



**Title:** Beyoncé’s Performance of Identification as a Diamond: Reclaiming Bodies and Voices in “Formation”

**Author:** Mari E. Ramler

**Mentor:** Candace Epps- Robertson

**Issue:** 1

**Publication Date:** May 2018

**Stable URL:** <http://constell8cr.com/issue-1/beyonces-performance-of-identification-as-a-diamond-reclaiming-bodies-and-voices-in-formation/>

# Beyoncé's Performance of Identification as a Diamond: Reclaiming Bodies and Voices in "Formation"

Mari E. Ramler, Tennessee Technological University

*A voice means this: there is a living person, throat, chest, feelings, who sends into the air this voice, different from all other voices."*

*Italo Calvino, "A King Listens"*

*"Bitch, I'm back."*

*Messy Mya, "Booking the Hoes From New Wildin"*

## **"Formation"—Appropriation or Identification?**

Following the success of her 2016 Grammy Award-winning video "Formation," Beyoncé was accused of commodifying, appropriating, and outright stealing the voice of New Orleans' post-Katrina trauma. "Formation" set off an Internet dialogue in which feminists and women of color expressed conflicting thoughts and emotions over just what they thought they were seeing. In an open-letter article "Dear Beyoncé, Katrina Is Not Your Story," Maris Jones cites her own post-Katrina trauma as a measure of critique for the pop star's insensitivity to Katrina's enduring damage and victims: "Our trauma is not an accessory to put on when you decide to openly claim your Louisiana heritage." Jones, like many critics, locates Beyoncé as an outsider, who "wasn't there" to experience the devastation yet seems to be capitalizing on it now. Jones' position is clearly understood; Beyoncé atop a sinking squad car in submerged New Orleans can easily be read as commodification, a performance of victimhood for the sake of making money and expanding her brand.



*Fig. 1 Popular New Orleans rapper Messy Mya*

Shantrelle Lewis goes even further in her *Slate* article “‘Formation’ Exploits New Orleans’ Trauma: Beyoncé’s blockbuster video isn’t advocacy. It’s appropriation.” Specifically, Lewis finds troubling how Beyoncé’s samples the voice of Messy Mya, a New Orleans *YouTube* celebrity and bounce rapper who was murdered before “Formation” was produced. Commenting on the Messy Mya samples, Lewis fumes: “This is not giving people voice. It is stealing.” With this claim, Lewis is arguing in favor of a yet-unresolved \$20 million lawsuit filed by the estate of the late Anthony Barre, aka Messy Mya, against Beyoncé for inappropriately sampling the murdered rapper’s voice (Andrews). However, before these lawsuits and claims of theft can be resolved, we must ask what is the line between sampling and commodification? What does Beyoncé sampling Messy Mya mean within this context—did Beyoncé steal New Orleans’ symbolic and embodied voice?

Regina N. Bradley offers an answer; she interprets Beyoncé's "Formation" not as commodification but as a "conjuring." In her blog post, "Getting in Line: Working Through Beyoncé's 'Formation,'" she asserts:

'Formation' is Texas style fatback and biscuits with country gravy, a dizzying spell that pulls from multiple places and modes of the black southern experience. Beyoncé took a familiar cultural marker of black southernness—trauma—and flipped that bih (sic) into a working ideology to engage what it means to be southern and black now.

In other words, Beyoncé creates a new unity using many different narratives, bodies, and voices—which makes sense given how, among scenes of the church, half-drowned buildings, and the weave shop, Beyoncé includes a plantation scene with herself in a black dress standing front and center on the front porch. "Do you know the significance of black folks and the front porch?" Bradley demands, "It's a communal space and a space of reclamation." If Bradley's assertion is correct, if the front porch is a "space of reclamation," then we must also pose Bradley's larger question: "Who is Bey trying to reclaim?" Obvious answers include her cheating husband Jay Z, her heritage as a Louisiana Creole, and the Black Southern experience in divergent historical contexts. However, this expanding scope, moving from the personal to the familial to the cultural, is not enough. I believe "Formation" is even more inclusive than Beyoncé's marital relationship, her familial heritage, and her racial identity; it performs the work of reclaiming the dignity inherent in every human body.

Although it might be obvious that Beyoncé's "Formation" is a call to action with contemporary activist themes and tropes, how this call functions is more controversial. Some critics claim her sampling in "Formation" is appropriation, an act of othering. What critics overlook though is the role that identification—not appropriation—plays in the song's and the music video's argument. Indeed, in a blog post entitled "The Fine Line Between 'Identity' and 'Identification': Debating Appropriation in the Case of Dolezal," Rob Peach writes, "[I]n contradistinction to the act of appropriation as a form of 'othering' is that of '*appropriation as identification*' with the object of 'othering' (Sharma 2010: 237)." Peach summarizes Sharma's differentiation when he writes, "appropriation signals solidarity with the cultural practices of the other." Thus, if we consider the role identification plays in Beyoncé's "Formation," of her song and of herself, first, we see the flexibility inherent in appropriation *as* identification. While talk of identification in Western discourse might assume the metaphor of a flat mirror, precisely how Beyoncé's "Formation" enacts appropriation as identification is better understood through another metaphor of identification—a multifaceted diamond that reflects and refracts the light that passes through it. Fittingly, this metaphor is itself appropriated from the Eastern religion known as non-dual Saivism, which both affirms the reality of the world of difference (i.e., not monism) and also recognizes the non-difference between Siva and Sakti and the corresponding non-

difference between them and creation (i.e., not dualism) (Roberts xxxiv-xxxv). By juxtaposing the disenfranchised and disembodied voice of Messy Mya with numerous images of her own body, her dancers' bodies, and the bodies of two children, the diamond metaphor illuminates how Beyoncé reclaims and (re)presents Messy Mya's irrepressible spirit, his earthly identity as a social justice-minded black man as well as the eternal and universal expression of his humanity.

This article explores how Beyoncé's "Formation" juxtaposes a lost voice with images of female bodies to address the dilemma surrounding who gets to speak the narrative of trauma. I maintain that the text presents two types of authentic speakers. The first type speaks from a place of *experiential pain*, having occupied the same historical period and geographical place where the trauma occurred. The second type speaks from a place of *existential pain*—an ethical reach that re-imagines what the trauma might have felt like. My goal then in this article is to disrupt the binary of appropriation versus identification by applying Nitasha Sharma's concept of "appropriation as identification." By applying Sharma's term to "Formation" and approaching the music video through a diamond metaphor, I illuminate Beyoncé's body as redemption, her dancers' bodies as reclamation, and Blue's Ivy's dance as inheritance—artistic and ethical consequences of the video that other critics have overlooked. Without the new perspective that this article presents, Beyoncé's work appears to be nothing more—and to achieve nothing more—than artistic larceny.

### Identification As Appropriation

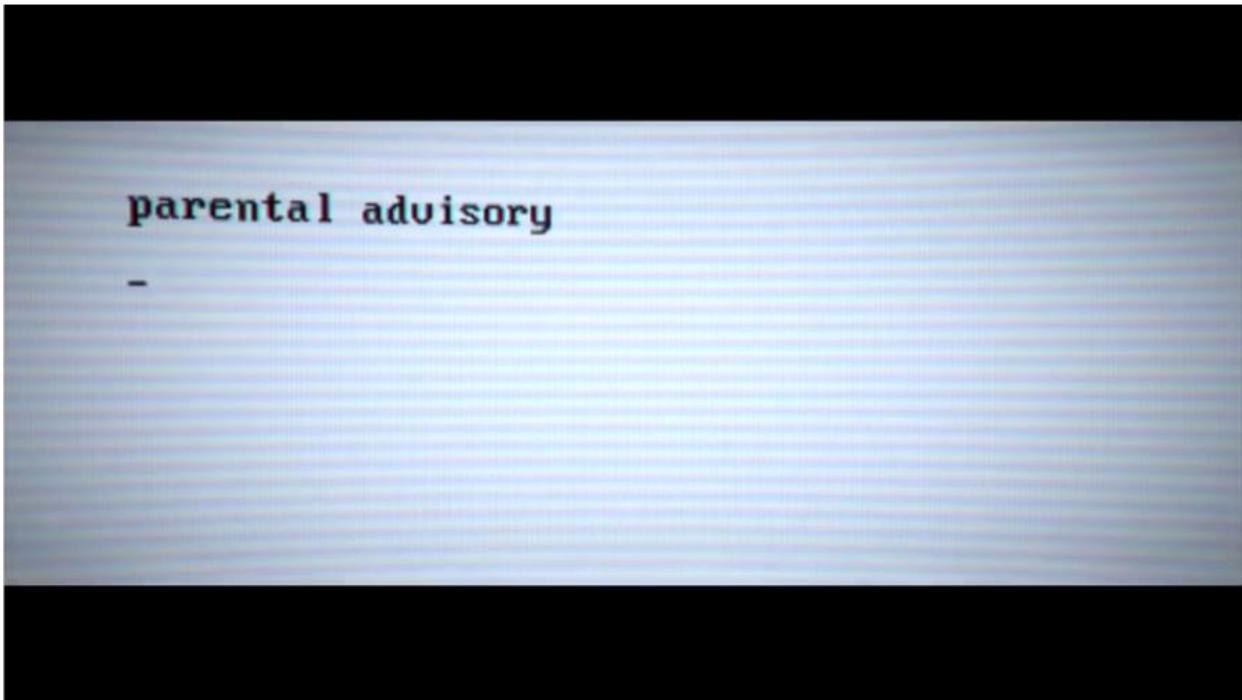
Rob Peach

extends Nitasha Sharma's research on identification as appropriation [i] in his blog post (previously mentioned):

[A]ppropriation does not have to be a bad thing. It depends on how one positions oneself in relation to those cultural formations with which one is associating his or herself. There are ways to engage in the act of appropriation constructively and with dignity, honor, knowledge, and respect for the cultural other that is informed by an awareness of the histories that have shaped the culture of the so-called other (Sharma 271).

Appropriation as identification signals solidarity with the Other, which we see in the way Beyoncé samples Messy Mya's voice in "Formation." While it might be hard to witness her elaborate costumes and opulent substitutions, Beyoncé identifies with Messy Mya (and New Orleans) in several significant ways. She samples three Messy Mya direct quotes in "Formation": "What happened at the New Orleans?"; "Bitch, I'm back by popular demand"; and "Ooh yeah, baby, oh yeah I, ooh, oh, yes I like that." These samples prime us to see her identification with him in her racial identity, her desire to share her side of the story, and her appeal to self as authority. If we only hear Messy Mya's biological voice, Beyoncé's sampling is

appropriation. But if we can hear his embodied and transcendent voices, the samples demonstrate appropriation *as* identification.



*Fig. 2 Video of "Formation" samples of Messy Mya's Voice*

The video linked above features three examples of "Formation" footage with Messy Mya voiceovers and then reveals the original footage of Messy Mya's video "Booking The Hoes From New Wildin." Beyoncé retains his voice, but substitutes other bodies to tell a similar story. In this viral *YouTube* video, published August 20, 2010, Messy Mya talks trash about two women in his hometown. His videographer, Messy Roley, giggles as she captures Mya's tirade about these "bitches": he relates his side of the story by detailing a public altercation he had with the two women he describes as "bald" and "pick your hair, poodle." He calls this story "what happened at the New Wildins." He rants, "Bitch. There's always two sides to a story, and this is my side. And bitch, I'm like six on your side. The hoes gonna believe Messy Mya before they believe you. Follow me, camera." In defending his reputation and appealing to his celebrity and financial success as evidence of his superiority, Messy Mya makes it easy for Beyoncé to identify with him. Indeed, she expresses a similar defense and appeal when she resolves "Formation" with the lyric "Always stay gracious; your revenge is your papers" (Beyoncé).

Messy Mya, and by extension New Orleans, speaks for Beyoncé. We can understand Beyoncé's identification with Messy Mya's feelings of being publicly misunderstood and wanting to share his side of the conflict with the "nappy haired bitches" if we remember that two voices are always present when a person speaks. There is the embodied voice, the physical sound that the

vocal chords produce and project out into the world. These vibrations register on a biological level. But there is also the disembodied, transcendent voice, an emotional expression that the self produces and projects out into the world. This second voice, the disembodied but transcendent expression of self, is what Beyoncé identifies with and builds upon in forming her own side of the story “What happened at the New Orleans?” If we understand Messy Mya’s voice to be only biological, then we must say that Beyoncé appropriated it. But if we hear Messy Mya’s embodied and transcendent voices, then it becomes clear that Beyoncé’s appropriation *is* identification. She identifies with his desire to tell his side of the story on a personal level, and she identifies with New Orleans’ side of the story on a historical level. Furthermore, when we talk about appropriation as identification, we would do well to expand our Western metaphor for reflection as a mirror to a multifaceted diamond.

### Identification As a Diamond

The American South in the time of Black Lives Matter and Donald Trump’s bid for the US presidency was Michelle Voss Roberts’ reason for writing *Body Parts: A Theological Anthropology* that “propose[s] alternative ways of thinking about—and a spiritual practice of attending to—the multiplicity of ways of being human in the image of God” (xix). Roberts provides a more inclusive understanding of the human condition by introducing the non-dual Saiva model of the human in the Hindi tradition as a new conversation partner to interrogate the Christian teaching of *imago Dei*, a theological phrase that had, for centuries, privileged a male, rational, and estranged-body definition. By placing *imago Dei* in conversation with non-dual Saivism, Roberts expands the former’s meaning to include its inherent female, irrational, and embodied connotations.

Non-dual Saivism uses the metaphor of a diamond to symbolize the divine in humanity in five sets of categories: the conscious body, the limited body, the subjective body, the engaged body, and the elemental body. Roberts’s comparative project of including non-dual Saivism as a way to widen and open Christianity’s teaching of *imago Dei* “expands the *imago Dei* from the single flat surface of a mirror into a brilliant jewel, reflecting light from many facets” (xxxv-xxxvi). This single light reflected from many facets symbolizes a central teaching of non-dual Saivism: one consciousness in many forms. This diamond metaphor and one-in-many model can be instructive as we similarly watch Beyoncé widen and open the narrative of what it means to be a black body in the American South. Indeed, one consciousness in many forms is exactly how Beyoncé reclaims Messy Mya’s voice.

### Sample One “What happened at the New Orleans?”: Beyoncé’s Body as Past



*Fig. 3 Beyoncé Squats on a police car in “Formation”*

Beyoncé’s music video “Formation” sparkles in its multifaceted historical reimagining. The video opens with Messy Mya asking “What happened at the New Orleans?,” his voice playing over the parental warning for explicit lyrics. Beyoncé samples only his voice. We do not see his body. Instead, the first visible body in “Formation” is Beyoncé, in a red dress, squatting on a half-submerged squad car. The next scene jumps to a red and blue flashing grille and then red and blue truck lights. We see a dancing male body, the back of a police jacket, and an empty street. We never see footage of Messy Mya, aka Anthony Barre, who, at twenty-two years old, was fatally shot Nov. 14, 2010, near the corner of St. Anthony and North Rocheblave streets as he left a baby shower for the son he and his girlfriend were expecting (McCarthy). I, however, see Beyoncé’s beautiful body in a red dress atop the blue-striped police car as I hear Messy Mya’s voice, and I have to wonder about this artistic choice. Messy Mya, gunned down after his unborn child’s shower, was discovered in a pool of his own blood. A crowd had gathered, and the image of him surrounded by arms and with a smart phone near his body was the way most people discovered his death online (McCarthy).

In her *NPR* article “In Beyoncé’s ‘Formation,’ A Glorification Of ‘Bama’ Blackness,” Jesmyn Ward reads Beyoncé’s “Formation” as a song for the South: “She sings to those of us who grew up black in the American South, who swam through Hurricane Katrina, who watched the world sink, who starved for two weeks after the eye passed, who left our dead floating in our houses.” Like Bradley, Ward interprets Beyoncé’s vision as a reclamation of the South and in particular the Southern black woman’s South. Ward’s analysis takes us through the music video’s scenes from plantation dresses and black hats to those with Blue Ivy, Beyoncé’s young daughter, in a white sundress, dancing. If my previous claim is true that Beyoncé reclaims Messy Mya’s blood with her symbolic red dress, if she substitutes her body for his, then we can better understand what she will later intend with the two children dancing in the music video.

For some critics, this substitution of bodies is unacceptable. In her article “On ‘Jackson Five Nostrils,’ Creole vs. ‘Negro’ and Beefing Over Beyoncé’s ‘Formation,’” Yaba Blay explores the fallout within the Black community. She writes, “Having grown up black-Black (read: dark-skinned) in colorstruck New Awlins, hearing someone, particularly a woman, make a distinction between Creole and ‘Negro’ is deeply triggering.” She acknowledges her own personal issues with the song based on her experiences as a Black woman growing up in the South and encourages other critics of Beyoncé and “Formation” to recognize their own experiential lenses:

A work as racially and emotionally charged as ‘Formation’ is bound to cause tension. And because Beyoncé so often evokes something very personal, we need to approach one another with more care and caution. After all, it is very possible to enjoy the ‘Formation’ song and video *and* take issue with it at the same damn time. Because we’re human. (Blay)

Again, the beauty of the diamond metaphor allows us to take a *both...and* position as opposed to an *either...or*. A diamond, in its multiple planes, can reflect them all.

Bradley, on the other hand, sees Beyoncé in this watery place not as a substitution but a catalyst. “Trauma,” she argues, “is the springboard of southern blackness. But its foundation is resilience and creativity.” She interprets the visual of Beyoncé sinking as a baptism, a rebirth. Regarding the singer herself, Bradley identifies Beyoncé as the southern black woman pleasure principle, “a vulgar female spirit that loves hot pepper and embodies both sex and death.” Bradley understands conjuring blackness as “physical, conceptual, and spiritual. All three are necessary to make protest and resurrection possible.” If Bradley’s vision of “Formation” is plausible, then we must ask what happens to each critic’s story of New Orleans if they are all equally as true as Beyoncé’s conjured one? Is there a way to both see and not-see? Can Beyoncé teach us not only that a multitude of New Orleans narratives are true, but also that

each can exist together? Our diamond metaphor is particularly productive, again. In this case, appropriation is not only a springboard, but also identification itself. By using Messy Mya's voice to introduce her first appearance in the music video, Beyoncé offers a form—her own—to his still-resonant voice. If we hear Messy Mya's voice as a consciousness that emerges in many divergent and embodied forms, then we can view Beyoncé's body as one plane of a multi-faceted diamond. We see Beyoncé's body, but hear Messy Mya's spirit.

#### Sample Two. "Bitch, I'm back by popular demand": Dancers' Bodies as Present



*Fig. 4 Beyoncé in Black on the plantation porch*

The next Messy Mya sample speaks to the core of Beyoncé's authenticity and authority. We see Beyoncé in black on the plantation porch. Next, two more male figures dance under a blinking overhead light in a dark room, a black preacher stands behind the pulpit in a church, and an over-turned house slowly sinks. Then we return to Beyoncé atop the squad car, this time reclining. She raps before singing, "Y'all haters corny with that illuminati mess / Paparazzi, catch my fly, and my cocky fresh" (Beyoncé). These images remind me of Bradley's rhetorical

questions, as quoted earlier: “Do you know the significance of black folks and the front porch? [...] Who is Bey trying to reclaim?”

Shantrelle Lewis, however, lashes out with her own question about the juxtaposition of Beyoncé-in-fur and a devastated Southern city: “What does it mean to speak for a marginalized community who has not asked for your pronouncements? Can black people appropriate one another?” In contrast to Bradley, Lewis answers, “I’ve never thought I’d come to this conclusion, but yes, we can—especially when you’re one of the most influential and powerful black women in the world. [...] Especially when you capitalize off of their deaths.” Lewis describes the two central, entangled tensions audiences feel in “Formation.” First, she raises the question of Beyoncé’s authenticity and consequent authority to speak. And second, she stresses the blurry line between sampling and appropriation. Beyoncé’s critics, Lewis among them, approach “Formation” from an experiential place of pain. Thus, we have individual voices who, based on their personal experience in a certain place or in a certain body, critique other voices for having a differing perspective of being in a certain place or in a certain body. They seem to say, “You aren’t representing my truth or the truth of the place as I or Others experienced it.” This identity standoff produces a chorus of voices to articulate their experiences, albeit from the margins, but it is hardly an ethic by which we should judge who gets to speak and who doesn’t. If we say Beyoncé, in *her* video, can’t speak on behalf of New Orleans because she’s too rich, or too white, or too inclined towards appropriation, then who *does* get to speak? And for *whom*?

I argue that Lewis has inverted the speakers. While superficially it may seem as if Beyoncé is speaking for New Orleans, I see New Orleans and, by extension, Messy Mya speaking for *her*. Let us consider the personal context of Messy Mya’s last online video. As noted earlier, Messy Mya rants about “bitches” disrespecting him in spite of his popularity. The camera follows him walking New Orleans’ streets, disgusted and outraged, as he reminds us that there are two sides of the bayou and consequently two sides to the story (Messy Mya). Messy Mya created his last online video to tell his side of a recent altercation in a comedy club. Beyoncé created *Lemonade*, and “Formation,” to tell her side of a marital conflict. For both performers, the immediate parties they are addressing are absent, but hopefully listening. Although Messy Mya and Beyoncé occupy/have occupied opposite subject positions in wealth and fame, they both helped the Black Lives Matter movement in their own ways.

Additionally, Mya’s “two sides to every story” comment resonates on a racial level. In “Formation,” Beyoncé and her dancers perform a subverted racial heritage. In different sequences, Beyoncé and her dancers gyrate in an empty parking lot. They sport gym-wear and afros, clear markers of black pride. Later, in antebellum costume, they twerk in the plantation house’s hallway. Here, the dancers’ erotic moves are more than out of place; they’re

anachronistically rebellious. Answering Bradley's question about what's being reclaimed, these costumed dancers in various geographical and historical locations are taking back black identity.

Beyoncé and her dancers' aggressive dance moves, black bodies asserting and inserting themselves into traditionally white spaces, are also central to Beyoncé's controversial performance of "Formation" during Super Bowl Fifty, which took place one day after the music video dropped. The 2016 showdown between the Denver Broncos and the Carolina Panthers was the third most-watched television broadcast in U.S. history, at the time, with peak viewership at an average of 115.5 million during the thirty-minute halftime show according to numbers released by Nielsen (Wang). In a costume that evokes common dress for the Black Panther party and with her marching band performance of "Formation," Beyoncé won the Super Bowl, sparking a productive, ongoing, networked conversation among pop culture critics and feminist and race scholars, Bey fans and social justice activists alike.

The controversy did not stop when the performance ended. Immediately after the game, Bay Area chapter Black Lives Matter activists Ronnisha Johnson and Rheema Emy Calloway ran onto the field carrying a sign that read "Justice 4 Mario Woods" to take pictures with Beyoncé's dancers, who enthusiastically complied. Calloway was struck by the dancers' support: "They didn't second-guess taking a stand in solidarity with us for Mario Woods" (Wang). Woods, a 26-year-old black man, was killed by San Francisco police in December 2015, shot by fifteen rounds fired by five officers after he walked toward them with a knife in hand. Woods' mother, Gwen, was also moved by the gesture when she saw the photo—that went viral—online, "I was really depressed, and that gave me a jolt. To see them with the sign in the stands, it jolted me back into reality. It uplifted me. [...] I am so thankful to those dancers that they acknowledged this" (Wang).

Beyoncé's Super Bowl halftime performance can be read as the next iterative scene in her "Formation" video. Postcolonial scholar Cameron Bushnell has called it "an undoing of American tradition" by way of appropriating the Super Bowl halftime tradition of the marching band, itself a descendent from the colonial military band. The African American military band began as an alternative to arming black males. Thus, the black men, used as military recruiters, were given instruments instead of weapons (Bushnell). Wearing a bandolier and introduced by cymbals, Beyoncé is no high-stepping band director. Instead she performs in rhythm with her dancers who wear black hats that recall the black hat she wore on the plantation front porch scene in the "Formation" music video. This is no attempt to recreate the plantation—no front porch scene. Instead, the setting is contemporary, a much more recognized America, and the Super Bowl becomes the updated backdrop for an assertion of the rebellious black female bodies.

In the Super Bowl battle of the bands between Bruno Mars and his male dancers and Beyoncé and her female dancers, the women are locked into a competition of space and attention. Beyoncé leads the women to form two distinct shapes throughout the performance: a moving X and an arrow. These shapes, formed by female bodies, represent a moving reclamation of territory (Bushnell). Live network television provides even greater possibility for reclamation—Beyoncé and her dancers claim much more than a football field (or a plantation porch), they claim television screens across the nation and the world with their halftime show.

Beyoncé's Super Bowl performance of "Formation" is both an assertion and insertion, a text that subverts American history by creating a new history, one that demands a conversation about the Black Lives Matter movement, black identity, and inherent human dignity. Furthermore, Beyoncé's Super Bowl halftime performance marks an important moment in the Black Lives Matter movement and in the ongoing nationwide conversation regarding race. Beyoncé's "Formation" performance forces the issue regarding authority in activism, an expression of the human spirit that demands dignity.

### **Sample Three "Ooh yeah, baby, oh yeah I, ooh, oh, yes I like that.": Children's Bodies as Future**



*Fig. 5 Beyoncé's hair*

Although known for his sharp wit and colorful personality, Messy Mya and his *YouTube* persona that Beyoncé sampled was more than an exhaustive rant directed at perceived enemies.

“Messy Cam” also reveals him engaging and connecting with members of the New Orleans community (Messy Mya). Indeed, Beyoncé’s third Messy Mya sample, “Ooh yeah, baby, oh yeah I, ooh, oh, yes I like that” is his warm response to a female neighbor’s new haircut. When the camera finds the neighbor, it becomes impossible not to notice the contrast between Messy Mya’s own flamboyantly purple hair and his neighbor’s dark, straightened hair. When we hear the sample in “Formation,” the compliment plays while Beyoncé and her own long, blonde braids fill the frame, thereby making Bey the recipient of Messy Mya’s praise.

Read superficially, Beyoncé seems to appropriate Messy Mya’s compliment to flatter herself. However, if we apply our diamond metaphor to this last sample, we notice a very tender connection between the bounce rapper and the pop star. In his *YouTube* video, something about his neighbor’s hair grabs Messy Mya’s attention and seems to shake him out of his caustic persona. We are shown another lighter, almost playful, side to him. We might wonder if this warmer side is what he reserves and shows to his friends or his girlfriend. We might ask whether he would show this side of himself to his future child. Because Messy Mya is yet another male black victim of urban violence, we will never know. This tragic coda to Messy Mya’s persona helps explain how this sample functions in Beyoncé’s music video and, more importantly, why she might identify with him. His unexpected moment of connection with a neighbor differs greatly from his usually polemical personality: the anger and swagger in his last video belies a man who can appreciate beauty in the world—indeed, who reaches out to touch it.

Messy Mya, who predicted he would die soon on a late friend’s Facebook wall and on his *YouTube* channel, is a victim of violence on multiple levels (McCarthy). When he was thirteen, his mother was shot in their home while he and his sister were present. On the precipice of fatherhood, his own life is cut short. Messy Mya’s spiritual voice—what Beyoncé hears behind his physical voice—is what resonates with her. She makes herself the recipient of and audience for his compliment. Later in the video, she adopts and extends Messy Mya’s affectionate tone to her own child when she sings about hair as a hereditary link, “I like my baby hair with baby hair and afros” (Beyoncé).

Lyrically and artistically, Beyoncé blurs the line of distinction between Messy Mya’s past voice and his present sampled one. But perhaps “Formation” performs this blurring of time most noticeably through its sequences of dancing children. Much has been written about the little black boy who dances in front of police officers until they raise their hands in submission to his artistry. In case there is any question about what the little black boy’s confrontation means, the mural behind him reads “stop shooting us.”



*Fig. 6 Little black boy dances police into Submission in “Formation”*



*Fig. 7 Blue Ivy plays “duck duck goose” in “Formation”*

However, I link this instance of dancing-as-resistance to Beyoncé’s artistic choice to use Blue Ivy in a profoundly different way. While the little black boy dances intentionally and intently to convince the authorities to surrender, Blue Ivy’s dancing is relaxed. She seems at home in the plantation house.

It remains unclear, though, why the little boy, and not Blue Ivy, subverts the police. The stakes are different as the images present them. She’s playing with her peers; he’s peacefully resisting authority in a form of non-violent protest reminiscent of the civil rights era. In this manner, he is dancing the past. Interestingly, Beyoncé never puts Blue Ivy in a similar position or in a defiant role. There appear to be no men within the frame with Blue Ivy or inside the house at

all. The only men in “Formation” are servants on the plantation’s front porch with Beyoncé. While there is a mirroring between mother and daughter, Blue Ivy’s dancing is never aggressively out of place or time; she’s neither inappropriate nor anachronistic.

We can therefore view Blue Ivy in the plantation house dancing with her backup dancers as a visual extension of Beyoncé herself: As Beyoncé sings “I’m so possessive so I rock his Roc necklaces,” Blue Ivy dances in a circle playing duck duck goose (Beyoncé). And when Beyoncé sings “I’m a star / I’m a star,” the camera cuts to Blue Ivy smiling before the music crescendos to reveal Beyoncé dancing in the hallway with her own backup dancers. The repetition of mother with backup dancers and daughter with backup dancers is more than just a visual connection; it presents a temporal loop. If the black boy challenges the threatening police presence by dancing the past, Blue Ivy resists the subordination of the past by dancing the future. She appears at ease, playful, and (finally) in her rightful place in what would have been a historical space of subjugation and alterity. Her future is bright.

Indeed, Messy Mya’s still-present sampled voice resonates with both children’s dancing bodies. Although not sampled directly for “Formation,” Messy Mya’s final video before his death features a prescient question that resonates throughout: “Who gonna pop me?” Uttered as he was anticipating the birth of his unborn child, this question represents both a hope for the future and a dread that past patterns of violence are inescapable. Messy Mya’s disembodied voice and the unvoiced body of his child are represented and reclaimed by Blue Ivy’s dancing form.

### **Reflection(s)**

In a guest lecture at Clemson University entitled, “Where Are We Now? Gender, Sexuality, and Black Social Movements,” Patricia Hill Collins highlighted the Black Lives Matter movement as a new form of community organization. Beginning with Trayvon Martin and including the rebellions in Ferguson and Baltimore as grassroots protest of state-sanctioned violence against Blacks, Collins posited that while the focus seems to be on black men, black women carry the Black Lives Matter movement forward—for their children. Founded by three black queer women who did not want to become the face of the movement, #BlackLivesMatter relies on local chapters of grassroots organizing for its future with most of these chapters powered by women. Collins argued that this movement is a current example of “flexible solidarity,” a term she defines as “solidarity across political differences.” Collins explained, “Black activism was not a fleeting period of protest politics, but rather multiple racial projects of Black social movements.” Furthermore, she argued, “A vibrant movement has a broad range of different voices with different projects. African American women always participated in strands of Black activism and Black social movements.” In other words, Collins reminds us that within the #BlackLivesMatter conversation, we are free to critique one another and each other’s projects.

Additionally, this critique has the ability to further the movement's larger objectives and humanity's most meaningful values. Our metaphor of a diamond is particularly apt if we imagine these various projects as multiple expressions of the same objective—to reclaim inherent human dignity. In the same vein, LaToya Sawyer uses the metaphor of black girls double-dutching to argue that the bloggers who debated Beyoncé's self-identification as a feminist were really participating in Black female culture and community in a harmonious manner.

Although critiqued by feminists and women of color, Beyoncé's "Formation" has forced and furthered the conversation surrounding New Orleans and Hurricane Katrina and the black lives who were affected by the systemic injustice we still inhabit. If we can symbolize identity not as a flat mirror but rather as a multifaceted diamond, each face reflecting different ways of being, we can begin to approach the difficult generalization of "What happened at the New Orleans?" We can interpret "Formation" not as commodification, but as reclamation, an appropriation *as* identification. We can view the black female figure sinking upon a squad car not as death, but as baptism, [re]birth by water. We can see Beyoncé's sinking body as redemption, her dancers' bodies as a reclamation of territory, and Blue's Ivy's dance as inheritance. And we can read Beyoncé not as spokesperson for a painful place, but as a conjurer, summoning the spirits of our past to presently help us form our children's future.

### Works Cited

Andrews, Travis M. "Beyoncé controversially sampled New Orleans culture in 'Lemonade.' Now she's being sued for it." *The Washington Post*, 8 February 2017, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/02/08/beyonce-controversially-sampled-new-orleans-culture-in-lemonade-now-shes-being-sued-for-it/?utm\\_term=.7ae240fe8f99](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2017/02/08/beyonce-controversially-sampled-new-orleans-culture-in-lemonade-now-shes-being-sued-for-it/?utm_term=.7ae240fe8f99). Accessed 27 January 2017.

Beyoncé. "Formation." *Genius*, 2018, <https://genius.com/8640216>. Accessed 27 January 2018.  
beyonceVEVO. "Beyoncé – Formation." *YouTube*, 9 December 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV\\_\\_bQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__bQ).

Blay, Yaba. "On 'Jackson Five Nostrils,' Creole vs. 'Negro' and Beefing Over Beyoncé's 'Formation'." *Colorlines*, 8 February 2016, [time.com/3181644/Beyoncé-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/](http://time.com/3181644/Beyoncé-reclaim-feminism-pop-star/). Accessed 29 February 2016.

Bradley, Regina N. "Getting in Line: Working Through Beyoncé's 'Formation.'" *Red Clay Scholar*. *WordPress*, 7 February 2016, [redclayscholarblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/07/getting-in-line-working-through-Beyoncés-formation/](http://redclayscholarblog.wordpress.com/2016/02/07/getting-in-line-working-through-Beyoncés-formation/). Accessed 29 February 2016.

Bushnell, Cameron. "Formation: A Clemson English Faculty Panel on Beyoncé." Clemson University. The Academic Success Center, Clemson, SC. 9 March 2016. Guest Panel Speaker.

Collins, Patricia Hill. *From Black Power To Hip Hop: Racism, Nationalism, and Feminism*. Temple UP, 2006.

Collins, Patricia Hill. "From Civil Rights to Black Lives Matter: Gender, Sexuality, and Black Social Movements." Clemson University. The Watt Family Innovation Center, Clemson, SC. 12 March 2016. Guest Lecture.

De Graaf, Mia and Justin Enriquez. "'Stop shooting us': Beyoncé surprises fans with searing Black Lives Matter-themed song Formation as she plans to hijack Super Bowl with political performance." *Daily Mail*, 6 February 2016, [www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3435521/Beyonce-slays-cleavage-baring-bodysuit-daughter-Blue-Ivy-angelic-white-surprise-Formation-music-video.html#ixzz55mdkUOqt](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-3435521/Beyonce-slays-cleavage-baring-bodysuit-daughter-Blue-Ivy-angelic-white-surprise-Formation-music-video.html#ixzz55mdkUOqt). Accessed 31 January 2018.

Jones, Maris. "Dear Beyoncé, Katrina is Not Your Story." *BGD*, 10 February 2016, [www.bgdblog.org/2016/02/dear-Beyoncé-katrina-is-not-your-story/](http://www.bgdblog.org/2016/02/dear-Beyoncé-katrina-is-not-your-story/). Accessed 29 February 2016.

Kreps, Daniel. "Watch Beyoncé's Surprise New Video 'Formation.'" *Rolling Stone*, 6 February 2016, [www.rollingstone.com/music/news/watch-Beyoncé-s-surprise-new-video-formation-20160206](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/watch-Beyoncé-s-surprise-new-video-formation-20160206). Accessed 29 February 2016.

Lewis, Shantrelle. "'Formation' Exploits New Orleans' Trauma." *Slate*, 10 February 2016, [www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2016/02/beyonc\\_s\\_formation\\_exploits\\_new\\_orleans\\_trauma.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2016/02/beyonc_s_formation_exploits_new_orleans_trauma.html). Accessed 29 February 2016.

McCarthy, Brendan. "Messy Mya, burgeoning rapper and YouTube sensation, identified as 7th Ward murder victim." *Nola*, 16 November 2010, [www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2010/11/7th\\_ward\\_murder\\_victim\\_identif.html](http://www.nola.com/crime/index.ssf/2010/11/7th_ward_murder_victim_identif.html). Accessed 28 January 2018.

Mya, Messy. "Booking The Hoes From New Wildin." *YouTube*, uploaded by TheeHHGz, 20 August 2010, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=daKqgdCypTE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=daKqgdCypTE).

Online Trends. "Super Bowl 50 Halftime Show – Bruno Mars & Beyoncé ONLY [HD] 2016." *YouTube*, 7 February 2016, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=L\\_Hgh7sPDLM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_Hgh7sPDLM). Accessed 29 February 2016.

Photograph of Messy Mya. *Nola*, 2018 Nola Media Group, 13 December 2016, [www.nola.com/music/index.ssf/2016/02/messy\\_my\\_a\\_big\\_freedia\\_featured.html](http://www.nola.com/music/index.ssf/2016/02/messy_my_a_big_freedia_featured.html).

Photograph of Beyoncé's hair. *InStyle*, 2017 Time Inc., 9 February 2016, [www.instyle.com/beauty/beyonce-stylist-reveals-details-hair-formation](http://www.instyle.com/beauty/beyonce-stylist-reveals-details-hair-formation).

Photograph of Beyoncé in black on the plantation porch. *Bustle*, 8 February 2016, [www.bustle.com/articles/140452-how-to-copy-beyonces-braids-from-formation-recreate-her-super-fierce-look-videos](http://www.bustle.com/articles/140452-how-to-copy-beyonces-braids-from-formation-recreate-her-super-fierce-look-videos).

Photograph of Beyoncé sitting on police car. *The Echo*, 16 February 2016, [www.theecho.com/news/beyonce-gets-into-formation/](http://www.theecho.com/news/beyonce-gets-into-formation/).

Peach, Rob. "The Fine Line Between "Identity" and "Identification": Debating Appropriation in the Case of Dolezal." *Reflect Black: African American Cultural Criticism*, 18 June 2015, [reflectblack.wordpress.com/2015/06/18/the-fine-line-between-identity-and-identification-debating-appropriation-in-the-case-of-dolezal/](http://reflectblack.wordpress.com/2015/06/18/the-fine-line-between-identity-and-identification-debating-appropriation-in-the-case-of-dolezal/). Accessed 27 January 2018.

Robbins, Bruce. "Comparative Cosmopolitanism." *Social Text* vol. 31/32 (1992): pp.169-186.

Samples.fr. "Beyoncé samples Messy Mya on 'Formation.'" *YouTube*, 8 February 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=j51X52ENYaU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j51X52ENYaU). Accessed 27 January 2018.

Sisavat, Monica. "Beyoncé Is Adorably Upstaged by Blue Ivy in Her "Formation" Music Video." *Popsugar*, 7 February 2016, [www.popsugar.com/celebrity/Blue-Ivy-Beyonce-Formation-Music-Video-Pictures-40090236](http://www.popsugar.com/celebrity/Blue-Ivy-Beyonce-Formation-Music-Video-Pictures-40090236). Accessed 31 January 2018.

Wang, Yanan. "The Black Lives Matter protest that you missed from Beyoncé's halftime show dancers." *The Washington Post*, 9 February 2016, [www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/02/09/the-black-lives-matter-tribute-that-you-missed-from-Beyoncés-halftime-show-dancers/?utm\\_term=.1d7f138d3dd3](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2016/02/09/the-black-lives-matter-tribute-that-you-missed-from-Beyoncés-halftime-show-dancers/?utm_term=.1d7f138d3dd3). Accessed 29 February 2016.

Ward, Jesmyn. "In Beyoncé's 'Formation,' A Glorification Of 'Bama' Blackness." *NPR*, 10 February 2016, [www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/02/10/466178725/in-beyonc-s-formation-a-song-for-the-bama](http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/02/10/466178725/in-beyonc-s-formation-a-song-for-the-bama). Accessed 29 February 2016.

### **About the Author**

An Assistant Professor in the English department at Tennessee Technological University, Mari E. Ramler explores the intersection of religion and science via female breast texts in new media and the public sphere. She has also written about Beyoncé for *Textshop Experiments*.

### **Notes**

[i] Nitasha T. Sharma. *Hip Hop Desis: South Asian Americans, Blackness, and a Global Race Consciousness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013.

### **Production Credits.**

Copyeditor: Daisy Levy

Editorial Assistants: Hannah Espinoza, Lauren Brentnell

Layout Designers: Daisy Levy, Hannah Espinoza

Reviewers: *constellations* is grateful to an anonymous reviewer and Candace Epps-Robertson who initially blind-reviewed this piece.