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# Exploring the Uses of the Liberal Arts through Beyoncé's "Formation"

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## Exploring the Uses of the Liberal Arts through Beyoncé's "Formation"

### Abstract

I first shared this assignment in LaGuardia's Spring 2017 mini-seminar *Introducing Your Discipline in the First Year Seminar*. I developed the assignment drawing on both Beyoncé's 2016 Super Bowl halftime show and her music video "Formation" to initiate a discussion about how the Liberal Arts may inform our readings of popular culture images and performances. Through an analysis of content and form of Beyoncé's musical performance and the video, students are invited to reflect on the ways in which a Liberal Arts education can contribute to a deeper understanding of the social issues addressed in the work. In our guided discussion, students frequently offer observations on historical and cultural contexts as well as power relations based on race and gender. We then explore the role of a liberal arts education (theatre and performance studies, history, political science, sociology, anthropology, music, etc.) in connecting and deciphering the various discourses that intersect in cultural events. To further familiarize students with the various disciplines that make up the Liberal Arts, we then explore the curriculum of the Liberal Arts: Social Science and Humanities major in the college catalogue. In an in-class activity, students are tasked with finding at least two courses that connect with the issues addressed in Beyoncé's "Formation" and explaining the ways in which these courses may inform our understanding of the song. As a third step, students include their findings in a formal reflection on the role of the Liberal Arts and their place in it. While the in-class activities are ungraded (but count for students' participation grade), the reflection is 10% of the final grade.

Note: If you are interested in integrating other aspects of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* album in your pedagogy, also consider my colleague Bethany Holmstrom's work:

<https://bethanyholmstrom.net/2016/08/30/lemonadesyllabus-switcheroo/>.

While Holmstrom developed her assignments for the composition classroom, some of them (especially Paper 4) may easily be adapted for the Liberal Art First Year seminar.

## Exploring the Uses of the Liberal Arts through Beyoncé’s “Formation”

### Step 1: Guided Visual Inquiry (ca. 15 minutes)

While watching Beyoncé’s Super Bowl halftime show and her “Formation” video, jot down any messages communicated through the performance/imagery/text. Try to respond to the following:

- What do you see? (What is the setting? Who are the people you see? Are there any recurring images? What historical and contemporary events or figures are alluded to through imagery?)
- What is the story that the song/video tells? How does the genre of the text (music video/performance) affect the way you experience it?
- Are there any parts of the song/video that resonate with you personally? What do the images make you think about?
- Can you think of any other texts (books, newspaper articles, songs, movies, TV shows, etc.) that address related issues?
- Can you think of any high school or college classes that would help you learn more about the issues addressed in the video?

### Step 2: Small Group and Class Discussion (ca. 15 minutes for small group and 30 minutes for class discussion)

Share your ideas in small groups first. Be prepared to share three major ideas with the large group.

### Step 3: In-Class Research Activity (ca. 1 hour, including research and discussion of findings)

Review the LaGuardia course catalogue and find any courses in the Liberal Arts major that might deepen your understanding of some of the issues we just discussed. Pick two and be ready to introduce the course and its discipline, and explain how it relates to Beyoncé’s “Formation.”

### Step 4: Formal Reflection (prepared at home; usually the first of three formal reflections in my course)

Write a 400-word reflection on the purpose of a liberal arts education and your place in it. Consider the following questions:

- What kinds of knowledge and skills does a liberal arts education provide (draw on our discussion of Beyoncé’s “Formation” and your research of the Liberal Arts major in LaGuardia’s college catalogue)?
- What do you believe to be the most important things people need to learn to become active members of a democratic society and good global citizens?
- How do you expect the liberal arts to influence you as a person?

Refer to at least one of the texts or TED Talks we discussed in class (consider especially Beyoncé’s “Formation,” Martha Nussbaum’s “Citizens of the World,” and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s “The Danger of a Single Story”), giving concrete examples of the contents of a liberal arts education that you think may help you in your personal development and benefit society at large.