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### Racial Violence Toward Black Youth in Beyoncé's "Formation"

Beyoncé's music video for her song "Formation" is a provoking commentary on racial and gender issues in the United States. The video confronts topics that include police violence and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and deals with these issues through vivid imagery and compelling lyrics. In the four and a half minute video, one scene deals with police violence towards Black youth by playing on characteristics of the individuals involved in the scene and emphasizes the injustice of racial violence.

In the scene in question, a small child faces a dozen policemen in an empty street. The child, who happens to be Black, faces a large group of White policemen. The child dances in front of the line of policemen while the policemen stand in a power stance in front of their vehicles, the red and blue lights flashing in the background. The shields on their face masks are lowered and they look seriously at the small child dancing before them. The policemen far outnumber the child, wear bulletproof vests and have guns in their holsters. The power differential between the policemen and the child in the standoff is highly skewed towards the policemen. The policemen are much larger than the child and they have weapons that the child does not have. The child poses no threat and has little power to control the situation. Yet, when the child stops dancing and raises their arms to make a 'T' formation, the police react by raising their hands in a defensive position, as though the child were threatening them. The police do not

seem to recognize the power differential and appear to believe that the child actually poses a threat to them.

The reaction of the policemen seems absurd because the power differential between the police and the child is so great. Small children are not typically the victim of police violence and suggesting that the child might be a physical threat to the police seems illogical. A critical look at the situation reveals that the idea that any unarmed individual who has not threatened anyone being viewed as a physical threat to the police is illogical. But by reducing the age of the youth, the innocence and youth of the child is emphasized and the absurdity of the police's reaction is heightened. Likewise, the dozen or so armed police protected with face masks and bulletproof vests and positioned in power stances are used to emphasize the power of the policemen. The fact that a dozen of armed policemen are needed to control one unthreatening person is unlikely, especially when that individual is a small child. However, by increasing the number of policemen and types of defensive mechanisms they are exerting against this individual, the situation becomes more absurd. The Black youth poses no threat to the police. However, the police feel threatened and because they feel threatened, they interpret the situation as one where they are under attack. The police react defensively- in this case raising their hands in a defensive position. However, in many other cases the defensive reactions are much more violent. But because the police have misinterpreted their position of power, their reaction is unjust. Overall, by playing on particular characteristics, the power dynamic between Black youth and policemen is exaggerated and the injustice of police violence towards Black youth is revealed.

While no physical violence occurs in the scene, the scene resembles a scene in which racial violence would likely occur. We can recognize that this issue is a racial issue because in other social contexts, the policemen's reaction to a child dancing would be unacceptable. If the

child were White, this scene would not have carried the same weight because it would not have resonated with the audience as much as this scene did. Our social context makes the intention of the video clear. Iris M. Young defines racial violence as “random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person” (Young 1990, 13) In the video, the child does not provoke the police. He is simply dancing in the middle of the street, which is anything but threatening. However, the social context makes this situation familiar and in a real situation, the defensive measures taken by the police are likely to be more violent than simply than a hand gesture. Racial violence, is unfortunately a common issue in modern society and White police officers inflicting gun violence against Black youth is an event that often makes the news. Young states that there were “dozens of incidents of severe beating, killing, or rape of Blacks by police officers on duty” (Young 1990, 13) Oftentimes, this violence has no motive except to damage the person who is perceived to be threatening. In this way, this scene aligns directly with Young’s definition of racial violence.

This particular scene does not deal with many feminist issues, but instead focuses more on racial issues. However, the overall video has a feminist theme throughout it. Judith Butler states that, “feminists everywhere seek a more substantial equality for women and a more just arrangement of social and political institutions.” (Butler 2004, 174) If we use this quote to define the motives of feminists, one realizes the motivations of feminists are evident throughout the video. The scene analyzed above, criticizes the social and political institutions that allows racial violence to become commonplace. It criticizes racial violence by institutions such as police departments by exaggerating qualities until racial violence becomes absurd in our societal context. Other parts of the video push for “a more substantial equality for women” (Butler 2004, 174) For instance, the lyrics include the lines “I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making”

and “I dream it, I work hard, I grind ‘til I own it.” (Knowles-Carter 2006) The first line, references Bill Gates, a powerful and wealthy man. Beyonce implies that she might soon match the wealth and power of Bill Gates and thereby empowers other women to do the same. The second line refers to working hard to achieve her dreams. Both lines include a tone of female empowerment and uses the achievement of their goals and positions of power to push for “more substantial equality for women.” (Butler 2004, 174) Hence, using Butler’s quote as a standard for feminist motives, “Formations” is a feminist video because it empowers women and criticizes political institutions.

In summary, the music video for “Formation” emphasizes certain characteristics of police violence toward Black youth to allow viewers to see through the social context that allows these situations to occur. In this way viewers recognize the prejudices that contribute to these situations and perhaps are more capable of recognizing their own racial prejudices. Additionally, the feminist themes that run through the video push for gender equity in an empowering way. Through these methods, “Formation” pushes for a more justice world for the racially and gender oppressed.

## Bibliography

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