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Causing Conversation: Civil War Memory in Beyoncé's "Formation"

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Causing Conversation: Civil War Memory in Beyoncé's "Formation"

Abstract

Not only did Beyoncé slay in her latest music video, but she got historical. Her single "Formation" touches on feminism, oppression, sexuality, and police brutality, and her video offers a visual representation for the overall theme of African American cultural ownership. It is, of course, an essential message for contemporary discussion, and the formerly-silenced subject is beginning to achieve prevalence in the music industry, but there is something special and bold about Beyoncé's take on race: by appealing to Civil War memory and forcing viewers to accept the African American struggle for life, freedom, and success, she is shattering perceptions of one of our country's most popular areas of historical study. What's more? She's a woman. [excerpt]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Civil War Memory, Sesquicentennial, Beyoncé's "Formation", Black History, heritage

Disciplines

African American Studies | Arts and Humanities | History | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Causing Conversation: Civil War Memory in Beyoncé's "Formation"

March 9, 2016

By Annika Jensen '18

Not only did Beyoncé slay in her latest music video, but she got historical. Her single "[Formation](#)" touches on feminism, oppression, sexuality, and police brutality, and her video offers a visual representation for the overall theme of African American cultural ownership. It is, of course, an essential message for contemporary discussion, and the formerly-silenced subject is beginning to achieve prevalence in the music industry, but there is something special and bold about Beyoncé's take on race: by appealing to Civil War memory and forcing viewers to accept the African American struggle for life, freedom, and success, she is shattering perceptions of one of our country's most popular areas of historical study. What's more? She's a woman.

In some scenes, the iconic singer reconnects with her Southern roots by appearing in a Civil War era Southern-style parlor with other women of color, all sporting opulent Victorian clothing. In another, she stands clad in black outside what appears to be a large plantation home and, in an act of rebellion, flips off the camera. These historical allusions certainly create a powerful image of African American social progression, but they also present a more subtle message about the memory of slavery and the Civil War. Beyoncé is denying any attempt to erase her from our history while presenting the complexity of black lives during the Victorian era. She carefully lays out the connotations of black and white, of woman and man, and of power and submission.

What unites the historical scenes in the "Formation" video is power. Inside the mansion or plantation home, Beyoncé is dressed in ornate clothing and presents herself with dignity, demonstrating poise in her perfect posture and flowing hand movements. Aesthetically, she is the image of southern beauty, but she also has an air of domination. Traditionally, women would be considered inferior to men in the Civil War Era South, and women of color especially would be viewed through the lens of slavery, many being subject to sexual abuse and rape by their male owners. However, there are no men in the parlor scenes, only Beyoncé and a number of other well-dressed African American women, and the video certainly insinuates that they are neither owned nor abused by whiteness. The power being demonstrated in these scenes is internal; Beyoncé is not actively speaking or acting out against white oppression, but she is asserting her social dominance by commanding a presence as the head of a household and establishing black excellence. She is proving to her viewers that the African American woman in the Civil War Era is not to be interpreted as weak or insignificant; instead, her memory and identity should be respected. Additionally, Beyoncé's daughter, Blue Ivy, appears with two other African American girls, all in flowing dresses with natural hair, an example of cultural ownership and refusal of

assimilation. Their excited, energetic movement attests to the freedom they exercise over themselves, another illustration of internal power.



Beyoncé gets historical in her latest music video. Photograph via Billboard.com.

Power is also evident in the scenes outside the plantation home, but it is an external power; these scenes are more overtly defiant. The most obvious difference is that Beyoncé is dressed in black rather than cream-colored garments as was seen inside the house, evincing a clear motif of black pride and representing a departure from the proper. She stands before a group of African American men not only to show camaraderie within her race but to demonstrate female empowerment. Once again, this juxtaposes the traditional view of African American women in the South—particularly slave women—who are often portrayed as objects at the hands of their masters. Beyoncé does not hold back; she is not dressed conservatively, nor does she act politely because her power stems from frustration and a need for more competent historical understanding. It is my belief that Beyoncé is, quite frankly, sick and tired of misinterpretation and ignorance all together.

Beyoncé thus presents a Civil War Era history that emphasizes black empowerment rather than victimization or blame. She is reminiscent of the female insurrectionists of the South, former slave women who defied the peculiar institution after the issuing of the Emancipation Proclamation and endured the struggle of fugitive status to escape to freedom. While former male slaves were able to escape by working or fighting for the Union army, women lacked this

advantage and were thus presented with a greater challenge. Thus, Beyoncé's message incorporates feminism and the steadfastness of African American women in the South.

However, the overall takeaway that Queen Bey encourages is that the traditional presentation of African Americans in the South skews the way an entire race is viewed through a historical lens; while the study of the Civil War era focuses most heavily on slavery, Beyoncé is demanding a reform of the image of blackness. Through demonstrations of internal and external power, the singer expresses her frustrations and encourages African Americans, particularly women, to be empowered and work together through various emotions—anger, frustration, resentment—to establish and claim their identity.

The implications of Beyoncé's contemporary commentary of the Civil War Era are huge; though she has received backlash and scorn over her politicization of the Super Bowl 50 halftime show, her daring and colorful messages visible in "Formation" bring light to historical issues that have residual effects. She is bringing formerly-silenced racial questions into the public sphere. And, of course, she is making excellent music.

Keep slaying, Queen Bey.

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