

To Visualize the Queen Diva!

Toward Black Feminist Trans Inclusivity in Beyoncé's "Formation"

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Abstract This article discusses the sonic presence and visual absence of legendary gender-nonconforming New Orleans-based bounce music artist Big Freedia in Beyoncé's music video "Formation." "Formation" was released in February 2016 as the first piece of Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*. In this analysis the author considers the implications of Big Freedia's visual absence in the video as well as the black feminist potential of Big Freedia's vocal presence in "Formation."

Keywords blackness, gender, representation, black cultural studies, black feminism

In the early winter of 2016, Beyoncé released a music video that triggered reactions ranging from black feminist jubilation to propolice outrage.¹ Beyoncé's "Formation" captured the collective imaginary that profusely expressed itself through a proliferation of online think pieces and debates for nearly a week after its release, which is an eternity in digital time and space (Ifeany 2016; Drayton 2016; Blay 2016). What remained in the recesses of the conversations that raged about "Formation" and Beyoncé's representation of New Orleans after Katrina, the Black Power movement, #Black Lives Matter, police violence, and the colorism that still impacts African American standards of beauty was the vocal presence and visual absence of New Orleans bounce music artist Big Freedia, the Queen Diva!² While Big Freedia's sonic contribution arrives midway through the track, Messy Mya, another New Orleans-based musical artist who pushes the boundaries of gender, opens Beyoncé's "Formation" with this inciting query, "What happened at the New Wildins?"³ The haunted quality of "Formation" produces a seductive sound that captures the spectral resonances alive in New Orleans, resonances cultivated in large part through the absent presences of queer voices.

Big Freedia, the already legendary bounce music artist whose reality TV show *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce* (Big Freedia 2013–) is entering its fifth season, is featured prominently on Beyoncé’s “Formation.” Big Freedia’s wide and booming voice is heard over the plucking of a singular electrified sitar.⁴ With this vocal inclusion, Beyoncé shares the sonic space with Big Freedia but not the visual theater of the “Formation” video.

On *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*, Big Freedia’s six-foot-three-inch frame is documented wearing a range of styles, from around-the-way-girl chic to classic femme-dapper looks, and the hair is consistently laid—as it were. Big Freedia as a reality star personality and as the quintessential bounce music artist of our present moment is captivating in terms of both the perpetually bedecked appearance and the rousing tonal quality that makes Big Freedia so magnetic. Stark images of modest New Orleans homes and sparsely populated sidewalks appear in “Formation” accompanied by Big Freedia’s voice-over: “I did not come to play wit you ho’s.” Big Freedia’s illustrious declaration introduces a plantation-style porch scene in which Beyoncé, flanked by a multigenerational group of handsome black men who don tuxedos as they stare into the space just beyond the camera, is dressed in a black satin off-the-shoulder top; long, full black satin skirt; and a wide-brimmed hat with two long blond braids that extend well past her waist. Beyoncé bobs her head incisively to the tickling pluck of the sitar.⁵

Big Freedia’s voice rings out, “HaHa! I came to slay, bitch.” The lush pastoral setting, with its stoic funereal quality, is quickly juxtaposed with a scene that takes place inside a wig shop where three young black women stand shoulder to shoulder staring blankly into the camera. The woman in the middle has ocher-colored hair, wears a caramel brown jumpsuit, and strokes a wig that sits atop a mannequin bust in her hands. She stands to the right of a woman with vibrant sky-blue hair in stiletto boots that match, which both contrast her all-white romper. On her right, a woman is positioned with fashionably ripped jeans and a denim and white midy top as we hear Big Freedia pronounce, “I like corn breads and collard greens, bitch. Oh yaas you best’a believe it!” Those who are familiar with bounce music and Big Freedia’s oeuvre will immediately recognize this distinct and soul-stirring voice.

Given Big Freedia’s sonic vivification on “Formation,” a visual text that is a part of Beyoncé’s celebration of the majesty, strength, and beauty of black women that enlivens the visual album *Lemonade*, it is curious that Beyoncé chose not to feature Big Freedia’s body in the video along with the renowned voice.⁶ The history of transwomen in feminist circles or within gay and lesbian communities has been fraught with exclusion and contested admission, but rather than speculate about why Beyoncé chose not to include a visual representation of Big

Freedia in "Formation," I will focus my analysis on the meaning that circulates through this cultural text as a result of her choice.⁷

Though Big Freedia does not identify as a trans person and does accept the use of the pronouns *she* or *he*, Big Freedia's gender expression can be understood as queer, in that it exceeds and pushes the boundaries of imposed gender norms. When visiting a queer youth group in New York, during season 4 of *Big Freedia: Queen of Bounce*, Big Freedia was asked by a young LGBT activist if Big Freedia had a preferred gender pronoun. Big Freedia responded by saying, "To me, it's whatever you choose, 'he' or 'she.' I'm confident to know who I am. My fans of course prefer 'she.' I usually go with 'she' most of the time. But if somebody go with 'he,' I'm like, what's up, bra. [Big Freedia motions as if giving someone a pound.] Ya know. So, it's either or. I know who I am."⁸ Big Freedia's choice not to choose a gender pronoun lays bare the failure of gender pronouns to adequately capture the spirit, the depth, the complexity of one's gender. One mode of addressing this impossibility is the use of plural pronouns, but Big Freedia's response to the pointed question about Big Freedia's own gender pronoun usage places that rhetorical decision upon the one who beholds.

Big Freedia's gender queerness, with all the resistance to fixity and perpetual liminality that it produces, confounds mainstream representation such that a mega star like Beyoncé, who has the creative license to produce anything that she so desires, would choose to foreclose the visual representation of Big Freedia in this video. Big Freedia's vocal inclusion on the track is an expansive choice, yet an absent presence is produced when the sonic incorporation of Big Freedia's voice is met by the visual occlusion of Big Freedia's body. Big Freedia's sustained absent presence elicits the spectral quality that Beyoncé's "Formation" ushers into the cultural field.

In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Avery Gordon (2008: xvi) describes haunting as "an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely." The haunting that is produced through Big Freedia's absent presence in "Formation" calls up the unresolved social violence, the murders of transwomen, transmen, and trans people of color in epidemic proportions, as well as the threat of violence and the nonlethal assaults that trans people have to contend with in their daily lives.⁹ The violence of erasure, the refusal of visibility, the pain of a contingent inclusion in black feminist world making is actively being produced with this cultural text. The haunted feeling of "Formation" becomes amplified through the voices of the musical artists whose gender expressions destabilize entrenched and repressive gender binaries. The visual representation of Big Freedia's gender-nonconforming corporeality and

sartorial expression in “Formation” would force a recalibration or require an opening up of black womanhood to include black trans and gender-queer embodiments in the mainstream. Black feminist thought and politics that account for black lesbian sexuality have already forged a modality for inclusivity that recognizes the stakes of robust and nonhierarchical inclusion.

In the Combahee River Collective’s “Black Feminist Statement,” the scholars recognize black women’s “continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation” (Hull et al. 1982: 14). The belief that black women are inherently valuable along with the absolute dismissal of biological determinism undergirds the Combahee River Collective’s black feminist imperative around sexual politics. The “Black Feminist Statement” offers an approach to thinking about the complexities of black women’s oppression in an intersectional way before that term was coined.¹⁰ The Combahee River Collective insists, “We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously” (16). In this statement, the Combahee River Collective makes clear its commitment to developing the necessary framework to sustain a movement that will fight for the liberation of all oppressed people. The mode of analysis that the Combahee River Collective develops to address the multiplicity of black women’s experiences of race, class, and sexuality can be expanded to include our contemporary understanding of gender as multiple, nonbinary, flexible, and transformative.¹¹

As the quintessential black feminist text of 2016, the visual album *Lemonade* and the music video “Formation” must be asked to recognize the importance of visually representing black trans and gender-queer embodiments. If, as black feminists like the pathbreaking scholars who formed the Combahee River Collective have declared, the liberation of all oppressed people is a black feminist imperative, then certainly we must recognize the continuous life-and-death struggle of black trans and gender-queer people. If Big Freedia’s presence in “Formation” could have been brought out of the domain of specters and into the multivalent visual landscape that Beyoncé produced with *Lemonade*, a landscape in which an array of black womanhood is carefully arranged and portrayed, this cultural text would demonstrate that black trans and gender-queer people also have a place in this celebration of black womanhood. A black feminist imperative that recognizes the inherent value of black trans and gender-queer people demands that Big Freedia be brought into the ontology and epistemology of black womanhood in such a way that Beyoncé would not hesitate to include Big Freedia’s body in the visual landscape of the black feminist worlds that she creates. The practice of recognizing the inherent value of black trans and gender-queer lives by not only showcasing black trans and gender-queer voices but also

visualizing black trans and gender-queer embodiment takes black feminist inclusion and value recognition out of the realm of possibility and brings them into the world of actuality.¹² The act of visualizing trans and gender-queer inclusion in black feminist cultural production is radical value-building and potentially life-saving work. Being moved by Big Freedia's voice while seeing her join a black feminist chorus of power, which some call magic, is a black feminist possibility within reach.

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Notes

1. To view Beyoncé's "Formation" video, see Beyoncé 2016. The "Formation" video was the first installment of Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade*. Incidentally, "Formation" is sonically alluded to at the end of the visual album *Lemonade* but is not included in the body of it.
2. Bounce music is New Orleans party music that has the Triggerman beat. This is body-positive, sex-positive dance music in which all who enjoy the sound are encouraged to appreciate their bodies, especially their booties, and bounce to the beat. The social dance that Big Freedia, Big Freedia's dancers, and many of those who enjoy bounce music perform, invent, re-create, and perfect is twerking. For more on twerking, see Gaunt 2015.
3. Messy Mya was a comedian and bounce artist from New Orleans who was shot and killed in the Seventh Ward in 2010 (McCarthy 2010). The audio recording of Messy Mya's voice that opens Beyoncé's "Formation" is drawn from one of Messy Mya's videos, "Booking the Hoes from New Wildins" (Messy Mya 2010). In this video, Messy Mya asks the question, "What happened at the New Wildins?"
4. In 2015 Big Freedia published a memoir, *Big Freedia: God Save the Queen Diva!* (2015a), that chronicles Big Freedia's life growing up in New Orleans and the path that led Big Freedia to become a legendary bounce music artist.
5. For more discussion of Beyoncé's music videos and black femininity, see Durham 2012.
6. Big Freedia was included in the live performance of "Formation" at the concert held in New Orleans for Beyoncé's Formation World Tour in September 2016. In a BET story about Laverne Cox meeting Beyoncé for the first time at the 2017 Grammy Awards, Cox disclosed that she was invited to be featured in the "Sorry" segment of *Lemonade* but could not accept the invitation because she had already committed to starring as Dr. Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Orcutt 2017).
7. Sandy Stone's "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (2006) is a response to the feminist exclusion of transwomen. Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979) and Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) espouse transphobic arguments about the need to exclude transwomen from feminist groups. In "Good and Messy: Lesbian and Transgender Identities" Matt Richardson (2013) recounts incidents that occurred in the 1990s in a gay and lesbian youth group and

- a black lesbian organization in which black transwomen were either excluded or had contested admission.
8. This interview took place at Speak Out Loud, an LGBT youth support group in New York, and is featured in "Freedia Takes Manhattan" (Big Freedia 2015b).
 9. The number of trans people who are killed each year is devastating. *The Advocate* produced a slide show of the trans people who were killed in 2016 (*Advocate* 2016).
 10. The term *intersectionality* was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics."
 11. The Combahee River Collective's "Black Feminist Statement" is a foundational black feminist text. Other central black feminist texts that offer important critiques of race, gender, sexuality, and class are Angela Davis's *Women, Race, and Class* (1982); Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984); Paula Giddings's *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (1984); Joy James's *Shadow Boxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics* (1999); and bell hooks's *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1982).
 12. Though I am arguing here for the inclusion of trans visibility in Beyoncé's visual album *Lemonade*, specifically in the "Formation" video, I recognize that trans visibility is not simple and is not the solution to violence against trans people. Talia Mae Bettcher's "Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion" (2007) discusses the complexities, precarity, and life-threatening danger of being seen as trans.

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