

# **POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN POP CULTURE**




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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Celebrities become more active in raising awareness on disturbing issues and advocating the needs of unprivileged communities. In terms of racial inequality, Beyoncé created a comprehensive textual and visual content that reveals the depth of racial inequality and calls for action. Beyoncé's "Formation" has met dual criticism being emphasized as a political activist versus blamed for pursuit after personal benefit. Current research presents an analysis of the textual and visual content in order to find out the true intentions of the artist. The research question is "In terms of textual and visual analysis of the text, video, and performance of the song "Formation," how does Beyoncé establish herself as a political activist?" The analysis includes hermeneutic approach with the use of hermeneutic circle to break down the information into symbols and reveal the context behind lyrics and visual messages. Theoretical background on political engagement includes the features of musical activism and embodied political argument. These ideas allowed drawing parallels between theory and Beyoncé's practice. The research concludes that Beyoncé's "Formation" is a well-developed three-step strategy. The lyrics have a cultural importance to draw the attention of target audience. The video is a visual footage of social injustice that articulates the mood of dissatisfaction. Finally, the live performance has a clear political statement with the use of a wide range of points of political importance. In a gradual and structured rising tendency, the three-step strategy proceeds from an individual level of influence to a collective form of influence on a multimillion audience.

**Key words:** political activism, musical activism, racial inequality, embodied political argument, hermeneutics, hermeneutic circle

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Political activism is a mean to raise public's attention to disturbing issues. Wars and revolutions are still existent ways to bring changes to reality. However, with media as the key tool of raising awareness, expressing political disagreement does not require violent measures. In the modern society, celebrities gained enough power to speak up and deliver important social and political messages through media.

The story of political engagement knows numerous examples when celebrities made a statement that defined them not only as celebrities but activists as well. Natalie Maines, the Dixie Chicks star, is an example of how political engagement could go awry. In 2003, the singer had a concert in London, where she made her political statement against President Bush during the Iraq war. In particular, she noted that she was ashamed that they both came from Texas. Although a half of the American society shared her vision, Maines was famously blacklisted for her critical note about George W. Bush. In her book *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press: Framing Dissent* (2014), Sarah J. Jackson catalogued the black representatives making place for each eminent personality in chapter. The author refers to such celebrities as Paul Robenson, Eartha Kitt, Tommy Smith, Sister Soulja, Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, Kanye West, and Mike Myers. These people have raised the planks of social awareness and encouraged the society progress to the mindset relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Modern audience sees the world through the lens of media and celebrities feel more empowered to emphasize “non-publicist-coached opinions” (Davis, 2017). The audience admiring one or another celebrity expects them to take a side in reflecting on disturbing issues and make a statement for others to hear. Allison Davis (2017) offers a term “the woke celebrity” after Charles Pulliam-Moore to describe famous people seen and heard through various media. Several celebrities make a few significant marks by engaging their social responsibility to cast the light to problems of the society having the power of popularity and recognition. Among those woke celebrities, Rowan Blanchard, Zendaya, and Amandla Stenberg spread their activist ideas through social media, which became the hallmark for the generation that they represented. Another group is defenders of women of color

suppressed by dominant white society and men. In particular, Jessie Williams, Colin Kaepernick, or Issa Rae, whose *Insecure* was the way to attract more black community to appear on TV.

However, not all attempts to engage the audience were as inspiring as Williams'. Emily Ratajkowski is a model and an actress in the mid-twenties who has more than 10 million followers on Instagram. Currently known as @emrata, she became an activist, who chose not to comply with the "fear of alienating" (Davison, 2016). She campaigned for Bernie Sanders and her essay was published in *Glamour*. The essay emphasized her as a sexy woman able to speak her mind. Despite her aspirations the essay was met with criticism and she was blamed for self-promotion to win a broader audience. Another example of unsuccessful political statements is Emma Watson's HeForShe feminist organization for male feminists. In order to promote the organization as the UN Ambassador for HeForShe, Watson had a year break from her career as an actress. The popularity of the organization is proven with more than 1.3 billion subscribers on the website. Nonetheless, Watson's participation was quite vague and took place next to Ratajkowski's experience as it was unclear whether the initiatives were activist or opportunistic.

The woke celebrities is what the society expects in the search for justice. Therefore, failure to make a stand might raise bigger concerns than failure to participation. The American singer Taylor Swift's scandal has shaken the society, when she did not participate in Women March as a feminist campaign that was held around the globe (Jahr, 2017). This campaign was the way to protest against President Trump's assertions and political decisions, particularly treatment of women. Miley Cyrus, Rihanna, Zendaya, and other celebrities took part in the march. Singers Madonna and Alicia Keys had speeches in Washington. Meanwhile, Taylor Swift was blamed for neglecting her moral obligation as a feminist activist, when she did not participate and decided to remain neutral in her actions and statements. Such inactivity met immediate negative response. Her Tweeter burst into disapproval. BuzzFeed named the singer "a fair-weather feminist" (Gerstein, 2017); Cosmopolitan highlighted that Swift made her audience doubt her feminist motifs (Mastroianni, 2017); and PopCruch attributed such action to "vague endorsement" (Russell, 2017).

When the award season starts, the public is waiting for another "move" from well-known activists. Lady Gaga participated in the Super Bowl show this year and sent strong political messages to the

audience. Lady Gaga was moderate enough and the public split into the camps, those who recognized her political statement and those who did not. The singer is known for supporting the LGTB<sup>1</sup> movement. She opened the halftime show at Houston's NRG Stadium with a call for unity and "one nation under God, invisible with liberty and justice for all" (Wood, 2017). Although she was not addressing Trump's policy against LGTB community directly, her performance included the song "Born This Way" being known as an anthem for LGTB rights.

Similarly to Lady Gaga, who used the volume of a whole stadium for her statement, Beyoncé performed at the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2016. Her part in the show left ambiguous feelings in the shocked audience. Beyoncé with her dancers were dressed in black in courtesy to the Black Panther Party. Their aggressive dances and moves also reminded the public about the Black Lives Matter movement. In the mid of the show, Beyoncé and the girls stood together in the shape of an X letter as homage to Malcolm X. Finally, Beyoncé's outfit looked like one of Michael Jackson's, when he also performed at the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 1993. Starting from her single "Formation" and proceeding with the provocative video, where she is atop of a half-drowned police car of New Orleans, this performance was the final stage of Beyoncé's formation as a political activist, who addresses racial inequality in the American society.

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<sup>1</sup> The American gay rights movement.



## CHAPTER 2. PROBLEM FIELD AND RESEARCH QUESTION

### 2.1 Precedents of Racial Inequality in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries

In Beyoncé's "Formation" there are various messages that has historical significance for the black society. The most influential visual and textual symbols refer to Hurricane Katrina, the Black Panther Party, Black Lives Matter, Malcolm X, and Mario Woods.

Malcolm X was an African-American Muslim minister and a human rights activist, who lived in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Named one of the most influential black personalities in the history, he was blamed for preaching racism, while he advocated the civil rights of the black community. In 1962, without being charged for police violence, LAPD officers raided a temple, where they shot seven Muslims. Malcolm X was appalled by this case. He called for both active response and collaboration with civil rights organizations, local politicians, and religious groups. Through his life, his main goal was to emphasize black self-determination and black self-defense.

In December 2015, another wave of violence and counter-actions emerged. The scandal arose when 10 police officers shot Mario Woods having a knife in his hand (Parry, 2015). The officers had information that an hour before Woods had stabbed a person. Such unnecessary and extreme measures were taken after the 26-year-old man refused to put down the knife. This dramatic event was filmed, posted in social media, and became viral in the condemning response. The case was seen as a precedent of racial hate and sprang the mass counter-effect.

Black Lives Matter actively responded to the case of Mario Woods. Moreover, they tracked the increasing number of police violence against black population before that case. The movement started in 2014 with social media responses to violence and resulted in numerous demonstrations that demanded the action against the unpunished police violence. The movement is known for peaceful demonstrations, where hundreds of people group together and stand up for justice. The result of this international activist movement is global awareness on the outrageous cases of racism and justice in practice, when some individuals guilty of violence or neglect are legally punished.

A similar example of movement against racial inequality is the Black Panther Party (BPP) that operated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Malcolm X inspired the founders and brought up the ideology of self-defense of the black community. Although some people attribute the BPP to the black equal to the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), the main focus of the party was bringing about social changes and providing security for the black community. Unlike lynchings of the KKK, the Black Panthers Party was a serious political and cultural force that spread the ideas of unity and resistance to oppression and brutality, including violent police actions, against African Americans. For this population, BPP was a great example of anti-racist movement being influential in making active changes.

## 2.2 Research Question

Although Beyoncé reminded the multi-million audiences about the good and bad past experience that marked the history of the black society in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, some skeptics see a double nature of her political involvement. A staff writer for *The Ringers*, commented on female celebrities and expressed her doubts about the intentions of political engagement of some activists. She stated, “For celebrities who have the privilege and freedom to choose comfortable silence instead, speaking up is both morally gratifying and [...] professionally advantageous” (2017). When it comes to speaking in public, one celebrity might aim to embrace bigger audience for personal purpose. Others have put their career to serve the needs of society.

Like Lady Gaga, Beyoncé took part in the Super Bowl Halftime Show. Unlike Gaga’s message, Beyoncé chose a more expressive way to raise awareness on the issues of the community that she represents. Her song “Formation” has made the public and the press erupt with comments and deliberations on her vision of political activism. The Huffington Post called this song “an overt celebration of Beyoncé’s blackness” (Blay, 2016); and this is only one of many critical assessments of Beyoncé’s song. Previously, she could sing “Who run the world – girls!” and it was universal as she supported all women regardless of race or class. Taking into consideration that Beyoncé did not express her racial concerns earlier, the lyrics and video of “Formation” require a close attention in order to define Beyoncé’s position as a political activist, who stand up against racial inequality.

The research question that this thesis will discover and answer: “In terms of textual and visual analysis of the text, video, and performance of the song "Formation," how does Beyoncé establish herself as a political activist?”

## CHAPTER 3. PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE. HERMENEUTICS

### 3.1 Introduction

In an attempt to define the signs of personal shift from a singer to a political activist, the messages that an individual sends require close attention. Beyoncé has recently become more aligned with political feminism and she addresses racial inequality. She made a shift from a pop star that in a capitalistic way pleases the audience for financial benefit. In 2016, she demonstrated a clear political content of her music and performance, which raised concerns in the public. The audience argued whether this political involvement is the continuation of her true entity tied with Blackness and everything that goes with it or her aspirations of her ulterior motive to win more appreciation for financial benefit.

The singer's latest song "Formation" is filled with textual and visual context that establishes her active political position regarding racial inequality and the role of women in making a stand against the current situation of the interracial issue. Every line of the lyrics contains symbols and messages peculiar for the black community, and they are widely recognizable with this population. The depth of the overall message is backed by visual art that like a visual presentation accompanies the text. The imagery constructed in the video, the background of the messages and symbols, and the effect that they could make needs investigation and interpretation. Moreover, while Beyoncé took part in Super Bowl Halftime Show, she finalized the volume of the message with an expressive staging of the song and overall performance during the show.

In order to read into the messages sent by the singer and an establishing political activist, a scientific approach should be used to interpret the messages and reveal the underlying motifs. Such science that has a potential to read the texts and visuals in depth is hermeneutics.

### 3.2 From Theological Reading to Modern Scientific Method

Miriam-Webster Dictionary defines hermeneutic as “the study of the methodological principles of interpretation (“Hermeneutic”). Hermeneutic can be both the science and the art of interpreting any type of communication, e.g. textual, visual, or audio. It was initially used to interpret Biblical writings. However, the intersections of various fields of study have proven that hermeneutic approaches have a bigger potential and can interpret a wide range of sources.

The historical track of hermeneutics goes deeper than Biblical times to the time of Greek and Roman polytheists. Their task was to correctly interpret the messages that Hermes (who gave the name to science) passed from gods to people. The theological application of hermeneutics is called exegesis. What differs exegesis from hermeneutics is that the latter aims to find out significance and connotations of words in different contexts starting from sentence and finishing with the whole book.

In order to interpret the Biblical texts, the hermeneutic approach searched for the data to fill in the context through seven main questions (Mantzavinos, 2016). “Who?” explained the background of the author. “What?” meant to explain the subject matter of the examined text. “Why?” searched for the reasons behind foundation of the text. “How?” explained the way the text was composed. “When?” revealed the peculiarities of time, when the text was written or published. “Where?” added a geographical point of understanding. Finally, “By which means?” the text was created.

With the progress of this science, hermeneutic has gradually become a social research method. The domain of hermeneutics was extended to the study that took an in-depth look at every act or process by means of interpretation of verbal and non-verbal communication. Hermeneutics describes the process of analysis as the hermeneutic circle. This metaphor explains seeing a whole through details and seeing details through a whole. Any “text” needs “reading” in order to have a general understanding of it. Further, a closer look at parts of this text results in a better understanding of the parts. Next, better understanding of constituents of the text redefines the initial understanding of a whole text, and so on. The hermeneutic approach allows the reader to enter this circular process, immerse into the depth of the context, and find out the genuine sense of the source. Importantly, the hermeneutic circle never ends, whenever the reader turns to the text again. This peculiarity stems from the contextual variable that affects understanding. Personal development, social events, and other factors expand the range of tools

that help interpret the text. By studying the context and the culture, the background and purpose of messages can be defined through hermeneutic approach by analyzing texts and visuals (Mantzavinos, 2016).

### 3.3 Textual Hermeneutics

The background of hermeneutic analysis implies that the human experience of the world is full of meaning. Any attempt to understand the world is based on history, culture, events and relationships with other people (Van Manen, 2014). Social actors develop the symbolism of the social world and there is no single understanding of texts, events, or phenomena as every context is unique and subjective.

The main task of hermeneutics is to interpret the social world, which already has symbolic meaning. Interpretation, or explanation, is the way to understand better. Therefore, the internal structure of the text is the main focus of interpretation. In a more extensive meaning, hermeneutic approach explores and analyzes the “lifeworld” of people by using a qualitative method of interpretation to collect information. Understanding the culture and context is a hard task for the researcher as underpinning the genuine nature or intentions require an analysis and insights. Being in the same cultural context greatly helps providing hermeneutic analysis of textual information full of symbolic terms. Nonetheless, the qualitative analysis will always remain subjective having no rigorous and standardized data collection and interpretation.

For interpretation of Beyoncé's text, understanding a community as a target audience is essential. In order to make the lyrics of “Formation” political, the text must be designed and conceptualized in accordance with the cultural peculiarities of the black community. Moreover, a special slang, phrases of particular importance, mentioned events, etc. should be reflected in the text in order to actualize the target audience. On the other hand, a political statement may refer not only to formation of the black community. Therefore, the analysis could reveal more generalized symbols that non-black population will easily understand. The hermeneutical approach interprets the units of importance and has a potential to define the purpose of using these units in the text.

### 3.4 Visual Hermeneutics

Visuals are not empty signifiers. The meanings of visual signs vary and to construct a political imagery, a political activist must be aware of the symbolic meaning of images that they may have for the society. Paul Ricoeur stated that hermeneutics could be more than reading of theological writings and writings as such. He claimed that hermeneutics could be applied to any human activity. On visual hermeneutics, he investigated the meaning of an image as highlighted that images do not send messages alone. Instead, an individual and his background are the determinative characteristics that affect perception of images or “matter of the text” that comes from the dialogue between the mind and the image (Ricoeur, 1981: 11). Ricoeur’s hermeneutic approach can be extended from static images to dynamic representation that Beyoncé constructs through her video and live performance. To construct a political message, a political activist should take into consideration that “iconic consciousness occurs when an aesthetically shaped materiality signifies social value” (Kaplantzis, 2015:15). Political images reflect social knowledge and dominant ideologies; certain visual representation evokes specific events and periods in mind; they also outline potential action by modelling relationships between participants of political events; finally, political images give resources for thought to encourage formation of active citizenship and participation in the necessary forms of collective life.

Ricoeur’s perspective on visual hermeneutic bears a contributive potential for defining political context of the visuals. As Kaplantzis writes, “Political iconography implies a critical ‘reading’ of imagery and aims at studying the identification, description, and interpretation of the content of images.” Visual hermeneutic allows revealing a political message behind the expressive visual presentation of Beyoncé’s song “Formation.”

## CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Given the rising trend of celebrities' involvement in political activism, some personalities raise concern whether the intentions aim to help the community or this kind of engagement is just a way to reach personal goals. Moreover, in the light of racial inequality that emerges in the American society, political activism performed by celebrities is requested and expected.

In order to understand the intentions of an establishing political activist, his or her actions require an approach that enables reading into the context behind the text. Hermeneutic approach provides well-established techniques for making a qualitative analysis.

In the current work, I investigated the symbols of Beyoncé's song "Formation" through hermeneutic circle and applied theoretical background on musical activism and embodied political argument. I aimed to find out whether Beyoncé's work coincides with the criteria described in these two types of political engagement.

The first stage was to extract the symbolic meanings from the lyrics, video, and life performance of an artist. I used Google search engine and Google Scholar to find out articles on symbolic representation of Beyoncé's "Formation." The sources that met the inclusive criteria were books, popular magazines and newspapers like The Guardian or The Huffington Post, and online critics by scholars.

The research allowed finding symbols and repetitive themes in all three types of content, which provided a substantial background for taking position in answering the research question. Most critics agree with the political nature of Beyoncé's "Formation;" though, others have several reservations regarding the singer's origin and capitalist intentions.

Having elucidated the context broken down into themes, hermeneutic circle with questions "Who?," "What?," "Why?," "How?," "When?," "Where?," and "By which means?" structured the themes into meaningful background for further analysis.



Finally, I described the background, context, and impact of Beyoncé's "Formation" plan examples of political engagement. All the features of each idea, i.e. musical activism and embodied political argument, found its representation in the studied material on the basis of symbolic context highlighted in the song, video, and performance.

## CHAPTER 5. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

### 5.1 Racial Equality and Racial Inequality

The ideal relationships of all the groups without any signs of superiority or oppression have never been reached in any society of the world. When the unity of groups cannot be reached to a satisfying extent, the issue of racial inequality arises. The problem of racial inequality has been the issue of the American society since the roots of the state. Racial equality is defined as “the belief that individuals, regardless of their racial characteristics, are morally, politically, and legally equal and should be treated as such” (“Racial Equality”). In the United States, this issue refers to legal support, equal opportunities, and access to education, employment, politics, etc. Thomas M. Shapiro defined racial inequality as “imbalances in the distribution of power, economic resources, and opportunities” (2004: 33). He also named the dimensions of racial inequality that refer to the American society in particular. The named imbalances emerge at the level of wealth, poverty rates, housing patterns, access to education, unemployment, and incarceration rates. As the society revolves, the gap between the white and non-white society does not become narrower. Vice versa, the disparity grows making the non-white communities mobilize at any point of the American history.

#### 5.1.1 Distribution of Wealth

Wealth means “the total value of things families own minus their debts” as well as “earnings from work, interest and dividends, pensions, and transfer payments” (Shapiro, Maschede, & Osoro, 2013). Money, wealth, income, or in other words, the opportunity to earn is a crucial factor that provides access to most amenities that make up the quality of life. Wealth defines the class status in the society and measures the level of poverty between groups.

Regarding disparities in wealth, White Americans reside on unreachable heights that the majority of non-white society can only dream of. Elvin Oliver and Thomas Shapiro estimated a black-to-white wealth and concluded that the ratio was 1-to-11. The Great Recession was a dramatic turn in income for the American society; however, what the statistics shows proves even more dramatic state of

affairs. While the ratio was about 1-to-11 in 2004, the aftermath of the crisis resulted in 1-to-20 in 2009 (Kochhar, Fry, & Taylor, 2011). In percentage, black population lost 53% of wealth, while the white part of Americans lost about 16% (Bobo, 2013).

### 5.1.2 Housing

Even though representatives of the black society might have a controlled income, the wealth gap explains the difference in the ratio of home owners. In 1983 through 2013, African Americans showed the figure of not less and not more than 45% of homeowners. Although white Americans showed a negligible increase by 1%, their number greatly exceeds – 69% (Pathe, 2013).

For those who have homes, residential segregation as an intended separation of residential locations of various groups has been historically implemented which resulted in black ghettos and cities and wealthy areas. This was the practice of Redlining that secluded minority race locations and marked them as risky for investments or renting (Taylor, 2016: 64). Such policy created the gap in the wealth of locations, income level of its residents, and interest in investments. Aaronson highlighted that neighborhood organizations and local authorities had in mind restrictive covenants and segregated locations to establish the order and foster racial exclusion shared as a key principle among homeowners, realtors, and mortgage lenders (Aaronson, 2014: 105-106). Nowadays historically determined locations are divided into suburbs as a favorable location for white populations, while inner city populations belonged to racial minorities.

### 5.1.3 Poverty

Apart from income distribution and peculiarities of housing, the American society has shown a significant difference between the black and white representatives regarding poverty. In 2009, 9.9% of white Americans were unemployed while the figure for the black unemployed people was threefold. The level of disproportion portrays the state of racial inequality in the American society and “the black-white racial divide remains as central to American life as it has been for centuries” (Irvin, Miller & Sanger-Katz, 2014).

The statistical data that tracks the changes in the level of poverty proves decrease in poverty for the black society but the contrast with the white society is striking. In 1980, the proportion of people living

below the poverty line was 32.5%. In 2012, the black community decreased the number to 27.2% compared to 12.7% of poor white population (Irvin, Miller, & Sanger-Katz, 2014).

#### 5.1.4 Education

Education is tied not only with the current state of inequality but also named to be a long-term reason to it (Bertocci & Dimico, 2014). After the Civil War, ex-slaves had no or very limited access to education that quantitatively and qualitatively had insufficient funding. Several uneducated generations shaped the black community. Moreover, the percentage of slaves across the states is tied with current racial inequality in school attainment.

The American students greatly rely on funding for public education which is based on local property taxes and varies depending on neighborhoods and districts. Given the mentioned residential segregation and concentration of poor populations, taxes vary creating unequal opportunities for different locations and communities. Urban and suburban schools offer different opportunities, facilities, and programs for students. In result, educational level shapes a different demand for unskilled and skilled labor. In fact, even though white and black representatives may have the same level of education, the latter population has a greater level of unemployment. In 2013, 5.7% of unemployed African Americans outnumbered the whites whose unemployment rate was 3.5% (Irvin, Miller & Sanger-Katz, 2014).

#### 5.1.5 Crimes and Incarceration

Disparities between the races continue and affect legal side of the racial inequality. Dr. Chenelle A. Jones declares that “the criminal justice system is not broken, it was designed that way” (2013). The criminal justice system was designed and applied mainly to control certain layers of the society and maintain racial inequalities since inception.

In the system of “justice,” the reasons of incarceration are significant and systematic. Poverty is the main reason that lays the path to prison. Several researches prove that financially unprotected black people have a greater rate of incarceration. Poor and unemployed people are more likely to be imprisoned and have longer sentences. Moreover, given similar circumstances, white offenders are imprisoned less often than the minor populations (Gallagher, 2014: 192-203).

Racial profiling is not only another reason, but one of the most disturbing issues that shook the American society and caused the counter-effect. Racial profiling is known as actions initiated by police officers on the basis of the race or ethnicity. Ferguson is the case when racial profiling had reached its extremes and created the Ferguson effect that stretched over years. Bob Lonsberry, an American radio talk show host, commented on this:

America does not trust black people to respond to a legal decision peacefully, and that is the result of either a horrific stereotype about black people, or horrific conduct by black people. Either way, we've got a problem. (Fisher & Lowery, 2014).

### 5.1.6 Media Racism

Although racism and racial inequality have always been present, media have made this issue more acute. The violence that is present in the conflict has become more articulated as it “pushed its way into the mainstream of white America” (Hargadon, 2015). The news media is a form of media influence that drives the mass mind into the desired direction. Moreover, “in those cases in which audiences do not possess direct knowledge or experience of what is happening, they become particularly reliant upon the media to inform them” (Happer & Philo, 2013: 321). Moreover, media has the power to shape behavior and mindset that makes an individual take one or another side in dispute. The black versus white representation has become so common that what initially would be understood as racism nowadays is tolerated in the white population. Basically, media are to be responsible for the positive and negative perception of whiteness and blackness. Racial inequality and hate does not root out from the American society. Vice versa, it roots into the mindset through various platforms of influence.

## 5.2 Political Activism

### 5.2.1 Introduction

A political activist is an individual, who actively stepped in political discourse to promote, impede, or raise awareness on disturbing issues. Political activism starts with voting; but it includes other forms that are more active in contrast with a rare act of voting. In contrast to passive involvement, activism

requires a clear understanding of the issue, having developed opinion, and working itself for the sake of changes that help reach the desired changes.

Every year the degree of political engagement rises. The American society remembers such cases as the American Revolution, the women's suffrage movement, the fights of civil rights in the 1960s, the resistance to wars, etc. 2017 has already shown numerous cases of political activism and establishes new influential platforms for political activism. James Pindell proclaimed, "We are living in America's golden age of political activism" (2017). One of the examples is the presidential inauguration that caused mass anger with thousands of demonstrators and Saturday's women's marches. What differs this era of political involvement is the volume of participants who, one of another way, contribute to the process of changes. At the time of total digitalization, being aware of events and tendencies is a matter of one click and several scrolls. Moreover, the political system itself does not seem to be reliable anymore as it does not address disturbing issues in a meaningful way.

The golden age of political activism started in 2009. Since then, the years were marked by such political efforts as Tea Party movement, gun control debates, Occupy movements, protests that supported Black Lives Matter, counter-protest of Blue Lives Matter, etc. The previous generation had a personal duty to be politically active which is basically considered passive and partially laid the basis to current crisis in civics. The three forms of activism anyone could perform were watching television for news, voting, and mailing to congressional representative if incensed (Zuckerman, 2013). Nowadays, political activism is a matter of people of any political background practiced by means of technological progress and disseminated through available platforms of influence.

### 5.2.2 Musical Activism: Ideology. Framing. Dissemination

Political activism requires involvement of two sides of the process of change, where activists support and encourage the society and the latter needs activists to address disturbing issues. There is often a movement or a certain kind of bigger organization that backs the needs of the communities. However, persuasive personalities as "faces" of social and political organizations are the key asset in making advancements. In terms of relationship between the main stakeholders, i.e. activists and society, ideology, framing, and dissemination define activism.

In order to engage the public attention, activism requires framing ideology. Ideology is a system of existing symbols, values, and beliefs and “ideology functions as a cultural resource from which social actors draw ideas, values and beliefs” (Corte & Edwards, 2008: 9). Its core function is to find pre-existing cultural peculiarities and meaningful background that allow distinguishing and articulating the target audience. Embedded symbols, shared within the target audience, unite people on the basis of building common ground. Framing involves production of meaning or significance of the idea that social movement activist aims to construct the presentation of alarming issues. The primary goal of framing is to get attention to issues in a presented format and draw support. Framing and ideology are interconnected as they present the basis and progress of the matters. Ideology is the state of the issue, while framing outlines the meaning and purpose of social or political change.

Activists use music to express and communicate ideas through framing, where lyrics are an effective medium of propaganda. Music with lyrics is a persuasive form of influence as it has the rhyming structure that allows memorizing and reconstructing the text word by word. Emotions have a significant role in receiving the messages. Music is a form of a personal and collective influence. At an individual level, the song resonates with personality and finds emotional response. Having different cultural and personal background, the listener will find one or another song amusing, disturbing, appalling, etc. The collective level of perception allows constructing the feelings of belonging to a particular community. Given that “personally owned and intimately tied to our sense of being, music can penetrate our minds, souls and bodies through rhythm and lyrics in ways and to an extent to which we are not fully aware” (Corte & Edwards, 2008), music is an influential form of influence in the hands of political activists. Dissemination of movement ideas lies in the same level of perception. On the personal level, the ideas are accepted or rejected. On the collective level, ideas shape the invigorated community that shares the ideology and is ready to participate.

#### 5.2.2.1 Three Elements of Framing

Basic notion of political activism is defined by three factors that coincide with political activism through music. In the search of public response, music is oppositional, authentic, and persecuted (Corte & Edwards, 2008: 10-13). Music activism represents a form of dissent to the current order. The tone of resistance differentiates the music of political and social context and defines its authenticity opposed to

the mainstream. Regarding opposition to mainstream, rebellion music is different as it does not project the ideology provided by framing. The second factor is authenticity that highlights the genuine aspiration of an activist to be a part of the changing process rather than benefit on the worrying themes that emerge within the society. Authenticity lies in the dimension of devotion as musical activists are “true believers in the cause and unwilling to compromise” (Corte & Edwards, 2008: 11). This side of authenticity evolved into the last factor – persecution. While legal persecution is not a common case for musical activists, representation of certain communities affects the musician and income. Given the artist is very popular and publicly wants to support an oppressed community, the mainstream backlash will have a wide range of consequences, from negative media coverage to a form of boycott.

### 5.2.3 Practicing Embodied Political Arguments

Arguments are mainly considered in terms of verbal communication when an interlocutor provides a rationale that supports a discussed idea. However, nonverbal arguments are an influential tool in delivering political messages. Jason Del Gandio (2015) states the importance of political arguments and highlights the strategies in making a successful political argument.

While performing acts of resistance, embodied argumentation allows activists critique the existent norms while presenting the alternatives. Moreover, argumentation is personalized and represents a personal perspective of an activist or a group of activists on the matter. Finally, political argumentation attracts wide audience. Embodied argumentation is an act of “civil disobedience and direct action ... in order to highlight and challenge social injustices” (Del Gandio, 2015).

Despite the disruptive nature of embodied argument practiced throughout the history, the elements of this act coincide with the desired effect that a political activism aims to reach through music and performance. The first important factor is location that will attract bigger attention. Used for rhetorical effect, the meaning of location must resonate with the meaning of the campaign.

While revealing the sides of political arguments, Del Gandio (2015) goes on with costumes and refers to the Black Panther Party and the Black Power Movement. They were strategically dressed in props and costumes to promote the image of a black person. He notes, “Their black berets, black leather



jackets, and naturally grown afros signified “all black, all the time,” “be black, be proud,” and “black is beautiful”” (Del Gandio, 2015).

Another factor is embodied exaggeration. The value of performance is partially delivered through exaggerated body movements. The expressive nature of acting highlights the message and invigorates the plot. In terms of street actions that the author describes, exaggeration refers to moves and oversize objects that attract the attention of casual observers and invite to watch the show.

In spite of an expressive engagement against the disturbing issue, participants should not become overrepresented in the action. The main goal of a participant is to become the medium that delivers the bigger message. The way that the medium participates must not distract the audience as well as drive the focus away or raise other concerns. The message is focused and lucid.

Finally, a successful act of embodied arguments includes signifiers and marking a message. Well-designed signifiers actualize the attention of audience and summarize the ideological statements. In the possible ambiguity of theatrical presentation, signifiers attract public attention and allows elucidating the core of the act.

## CHAPTER 6. ANALYSIS

### 6.1 Introduction

“Formation” revealed a more progressive and aggressive side of Beyoncé for her fans, for the American society, for the black community, and for the rest of the world. The song also attracts the attention of pop-music scholars, who believe in “the linked and multivalent roles that music plays within larger shifts in American political and social life” (Hughes, 2016: 1033). “Formation” has made the society to have a close look at Beyoncé and reconsider her role. This song reminded the public that Beyoncé is not only a singer and a cosmopolitan woman, but also a representative of the African Americans community, who has the power of voice in all its meanings.

Despite the fact that the black and the white communities have lived side by side for centuries, the culture of African Americans has not lost its uniqueness. The peculiarities of the culture and communication develop a system of symbols and messages that are easily recognizable by representatives of African Americans. Though, for the white society, some signs and words do not stand for any meaning or message. In a sense, “It is us, it’s for us, and it’s not concerned if white people understand” (McFadden, 2016). Consequently, Beyoncé has used her background to put in words her political position and make a statement about the “formation” of the community that she represents and be more persistent in supporting the matter of blackness.

Taking into account that the target audience of “Formation” is black populations, the majority of society was left hesitant, not to say terrified, as the lyrics sent an ambiguous and unclear message for those outside the black culture. A bright example of this fear being spoken out is the TV show “Real Time with Bill Maher”. While the invited guest Killer Mike, being as African American, defends Beyoncé’s political and love-all rather than violent position, Bill Maher says with a smile on his face, “What she sang was [...] ‘ladies, time to get in formation’ which means kill whites. I think we all know it” (@Real Time with Bill Maher, 2016: 2:23). In order to define whether Beyoncé has taken an active position and became a political activist, a textual analysis of the lyrics along with visual messages from video clip and live presentation of the song at the halftime Super Bowl 50 Show are needed.

## 6.2 Themes of Textual Analysis

The reason why Beyoncé's political activism can be examined by the lyrics of the song "Formation" is that she wrote most of the text. Basically, four lyricists took part in the creative process: Asheton Hogan, Mike Will Made It, Swae Lee, and Beyoncé. However, as Mike Will explained, she did the most part of work on her own or inspired by other participants. No one but Beyoncé could write about her origins, examples from life like hot sauce, and details about her family. Other writers gave the hints that Beyoncé polished off to a statement. In the finished look of lyrics, the song tells the audience about the unique black culture, draws attention to articulating Black Pride, and highlights the pints and ways of social upheaval.

### 6.2.1 Culture

Culture is one of the main themes found in the text. Certain symbols are recognized within one culture and left behind outside it. "Formation" uses food symbols and a matter of security to differentiate her audience.

One of cultural peculiarities of the black culture is a constant feeling of insecurity. She sings, "Earned all this money, but they never take the country out me / I got hot sauce in my bag, swag." Despite the wealthy present, the singer has distinct black roots. Carrying a hot sauce in her bag is not a literary use of words but a kind of self-protection every southerner has to be ready to use in the neighborhood. This is a justified fact used once again from the time of an HBO movie *Lemonade*, where Beyoncé hit a car with a baseball bat named "hot sauce" (Figure 1). The repeated use of this line states her origins and reminds that she will not stand back defending herself and her community.

Beyoncé collaborated with Big Freedia to add the "southern taste" to the song. Big Freedia sings, "I like cornbreads and collard greens, bitch / Oh, yes, you besta believe it." Freedia gave an interview to *The Fader*, where she told about the purpose of their collaboration (Tanzer, 2016). She explained that only a true southerner knows what the best foods for them are. Cornbread and collard greens are more like food emblems as a message that would hit only the target audience but would mean little to nothing to a "bylistener." Beyoncé once again articulates the audience in the call for formation. She

feels no need in explaining the others the symbolic depth of her messages (Arzumanova, 2016: 422). The more specific features she notices, the more “her” public will nod in appreciation.

### 6.2.2 Black Pride

The singer makes space in the text to history and her origins. The lines say, “My daddy Alabama, momma Louisiana / You mix that negro with that Creole, make a Texas bama.” By naming Alabama and Louisiana, Beyoncé refers to the Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton. In his autobiographic book *Revolutionary Suicide*, he wrote the same words, “Both of my parents were born in the Deep South, my father in Alabama and my mother in Louisiana” (Newton, 2009: 9). “Bama” was initially used for slang-style naming working class of blacks who went North from the South at the time of the Great Migration (Bradley, 8 march, 2016). In other words, bama is someone unimportant for the white society. Self-celebration is a part of Black Pride that Beyoncé wants to foster, when she has drawn the attention of her audience.

The idea of “illuminati” included in the text might seem out of the context from the first sight. The line goes, “Y'all haters corny with that Illuminati mess.” According to Conspiracy Theorists, some celebrities of high success are accused of involvement in this organization. However, such statement is an attempt to diminish the talents and accomplishments of Beyoncé and her husband as they are frequently accused of being illuminati. Negative attitude towards illuminati attributed to successful black singers psychologically build up overall negative attitude towards the singers. Beyoncé addresses this false generalization which is nothing but racism fostered in the white society.

On the other hand, Beyoncé's articulation of the target audience fails at some point, when she states her Creole origins. Yaba Blay, a black-skinned researcher from New Orleans, points out, “Even in the midst of her Blackest Blackity Black Blackness, we find remnants of anti-Blackness” (2016). In the historical perspective, Creole representatives were the born mixes of African, French, Spanish, or Native American people. Having much lighter skin than “negros,” Creoles had more allowances in the society, e.g. easier access to education. When Beyoncé highlights her phenotypical specifics, she might have a reverse effect. Historically, before Jim Crow, Afro-Creoles and African Americans were two races with different allowances, statuses, and wealth. Surprisingly, both Creoles and whites discriminated African Americans (Washington, 2016: 136). Although Beyoncé's experience as an

activist is too short to take into account all the peculiarities of engaging most populations, a political activist who takes on a mission to back the interests of black people can have any complexion. Moreover, pride in origins that Beyoncé highlights is a part of her formation plan about the black community.

### 6.2.3 Points of Upraise

Intro and Interlude of the song include Messy Mya and Big Freedia as a tribute to other members of her society. Writer Dr. Zandra Robinson commented on this decision at New South Negress, “At her limits, the voices and presence of gender queer folks enter to take over. They, in fact, ask of us the toughest questions.” In particular, Messy Mya originated from New Orleans and was killed.

The text of a song starts right with “demand.” The first two lines of the song revive the unaddressed issue of New Orleans, “What happened at the New Wil’ins? / Bitch, I’m back by popular demand.” One of the deadliest hurricanes crushed on the lands of New Orleans. The question originally comes from Messy Mya’s video “Booking the Hoes from New Wildin’.” The resolution of the catastrophic event never came to restore the area. The question has been raised many times and Beyoncé has put across this “popular demand” once again.

While the lyrics look aggressive and her style becomes more articulated with demands, Beyoncé highlights the only appropriate way to reach the desired. She teaches, “You know you that bitch when you cause all this conversation / Always stay gracious, best revenge is your paper.” As she says “your paper,” the singer speaks about achievements and not involvement in ungracious scandals. In terms of a leader to follow, Beyoncé has hardly ever been involved in scandals that she would enter. Her personal success is that “paper” that she earned and teaches others. Responding to things like her light color of skin or being illumine is lower than her dignity. This corrective ethics aims to change the generalized image about her community that would decrease the cases of profiling and stereotyping.

Beyoncé is a living example of success that speaks for itself. At her heights of achievements and wealthy, she can state, “You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, 'cause I slay / I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making.” She uses the same phrase deliberately shifting from “you” to “I.” Her success is nothing but her work and she wants to do more as she sings after, “I dream it, I work

hard, I grind 'til I own it.” Although she is unlikely to reach the financial heights of Bill Gates, mentioning him might mean reaching a similar revolutionary potential that she aims and that everyone should aim to make the black community prosper. Gates is also a well-known philanthropist. Therefore, another parallel between him and Beyoncé is their philanthropic aspirations. On the date of “Formation” release, Tidal<sup>2</sup> donated \$1.5 million to support Black Lives Matter and some more organizations. At the same time, Beyoncé announced the beginning of her tour and engagement in the local United Way programs that supports underserved populations in numerous ways. Engagement in social projects, donations, and the power of her voice to raise concerns is what defines her as a political activist.

Term “slay” along with her more aggressive style that she has been gradually developing highlight her call for formation. “Slay” first appeared in the gay population of African American community. Later, this term gained a meaning of success or dominance and won a widespread popularity in the American society. This is a clear call for action. The white dominance is the past time that has to be changed. She calls for the black women to get together and slay. Women have the right to be active in bringing about social justice and liberation. This kind of “slay” that the white society drags can be explained properly only by someone who represents the culture, knows all names of southern terms, and gets Beyoncé’s message and is ready for action which is not Maher’s “kill whites”. Zandria F. Robinson<sup>3</sup> goes through the lines and what lies between them:

“Formation, is a different kind of resistance practice, one rooted in the epistemology of (and sometimes only visible/detectable to) folks on the margins of blackness. [...] Formation, then, is a metaphor, a black feminist, black queer, and black queer feminist theory of community organizing and resistance. [...] For the black southern majorettes, across gender formulations, formation is the alignment, the stillness, the readying, the quiet, before the twerk, the turn-up, the (social) movement. To be successful, there must

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<sup>2</sup> TIDAL is a subscription-based music streaming service owned by Beyonce’s husband, Jay-Z

<sup>3</sup> Zandria F. Robinson is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and an alumna of the University of Memphis.

be coordination, the kind that choreographers and movement leaders do, the kind that black women organizers do in neighborhoods and organizations. To slay the violence of white supremacist heteropatriarchy, we must start, Beyoncé argues, with the proper formation". (Robinson, 2016)

When the audience hears, "Okay, okay, ladies, now let's get in formation, I slay," it hears the words "in formation" merging into "information." Together, these words constitute the way black society should slay – get information, get educated, and get advantage. In terms of racial segregation mentioned in the theoretical part, this is a clear political statement to eliminate racial disparities.

## 6.3 Visual Analysis

Beyoncé's text resembles a folk-style speech that calls for dignity, pride in origins, and unique culture with particular appearance that differs from the mainstream culture of the white society. The lyrics also draw some guidelines for action including no confrontation on the way to racial equality but prosperity instead as well as the singer exposes her success to highlight that the audience should "grind it" to thrive.

The next phase of "Formation" as a part of "formation-plan" is visual support that in its disturbing form ought to shake the black community for action and remind the white population and government that the cases of unaddressed injustice are not forgotten. In the visual presentation, Beyoncé once again stresses the unique aspects of the black culture, refers to Hurricane Katrina and police brutality, and makes meaningful claims.

### 6.3.1 Black Culture

The video unveils numerous layers of images and symbols peculiar to a black Southern vernacular and aesthetic. Syreeta McFadden, a writer for The Guardian, catalogued this vernacular imagery:

"Creole and Black American, Mardi Gras Indian, crawfish, Black cowboys, wig shops, socks and slippers, corsets and parasols, parades, high school basketball, step team moves, bounce queens Big Freedia and Messy Mya, cotillions, "twirl on dem haters",

braids, “bama”, black spirituality (church and hoodoo, maybe even a nod to Mami Wata), black mama side eyes, drawls, Blue Ivy (Figure 2) black girl magic fierceness.” (2016)

McFadden shows that for non-black community these aesthetic symbols and cultural legacy will be alien and strange. These are the intangible threads that unite all black people in a close community based on their culture. Moreover, inadequate police actions, governmental misguidance, centuries of oppression and then years of neglect serve the same role – these dramatic facts unite the black community even more.

The critics of visuals consider the setting to be absolutely inappropriate for political statements. Harris lists Beyoncé’s children being placed in a perfect house, her dancers in denim at an empty parking lot, or swimming pool and women in cheerleader’s outfit, etc. (Figure 3). In the article “Here’s the Problem With Beyoncé’s ‘Formation’ Video,” Harris expresses doubts, “It isn’t a political statement of much coherence or purpose” (2016). However, the visual representation of the “blackness” takes the list provided by McFadden and goes beyond. Beyoncé opens the rich though marginalized world of old and new south in its darkness and dirty manner. The range of Beyoncé and her dancer’s outfits is a cross cut of centuries with Chantilly lace, light denim, off-white full-length dresses, provocative red body, a cheerleader uniform, etc. The south is also represented in the gothic versus bounce styles. As a kind of popular art and a political statement, “Formation” presents a female position in social justice movement by gathering the pieces of a cultural puzzle for the representative to take pride in. By fostering the sense of personal dignity and Black Pride, Beyoncé would implement one of the points of the political campaigns if she took on a political career.

### 6.3.2 Hurricane Katrina

The video clip begins with Beyoncé on top of a half-drowned police car in the mid of a flooded area with houses around. With this scene that sets the mood, the singer recreates the dramatic natural disaster of Hurricane Katrina that took place in New Orleans (Figure 4). Notably, this area is home for a black community that suffered from this catastrophe yet was not treated properly in need. Importantly, the half-drowned car is not just a generalized representation of law or justice, the writing on the door states New Orleans Police. As the government failed to protect the Americans of color, the



event became a pivotal point for revelation of the disturbing issue of racism and racial inequality. The flood washed away homes, lives, and security of many people as well as filled up the cup of patience of thousands of unaddressed people in New Orleans and other representatives across the nation. One of the side effects of this no-return point is the establishment of Black Lives Matter of people who continuously suffer from injustice and race profiling.

The Outro unites the beginning and the end of the song with Beyoncé on the car once again, both going underwater. The finishing lines refer to *Trouble The Water*, a 2008 documentary that poses a borderline of Hurricane Katrina and how it affected the society. The repercussions of the changes have never been solved. Therefore, even now, many years later, Beyoncé goes underwater with words from the movie, “Girl, I hear some thunder Golly, look at that water, boy, oh lord.”

### 6.3.3 Police Brutality

Notably, Beyoncé refers to Black Lives Matter. The video gained a great portion of criticism from the public for escalating the degree of hate between the police and the black community as well as interracial hate as a whole. Obviously, this reference is essential in the political message as Black Lives Matter is the key link in the chain of cause-effect events in the history of racial inequality. The movement activity is the reaction of the black community against racial profiling and police violence in a range of “legitimate” allowances including killing black people. There can be nothing more convincing of peaceful intentions that the wall sign saying “Stop Shooting Us” (Figure 5) and a dancing black boy who unarms a coordinated assembly of soldiers (Figure 6). However, the fear that the black aggression is able to evoke makes people come to unexpected conclusions. U.S. Representative Peter King concluded that the claim “Stop Shooting Us” looked very similar to N.W.A uttering “Fuck the Police” (Ex, 2016).

Despite emerging critics of Beyoncé’s formation as a political activist through “Formation,” the singer supports her messages with actions outside her career as an artist. In terms of this matter, critics, political engagement of other singers, and Beyoncé’s contributions justify her full formation for actions. Brandon Harris from Indie Wire has shown no insights into the true messages behind the provocative video. His critics is based on the illusion of importance as the “use of evocative symbols of black pride does not constitute political intent” (Harris, 2016). Although he admits that Beyoncé’s multi-

million donation to homeless shelter in Houston to, he attributes much more importance to monetary influence than her musical call for formation.

### 6.3.4 Formation Claims

Dr. Naila Keleta-Maye, a professor of Theatre and Performance at the University of Waterloo comments visual messages sent through Beyoncé's video as political. While researching race, gender, and performance, she can critically assess Beyoncé's latest work, when she says that "Formation is a master class in how pop artists can clearly articulate political views that differ from the mainstream without being labelled didactic and marginalized by the media" (2016). The researcher acknowledges the work of everyone in making of the video and states that the outcome has a perfect look and delivery potential. She also mentions capitalism having a different perspective on this issue. Keleta-Maye notes a complex meditation on female blackness where African-American women have a specific perception of femininity and feminism. In terms of capitalism, the notion of obtaining is not the "fuss" about having but the state of racial appreciation, when a black person can reach the desired heights. "Formation" represents a political pop-song video based on Beyoncé's marketing and business intelligence. In the capitalistic society, where she struggles for justice, Beyoncé has the unique ability to send the political messages and hold the mainstream attention. Her capitalist insights of a successful businesswoman who earns by singing and performing has eventually brought her to the Super Bowl 50 halftime show, where millions of people could get her message in an expressive way as it was possible.

Apart from all the points that make up imagery of the video, Dr. Keleta-Maye comments on the symbolism of a car that goes underwater. In her vision, women empowered to make changes can make the system comply and "police cars sink under the weight of female blackness" (Keleta-Maye, 2016).

Despite the active position of one who can lead others, a writer Charing Ball doubts in Beyoncé's political motives, "Despite the song's (and visual's) political overtones, Beyoncé nor her dance moves offered us very little in the way of urgency or even a call to arms – other than a reminder to purchase tickets to her likely corporate sponsored world tour" (2016). "Way of urgency" of a singer is an ability to draw the audience's attention that will make the masses awake or "wake" as it is popular to say. What Beyoncé has greatly benefitted from is "success within the culture industry [able] to invoke an otherness and to then – urgently – make that otherness palatable, legible, and, of course, commercially

portable” (Arzumanoza, 2016: 422). Beyoncé’s political activism does not diminish her power of voice as a singer and an artist. Nor her activism makes her an expert in shaping the policies or “call to arms.” Charing Ball justifies her comment by Beyoncé’s list that makes up welfare of a capitalist: Givenchy dress, looking gracious, having a house and education, etc. This argument is turned against Beyoncé rather than aimed to reach others as a desired plan. The black community should not be thankful for small favours. The level of racial inequality makes possible for a very little percentage of people to thrive *despite* the system. Except for the Givenchy dress, the list is a must have for everyone in the society with equal rights. Who, if not Beyoncé, who reached her success on her own can be a political activist and an advocate for her community in the American society, where celebrities and wealthy people have a power of voice and one of the most influential platform to be heard.

## 6.4 Visual Themes in Live Performance

The lyrics were composed as an informative statement and video added up disturbing images to energize the effect. The final part of Beyoncé’s process of formation took place at the Super Bowl Halftime show, where she added emotional touch and expressiveness to her message. The effect of Beyoncé’s performance was immediate and immense. She succeeded in resonating with the public and made people speak. Chris Perez from New York Post tracked the feedback of social media and stated that only Tweeter users placed about 147,000 posts per minute during the disturbing performance (Perez, 2010). The meaning of her life performance differed from ones of lyrics and video. Beyoncé and her dancers had a particular look to do several points of homage to important social and political personalities and movements. The analysis presents the symbols that Beyoncé uses while her performance and offers several points of critics that place the artist closer to or farther from establishing herself as a political activist.

### 6.4.1 Visual Messages

Dr. Sandra Trappen, who specializes in social inequality, had a particular interest in Beyoncé’s latest work seeing a political message to convey in her performance. The outfit of the singer and the dancers not only make the first impression of the aggressive looks but also give multiple honors. All wearing

black and Beyoncé with bandolier of bullets sent the political message to millions of spectators. All dressed in black, the ladies gave a reference to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Black Panther Party. Beyoncé has shown a clear understanding of the background and history of the party and the contribution made for the country and for the black society struggling for civil rights.

The homage to the Black Panthers Party was clear in two ways. First, all girls had a stylized black uniform and everyone was wearing black berets. Such looks belong to the members of the BPP, who protected the black community and helped those in need. The second visual sign that plays the tribute to the party is a collective rise of a fist up. This was the gesture and the emblem of the party.

Apart from the particular way everyone was dressed, Beyoncé's look expanded the visual message. The strings of bullets as well as the black jacket itself with other golden accessories were a reminder about Michael Jackson (Figure 7). His outfit was designed for the same show which was held in 1993. Moreover, Beyoncé mentioned that this personality has shaped her personality and made her who she is.

Nonetheless, the list of visual symbols does not finish with the especially designed costumes. In the middle of the dance, the dancers formed an X letter in remembrance of Malcolm X (Figure 8). Another visual sign was the help up sign "Justice 4 Mario Woods," a black man who was shot by several police officers and whose case was not properly addressed. Along with making the fist up, the ladies called for awareness and social actions (Figure 9). In terms of homage to BPP that advanced the social and political changes for the African Americans, Beyoncé's "Formation" is a call for people to make a stand nowadays.

#### 6.4.2 Points of Criticism

Beyoncé's articulation as a black feminist fighter is as expressive as a volcano eruption that took place at the show and in social media. First, she said that she was tired of being a pop star or a hot girl; then she claimed that she wanted to become iconic (Ellen, 2016). The dual effect of her "Formation" message includes the inspired blacks and the scared whites. Kris Ex writes for *Billboard*, "White supremacy and patriarchy continue to live in fear of an actualized black woman who actually resonates with black women" (2016).

A recent book *The African World in Dialogue: An Appeal to Action!* published in 2016 provides a long historical footage of articulation of Black Power through the decades of oppression. The author, Teresa N. Washington, takes a close look at Beyoncé's "Formation." She agrees with Beyoncé's articulation as a progressive feminist and a political activist with "Formation as the "anthem of unapologetically celebrated Blackness" (Washington, 2016: 144). In her view, the progressive movements were able to overcome lynching of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century was marked by progressive movements and eminent personalities that advanced the issue of racial inequality. However, the days of Dr. Martin Luther King, when the audience was hypnotized by his speeches, are gone. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is the era of lynchings by police officers. Washington states that despite that uprising tendency of the black society with such examples as the New Black Panther Party and Black Lives Matter, the black community lack personalities that would make significant changes. Therefore, Beyoncé gradually becomes an emergent political activist that is able to use her platform, power of voice, her origins, and her capitalist way of thinking to send the messages that African Americans understand as a political call for formation and start a revolution to win liberation.

Susan Moore, an author for The Guardian, explicitly states that Beyoncé embodies a new political movement. Her critical review of the performance at the Super Bowl concludes that Beyoncé "comes from and where she is going" (Moore, 2016). In her "unapologetically black" manner, she responded to a president-to-be Donald Trump who said about Black Lives Matter, "I think they're trouble. I think they're looking for trouble" (Moore, 2016). The extent of broad ignorance has escalated the issue of racial inequality to the point of no return and evolution to a new form of activism, where pop singers are empowered enough to make the audience woke.

In defining Beyoncé as politically active, Moore goes deeper into the history of the singer's attempts to articulate the audience. When Obama was inaugurated, she proudly sang "At Last," her earlier involvement in a charity initiative to help the Hurricane Katrina survivors, and other philanthropic initiatives that she and her husband Jay Z practice.

However, not everyone appreciates Beyoncé's contribution and political potential at all. Former New York mayor Rudi Gulliani expressed doubts about the relevance of that kind of show, "The halftime show, I thought, was ridiculous anyway. I don't know what the heck it was. A bunch of people

bouncing around and all strange things. It was terrible” (Page, 2016). Gulliany made a thin guess about the parallels drawn by Beyoncé and the dancers. Their uniformed looked like a tribute to the Black Lives Matter, while being the homage to the Black Panther Party instead. Their salute gesture of a fist raised up was considered a slap to police and a call for aggressive actions. A white male conservative political commentator and radio host Rush Limbaugh was a little more insightful than the previous critic. He stressed that the show is basically designed for “middle Americans” and their entertainment. He concluded that what Beyoncé showed was the “representative of the cultural decay and the political decay and the social rot that is befalling our country” (Page, 2016). If expressing the needs of underrepresented populations is decay, then he could be right. The idea of irrelevance of expressing political concerns at a football match is doubtful as well as a non-politicized nature of entertainment in the US (Duffy, 2016). Beyoncé had a gradual shift from meaningful lyrics to video footage of racial inequality. The final stage of her political statement was the reference to the Black Panther Party and Malcolm X, whose priority was the struggle for the rights of the black community. This is not decay; this is a gradual process of changes and an evolution of the impact that pop and hip hop cultures can be empowered.

More problems come out of illiteracy on activity of the Black Panthers. People commented on the use of the Black Panther-type uniforms during the show drawing parallels with the KKK (Trappen, 2016). Such fallacy has no background but racism and xenophobia. Despite the fact that these groups could be labelled as “hate groups that practice racial antipathy towards groups defined as their racial opposite” (Trappen, 2016), the activity of those greatly differed and drawing more parallels between them would be inappropriate. Unlike KKK, the Black Panthers did not kill anyone while protecting civil and economic rights of the black community as an unprivileged and underserved community.

## CHAPTER 7. DISCUSSION

### 7.1 Summary of Hermeneutic Analysis

#### 7.1.1 Who?

In the hermeneutic analysis, this question should give the information about the author. The song “Formation” provides an extensive list of information about Beyoncé. She highlights her origins and takes pride in being a girl from the neighborhood that knows all the hardships of living. She knows that she must have a “hot sauce” to feel secure. When Beyoncé succeeds, jealous people attribute her success to “illuminate,” while she claims that all she has done is what she “grinded,” so she earned what she deserved.

The lyrics define Beyoncé as a sound personality with a comprehensive vision of herself in the society. She is a caring mother and a loving woman, who is proud of her blackness and whose dominance is a part of her daily role. She does not feel oppressed that her looks are different, nor feel upset about her “negro nose.” For Beyoncé, her kids are the best with afros. She is gracious the way she is like and entering discussions with those who think differently is beyond her self-dignity.

Visual presentation in the video and performance define her leader qualities. Together with her dancers, Beyoncé stands in a dancing formation. She gives the tone and the mood; she is active in her vision; and she is ready to teach others a lesson.

#### 7.1.2 What?

Beyoncé explains the subject matter of her “formation” at all three levels: lyrics, video, and performance. The call for formation as a growing power of change is the subject matter of “Formation.”

The textual analysis reveals the author's focus on the black culture. The author uses symbols like “hot sauce,” “bama,” and “cornbreads and collard greens” to show the value and uniqueness of the black culture. The text also highlights the Black Pride as one of the facets of formation. Being who you are is

not a point of criticism, but should be the background for success. The text also places direct demands that make the audience think actively about the case of New Orleans, self-pride, and hard work despite the system.

Beyoncé's video and performance reveal a gradual progress of formation. The author moves from self-actualization to examples of injustice and finalizes the formation being dressed in black like a member of the Black Panthers Party ready for action. The images of the drowned city and police officers arrayed against a little boy show what is wrong in the society where white and black people live side by side.

### 7.1.3 Why?

Since 2014, Beyoncé had a pause in her creative process and released a new song as a tribute to the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BPP. Like one of them, she raises concerns about racial inequality and calls for a social and political action. Racial inequality has many faces and the imbedded black and white roles have led to a wide range of dramatic consequences.

The reason for writing the explicit text is to give a first statement about the need for formation and the ways this formation should be carried out. The reason for making the video this way is to highlight the most emerging and disturbing problems in the visual presentation as well as to give the vibrant "beat" to energize the process of formation. The reason for the expressive performance is to shock the American society, both black and white communities, and draw a bottom line of her message.

### 7.1.4 How?

The unity of Beyoncé's messages reveals a triple structure of implementation of the formation plan. In her song, the text bears a cultural message for the existent audience of the artist. Based on history, origin, and black pride, and hard work peculiar for the ancestors, African Americans must make a formation. The video is focused on social matters present in the modern society. Based on the cases of Hurricane Katrina and police brutality, the black community must make a formation. Beyoncé's performance at the Super Bowl Halftime show is a form of political message with respect to the history of opposition against racial inequality. The show is homage to the BPP, Black Lives Matter, Malcolm X, Michael Jackson, and Marion Woods.



Cultural, social, and political degrees of “Formation” aim to escalate the issue to each following level and convince the audience, whether black or white, to take an action and make a formation in order to bring about racial equality and prosperity of the American society in all the communities that represent it.

#### 7.1.5 When?

Basically, the time of writing the song coincides with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the BPP. However, other reasons to making an active stand are ever-present. Numerous statistical data on the inequality of wealth, access to education, incarceration, employment, etc. draws the tendency that is not going to change unless the black community gets in formation and rise.

Ultimately, every day is high time for changes. The dominant white society that rules and drives the policies, the practice of racial segregation, racial profiling, avoiding the needs of minor communities, and overall marginalization of non-white communities answer the question “When?”

#### 7.1.6 Where?

Although, the singer represents the American society, the geography of Beyoncé’s message is the whole world. The time of digital availability allows access to information worldwide. Beyoncé’s song and video are available for personal critics of every African American or others. As for the physical location of “Formation,” the artist chose one of the most influential platforms in the United States.

For Americans, this is the most-watched television event with the audience over 100 million people. Making a political statement could have no better location to make an impact. Beyoncé weighed up the risks of her provocative presentation and was brave enough to express her vision on the state of affairs and the way out of the problem of racial inequality.

#### 7.1.7 By which means?

In an effective manner, Beyoncé gradually expands the measure of the impact from personal to collective. The single was a personal choice of an individual whether to buy and listen. The release of the video increased the audience and allowed expressing first thoughts on her formation as well as her vision of formation of blackness. Finally, the artist reaches the multimillion audience and resonates

with the American society as a whole during her live performance and later by means of media and social media footage.

Beyond the singer's formation through the song, video, and performance, Beyoncé also participates as a philanthropist and an activist who advocates vulnerable communities. This adds volume to Beyoncé's establishment as a political activist.

## 7.2 Political Activism in Beyoncé's "Formation"

### 7.2.1 Musical Activism: Ideology. Framing. Dissemination

#### 7.2.1.1 Framing Ideology

Hermeneutic analysis of textual and visual symbols allows defining key points for identifying the nature of Beyoncé's intentions, whether she is a political activist or an experienced capitalist who wants to benefit on the problems that rise in the black community. In the theory that concerns musical activism, the three important constituents that define the term are ideology, framing, and dissemination. The three stages of delivering the message – lyrics, video, and performance – provide a comprehensive background to state that Beyoncé is an establishing political activist with progressive capitalist vision of making a political statement.

Ideology as a system of existing symbols, valued, and beliefs aims to define the people who would listen to Beyoncé's message and who will become her primary target audience. As the first stage of articulation of her community, Beyoncé shares the cultural symbols that African Americans understand. Culture makes people stand out from others and unites people. Beyoncé recognizes this feature, when she uses symbols of a baseball bat and food.

Within Beyoncé's ideology that emerges in the text is constructing two ideological messages through framing. As an author of lyrics, Beyoncé uses her personal information of her origins, her family, and the way she became successful to stress the extent of her self-pride. She encourages others to work hard, to get an education, to be informed and aware in order to bring about changes for better. Her personal example is an inspiration and an icon that through success is eligible to speak out and "slay."

From the lines of her song, Beyoncé calls for formation of every black person, wants them to accept her shaped ideology, and convinces to stay gracious in this struggle.

The visual symbols that emerge in the video outline the areas of change. Hurricane Katrina is not only the disaster that greatly and directly affected the black community. Governmental mistreatment of the consequences of this issue has shown a general level of neglect. This neglect makes the relationship between African Americans and white population tense with a growing tendency of tension.

Another form of tension is police mistreatment. The number of the cases, where a black person was racially profiled are growing. Being black in the white society means a close attention as a source of threat for the mainstream society. Beyoncé claims that the African American part of the U.S. society is as innocent and disarming as a child who dances in front of white people with guns. She claims “Stop Shooting Us” directly for the white population to mitigate the escalating degree of racial hate and profiling. This framed symbol also signifies the demand for the black community to get in formation against these and other cases of police brutality.

The first shot of the video as well as the final one make a double effect of the visual message. Beyoncé starts with Katrina and police and finishes with the same mis-en-scene. Being atop of the police car half drowned in the Katrina flood is like a political poster that spotlights the issues and countersanctions led by the female leader.

On performance as a means of visual framing of symbols, Beyoncé gets in formation enlisting the historical political and social icons for support. She refers to the BPP and BLM as organizations that struggle for the rights of African Americans. The artist pays a tribute to iconic personalities, whose life was devoted to making the life of the black community easier in the hostile white society. Symbolically, Beyoncé took up this political torch being dressed in black and ordering “Get in Formation” and “I slay.”

### 7.2.1.2 Peculiarities of Dissemination

As highlighted through hermeneutic analysis, the three pieces of her work regarding “Formation” are the forms of cultural, social, and political statements. As the sources of dissemination of these

statements, Beyoncé chose a text, a video, and a live performance. In these forms of dissemination, the artist proceeded from the individual to a collective source of influence accumulating the number of people to hear the messages for a person in the headphones to a multimillion American audience, who watches the live Super Bowl Halftime show.

On the three elements of dissemination mentioned by Corte and Edwards (2008), Beyoncé's political formation is oppositional, authentic, and persecuted. The highlights of the analysis stress a vivid oppositional but non-violent nature of Beyoncé's claims. She calls for justice from the white society and formation from the black population. Her claims are authentic as she presents her personal view and beliefs. The singer clearly defined her origins, history, and points of Black Pride that unite her with the community that she advocates for. Finally, in her progressive and expressive way to draw attention of the society and make her community actualize, she met a strong criticism mostly from the white conservative representatives of all levels of influence. However, Beyoncé has established her solid platform of influence that she can disregard "all this conversation" and "always stay gracious."

### 7.2.2 Practicing Embodied Political Arguments

As Del Gandio (2015) wrote for "Liminalities," making a political statement may take a form of embodied political arguments where disturbing issues are shown through theatrical staging. The author emphasized the key elements that made the campaigns successful. Beyoncé's live performance greatly resembles this kind of political activity because the five features of political arguments – location, costumes, exaggeration, overrepresentation, and message – fit the way Beyoncé finalized her three-stages statement.

Making a political statement would have no better place than the Sunday Super Bowl Halftime Show. Beyoncé has chosen the location and the event that unites people of any origin, race, wealth, status, etc. This is one of the most watched events in the United States. Therefore, Beyoncé has chosen one of the most substantial platforms to speak up with words, costumes, and symbolic presentation.

The costumes that the artist chose for herself and her dancers create an ambiguous effect. The literature reviews of the critical analysis on Beyoncé's visual effect, in particular, attributes the symbolic representation to the black form of the KKK. This signifies the rising fear and a general illiteracy of the

public, which results in a form of xenophobia targeted against the rising “formation” mood. In fact, Beyoncé gave multiple tributes to political icons that mattered for the black people in the United States and made their life matter for the white population.

The fear is partially caused by Beyoncé’s expressive way of delivery with specific lyrics, black costumes, and lively dances strictly “controlled” by the establishing political leader. Del Gandio mentioned embodied exaggeration as the way street theatre could attract people in the street. Beyoncé extends this rule and uses her expressiveness to shock the society and make people speak their mind, whatever the impression may be.

Del Gandio also warned that overrepresentation in the embodied political argument may send more messages distorting the focus on the core issue. A similar situation took place with Beyoncé’s “Formation” when her Creole origins sent ambiguous message about the sense of unity of black people. Despite her active engagement, particularly her origins historically separated mixed Americans from black “negroes.” In the mindset of African Americans, Creole people are placed closer to white oppressors rather than African Americans. Another point of ambiguity caused by overrepresentation is the author’s focus on her wealth. This caused broad discussions of her capitalist versus political intentions in the call for formation. Being successful in her audience, Beyoncé is blamed for playing a bad game with disturbing issues and financially benefit from the audience that shares concerns about the current state of racial inequality.

Despite an existent percentage of doubts and disagreement, the singer succeeds to draw attention and engage an enormous number of people who watched the performance and those who commented on it in the media and social media. Similarly to street campaigners, she uses signifiers that highlight political nature of her performance. Her signifiers are delivered through gestures, geometry, and a text. Beyoncé and her dancers raise fists up as members of a political party; they form an X letter to remind about an eminent political personality; and they use a sign “Justice 4 Mario Woods” (Figure 10) as an example of injustice against the black race.

## CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSION

Political engagement of celebrities is the trend that gathers momentum in the latest years. The issue of racial inequality is ever-present and overrepresented in the American society. The long history of relationship between the black and the white community resulted in a multifaceted injustice that affects wealth, education, location, employment, poverty, etc. Celebrities take a moral and political responsibility to advocate for African Americans using their native platform of influence. Music is a form of political activity that makes possible reaching a broad audience and making statements for and against.

Given the rising trend of political activity among celebrities, some personalities fail to deliver the message or convince that activism aims at the goodness of people. Beyoncé entered the political activist trend shared among celebrities with her song “Formation.” Having in mind the unknown nature of intentions of celebrities, the current work took a close look at Beyoncé’s song “Formation” to answer the question: “In terms of textual and visual analysis of the text, video, and performance of the song "Formation," how does Beyoncé establish herself as a political activist?”

Hermeneutic analysis was used to break this piece of music art into pieces and reveal the context of the textual and visual messages. Hermeneutic circle allows breaking a whole into pieces and reread the whole texts once again. The first reading of Beyoncé’s “Formation” looks like an attempt to show her personal success in life and boast about her dominance over her husband. A strict structuring of the context with such questions as “who?,” “what?,” “why?,” and so on allowed reading of separate symbols and reconstruct the impression about the song.

The following stage of the analysis went through the theoretical peculiarities of musical activism and the idea of embodied political argument. The theory of musical activism includes seeing into the system of cultural symbols, flaming new symbols, and dissemination. Beyoncé as an author of lyrics and the main personality, who acted in visual content, met the criteria of musical activism. Moreover, features of dissemination coincide with the ones seen in the activity of the singer. Her participation at

the Super Bowl Halftime show allows drawing parallels with embodied political argument which also proves Beyoncé's political intention of "Formation."

To summarize, apart from her feminine and feminist natures, Beyoncé has recently developed a new dimension of her personality. In "Formation," she provides a three-step political strategy. The lyrics have a cultural importance to draw the attention of target audience. The video is a visual footage of social injustice that articulates the mood of dissatisfaction. Finally, the live performance has a clear political statement with the use of a wide range of points of political importance. In a gradual and structured rising tendency, the three-step strategy proceeds from an individual level of influence to a collective form of influence on a multimillion audience.

Theoretical support of the analysis, piece by piece, contributes to Beyoncé's image of an establishing political activist. Her strategy that revolves around the song "Formation" presents Beyoncé's well-developed design of a political statement against racial inequality.

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## APPENDIX

### LIST OF FIGURES

**Figure 1. Beyoncé is carrying a baseball bat named "hot sauce." (Source: genuis.com, 2016)**



**Figure 2. Beyoncé's daughter Blue Ivy in the middle (Source: McFadden, 2016)**



**Figure 3. Dancing formation in cheerleader outfit at an empty pool (Source: Callian, 2016)**





**Figure 4. Beyoncé on top of a police car (Source: McFadden, 2016)**



**Figure 5. "Stop shooting us" writing on the wall (Aources Wells, 2016)**



**Figure 6. A boy dancing in front of police men (Source: McFadden, 2016)**





**Figure 7. Beyoncé in a Jackson-style costume (Source: Yoh, 2016)**



**Figure 8. Dancers form letter X (Source: Callinan, 2016)**



**Figure 9. Dancers hold fists up (Source: @abagond, 2016)**





**Figure 10. "Justice 4 Mario Woods" (Source: Thornhill, 2016)**

