

desire to confront these social and political issues, due to the backlash and outrage they may incite, she is unafraid and so powerful that she can address these issues without fear or hesitation. Understanding that Beyoncé does not divulge and communicate her personal views or personal life to her fans and the general public, the "Formation" music video and the entire *Lemonade* album allowed the fans, media, and public a look into her life and mind. Since Beyoncé remains relatively silent, when she speaks people listen and follow. Therefore, her power is in her silence, and once the silence is broken she immediately garners the attention of everyone, thus communicating the importance of Beyoncé sharing the political fueled messages of "Formation" which demonstrates the cultural significance and influence she wields in the music industry and American society.

Recognizing and understanding the power she holds as an individual and musical artist, Beyoncé's concluding lyrics represent her as untouchable and omnipotent. Beyoncé's crossover appeal is indicative of her all powerful nature to communicate the visual and lyrical messages of "Formation" to both a mainstream and Black audience. Her ability to reach different audiences of all races, genders, and sexual orientations is significant to the mobilization of *all* individuals in society to challenge white androcentric power. Furthermore, the lyrics also communicate Beyoncé's godlike and supreme abilities to rise against any controversy, as demonstrated with the "Boycott

Beyoncé" merchandise she sold at her "Formation" concerts (Harris-Perry, 2017; Kornhaber, 2016). Exploiting the law enforcement's oppression of Beyoncé, she profited financially and remained untouchable. As Fiske (1992) asserts "oppression is always economic" (p. 157). Referencing that the greatest revenge lies in her paper or monetary wealth, Beyoncé communicates that regardless of opinion on "Formation"—if you were offended and insulted or loved and embraced it, she is "that bitch" to cause all this conversation. Despite the backlash and outrage "Formation" has incited, Beyoncé's concluding lyrics communicate that she will remain a powerful force as her bank account will continue to runneth over with money, representing her immense power and influence she wields in society. Through a critical/cultural studies lens, the effects of the "Formation" music video communicate that the sexist and racist dominant ideology is transforming and change for Black Americans, and specifically for Black Women, is coming soon as Black Women and "Others" get in formation, slay, and follow Beyoncé to become those bitches to cause conversation in the United States.

References

Barker, C. (2012). *Cultural studies*: *Theory and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Chen, J. (2016, August 29). The 2016 MTV VMAs: Beyoncé makes history, surpasses Madonna with most Moonmen awards. *US Weekly*. Retrieved from http://www.usmagazine.com/celebrity-news/news/beyonce-makes-history-has-more-mtv-vmas-than-madonna-w436693

Ex, K. (2016, February 10). Why are people suddenly afraid of Beyoncé's black pride? *Billboard*. Retrieved from http://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/6873899/beyonce-formation-essay

Fiske, J. (1992). Cultural studies and the culture of everyday life. In L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, & P.A. Treichler (Eds.), *Cultural Studies* (p. 154-173). New York, NY: Routledge.

France, L.R. (2016, February 24). Why the Beyoncé controversy is bigger than you think. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/23/entertainment/beyonce-controversy-feat/

France, L.R. (2017, February 13). Grammys 2017: Adele and Beyoncé's big moments. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/12/entertainment/grammys-2017/

Harris-Perry, M. (2017). Beyoncé: Her creative opus turned the pop star into a political force. *Time*. Retrieved from http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2016-beyonce-runner-up/

Kohn, S. (2016, February 15). Beyoncé a political superhero with rhythm. *CNN*. Retrieved from http://www.cnn.com/2016/02/15/opinions/beyonce-protest-misses-point-kohn/

Kornhaber, S. (2016, April 28). Why Beyoncé is embracing her own backlash: The "boycott Beyoncé" merchandise on sale at her concerts affords her a new kind of appeal. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/04/boycott-beyonce-merchandise-formation-tour-opposition/480318/

Roberts, R. (2016, November 3). Conservative country music fans lash out at CMA performance by Beyoncé and the Dixie Chicks. *Los Angeles Times.* Retrieved from http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-conservative-cma-beyonce-dixie-chicks-20161103-htmlstory.html

Zimmerman, A. (2016, November 2). Beyoncé slays the Country Music Awards—a political statement unto itself. *The Daily Beast*. Retrieved from http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/11/02/beyonce-slays-the-country-music-awards-a-political-statement-unto-itself.html