

# "This a different angle": Dancing at the Louvre

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### Abstract

Sulla scia delle proteste globali che hanno segnato l'estate del 2020, come quelle di Black Lives Matter e dell'abbattimento delle statue negli Stati Uniti, questo contributo ripropone l'idea della danza nei musei come forma di "archeologia radicale". Essa è presentata come una storiografia radicale per quei corpi di colore che, in precedenza, sono stati resi invisibili, o solo parzialmente visibili, da una pratica oppressiva della storia. L'articolo esamina un caso centrale dal punto di vista degli studi accademici sulla danza, il video musicale *APESHIT* (2018) di Beyoncé e Jay-Z Carter, girato al Louvre, e ne offre un'attenta analisi coreografica tra movimento e immobilità, al fine di sostenere la danza nei musei come forma metaforica di "abbattimento di statue", una forma che può sfidare con forza lo *status quo* della storia dell'arte.

In the wake of the global Black Lives Matter protests and the statue-toppling that marked the summer of 2020, this article reappraises the idea of dance in the museum as a form of "radical archaeology". It presents dance in the museum as a radical historiography for those bodies of colour previously rendered invisible, or only partially visible, by an oppressive curating of history. From a dance scholarship perspective, the article examines a central case study, Beyoncé and Jay-Z Carter's music video *APESHIT* (2018), filmed in the Musée du Louvre (France), offering a close analysis of its complex choreographies of movement and stillness to argue for dance in the museum as a metaphorical form of statue-toppling, one that can powerfully challenge the art historical *status quo*.

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## «This a different angle»: Dancing at the Louvre

### Introduction: A Story of Falling Statues

It is June 2020: I am writing this article in the same week that a group of protestors in Bristol (UK) pulled a statue of slave-trader Edward Colston<sup>1</sup> from its pedestal and rolled it into the harbour waters; the same week that the streets of Oxford (UK) resounded with renewed calls that “Rhodes Must Fall” and the statue of British colonialist Cecil Rhodes be removed from the façade of one of its Colleges; the same week that the statue of the West Indian merchant and enslaver Robert Milligan was removed from the West India docks in London (UK); and the same week that, across the Channel, a statue of Léopold II was toppled in Antwerp, Belgium. These calls and actions for colonial statues to fall have come in the wake of global Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the killing of an unarmed black man, George Floyd, by a police officer in Minneapolis (USA) on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2020. In the UK, much of the public and, particularly, the right-wing media discourse on this statue toppling, monument removing and renaming of buildings has focussed on what this might mean in terms of erasing, re-writing or even – and here, the irony is astounding – “white-washing” history<sup>2</sup>. Yet the historiographical argument is clear: while the toppling of statues does not erase but rather highlights history, it is statues themselves that have contributed to the erasure of specific stories of people and cultures for centuries. As historian Tanja Bueltmann reminds us, statues are often far less historical than they are ahistorical, as they are

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1. Edward Colston (1636-1721) was a Bristol-born merchant, philanthropist and Tory member of parliament who was heavily involved in the transatlantic slave trade, eventually becoming Deputy Governor of the Royal African Company (1689-90). His legacy in Bristol has long been debated with repeated calls for his statue to be removed. Cf. Olivette Otele, *Slavery and Visual Memory: What Britain can learn from France*, in «Open Democracy», August 29<sup>th</sup> 2016, online: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/slavery-and-visual-memory-what-britain-can-learn-from-france/> (accessed 24/10/2020). On 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020, Colston's statue was finally toppled by Black Lives Matter protestors and thrown into the harbour. The statue has subsequently been removed and will now be placed in a museum, along with the ropes that were used to topple it, and placards from the protest.

2. See, for example, the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's statements on Twitter following the toppling of Colston, where he wrote that «to tear [statues] down would be to lie about our history, and impoverish the education of generations to come», as cited in Peter Walker – Alexandra Topping – Steven Morris, *Boris Johnson Says Removing Statues is to Lie About our History*, in «The Guardian», June 12<sup>th</sup> 2020, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jun/12/boris-johnson-says-removing-statues-is-to-lie-about-our-history-george-floyd> (accessed 19/6/2020).

selective in their historicising<sup>3</sup>. Statues are about who has the power to select what, and whom, we remember, and whom, and what, we forget. This is a matter of who is held up on a pedestal and who has the power to put him there.

The actions of those protestors on a summer's Sunday afternoon in Bristol should not cause us, as historian Charlotte Riley puts it, «to worry about “re-writing” history [because] it's literally what historians do»<sup>4</sup>. As Riley points out, historians are constantly engaged in the process of re-evaluating and reinterpreting the past: she reminds us that while «the past may be dead [...] history is alive, and it is constructed in the present»<sup>5</sup>. As such, the Black Lives Matters protestors in Bristol, Oxford, London and Antwerp are not only history-makers themselves; they can, in fact, be seen as historiographers, and their actions as publicly debating, questioning and re-writing history. Through such actions, at least in Britain, the lines of public debate about heritage and racism are now being decisively re-evaluated and redrawn. The context of the Black Lives Matter protests have enabled citizens to powerfully use statues and museums as public spaces to re-frame how we think and feel about difficult and uncomfortable histories of colonialism, slavery, oppression, and about anti-blackness and social justice in the twenty-first century. In Britain, they are becoming places where the public can assemble to acknowledge the on-going nature of the country's colonial past and together work for collective, transformative action. Sometimes, bringing a statue down with ropes and rolling it into the harbour is part of that action. In statues and in museums, historically, we see a tidy, if subjective, curating of the past. Both are sites of public memory, of common remembering; they are where we come together to remember (or to forget) and where what we remember (and what we forget) is very often decided for us, where the past is neatly boxed into a glass display case, curated and framed for us in a very specific way. However, the past cannot always be so tidily enclosed, framed and mummified. Sometimes the glass of the vitrine must be smashed and the statue must fall as we confront those difficult and uncomfortable histories.

However, it is important to note that due to the institutional developments brought about by the movement of the “New Museology”<sup>6</sup>, museums have gradually become – and are still becoming – much more fluid, transient spaces where the historicized past meets the present moment. Even if we believe that Colston's statue should remain lying at the bottom of the Atlantic, its removal and the plan to eventually place it in a museum along with the ropes that toppled it and Black Lives Matter placards

3. Cf. Tanya Bueltmann, Twitter thread, June 9<sup>th</sup> 2020, online: [https://twitter.com/cliodiaspora?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle-%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/cliodiaspora?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle-%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) (accessed 19/6/2020).

4. Charlotte Riley, *Don't worry about “rewriting” history*, in «The Guardian», June 10<sup>th</sup> 2020, online: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jun/10/rewriting-history-historians-statue-past> (accessed 24/10/2020).

5. *Ibidem*.

6. Since the 1970s, museums have undergone significant and radical changes, with political and economic pressures leading to a shift away from collections and towards a more viewer-centred ethos. This self-reflexivity that attempts to ensure greater accessibility to these public spaces and to put an end to the traditional elitism of the museum has become known as a “new museology”.

becomes an important action too. Significantly for my argument here, it is within such a framework of the historicised past meeting the present moment that performance has entered the museum. As museology scholar Helen Rees Leahy suggests, it is «the inherent transience and fluidity of performance that confronts the apparent solidity and stasis of the museum»<sup>7</sup>. Performance in the museum can be part of a confrontation with the past: not only smashing through the glass of the vitrine, but also finding ways for that fragmented and fragmentary past to be reassembled in different ways. Through performance, history can be re-membered differently and previously erased or deliberately forgotten histories can resurface<sup>8</sup>.

In witnessing the collective protests and statue toppling that have been occurring, I have been prompted to think again about dance in the museum and what I have elsewhere termed dance's potential in the museum to be a means of «radical archaeology»<sup>9</sup>. Following archaeologists Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley's groundbreaking argument, I have previously argued that the dancer in the museum is navigating past and present. Like the Bristol protestors, in her own way, she is statue toppling; she is “doing” history, remembering, story-telling. For choreography, like archaeology, continually inscribes «the polyvalent qualities of the past»<sup>10</sup> in its present-ness. However,

whereas archaeologists aim to survey, excavate and produce texts, and there is rarely recourse to an empathetic (or bodily) understanding of the past, in my own museum practice, the dance aims to communicate the emotions and sensations of [female] bodies from the past to its viewers and to encourage in them an empathetic, visceral connection to the past<sup>11</sup>.

This “radical archaeology” that takes place in the *bodies* of both the dancer and the viewer, is an essential principle behind my own dance practice in the museum where the choreographic reassembly of fragments of bodies, stories and perspectives (akin to an archaeological re-piecing together of broken shards) points to a mode of dismembering and remembering history<sup>12</sup>. As a white feminist scholar, I

7. Helen Rees-Leahy, *Watching Me, Watching You: Performance and Performativity in the Museum*, in Tony Jackson – Jenny Kidd (edited by), *Performing Heritage: Research, Practice and Innovation in Museum Theatre and Live Interpretation*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 2011, pp. 26-38: p. 28.

8. On notions on the dismembering and remembering of history through performance in the archaeological museum, see further Marie-Louise Crawley, *Likely Terpsichore? Dancing in the Museum of Ancient History and Archaeology*, in «Performance Paradigm», n. 13, 2017, pp. 66-79; Marie-Louise Crawley, «*The crafted body*»: *Thoughts on Dancing, Viewing and Remembering*, in Simon Ellis – Hetty Blades – Charlotte Waelde (edited by), *A World of Muscle, Bone and Organs: Research and Scholarship in Dance*, C-DaRE, Coventry 2018, pp. 59-75; Marie-Louise Crawley, *Dance as Radical Archaeology*, in «Dance Research Journal», vol. LII, n. 2, 2020, pp. 88-100.

9. Marie-Louise Crawley, *Dance as Radical Archaeology*, cit., p. 88.

10. Michael Shanks – Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 20.

11. Marie-Louise Crawley, *Dance as Radical Archaeology*, cit., p. 93.

It is worth noting that there is some overlap with my own propositions in the field of sensory classical archaeology (e.g. Eleanor Betts, *Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture*, Routledge, Abingdon 2017) but sensory classical Roman archaeology has, to date, mainly focused on the sonic and haptic rather than the kinaesthetic.

12. My idea of dance as radical archaeology also chimes with work being proposed in the fields of both phenomenology and sensory studies in archaeology. I am indebted to the Sensory Studies in Antiquity network

have always thought of dance's radical potential in the museum for doing historiography in terms of revealing previous unrealized female histories in a traditionally patrilineal space. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests, my attention has turned once again to the "whiteness" of the marble statues in the archaeological museum – and indeed my own white body and the white mask that I wear in my museum dances<sup>13</sup> – and I have begun to think about the potential for dance as radical historiography for bodies of colour rendered invisible (or only partially visible) by a tidy and oppressive curating of history. In this week of statue toppling, I have thought repeatedly of one very striking museum dance that deserves another look in the light of black lives mattering: *APESHIT*, a 2018 music video by hip-hop artists the Carters (otherwise known as Beyoncé and Jay-Z).

### ***APESHIT* (2018): The Carters' Louvre takeover**

Directed by Ricky Saiz and choreographed by Flemish-Moroccan choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, *APESHIT* was the first music video to be released from the Carters' album *Everything is Love* (2018). Filmed inside France's Musée du Louvre over two nights in May 2018, the video was released on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2018. As concerns how radical dance can be in an art history and archaeology museum, *APESHIT* is quite the statement. With their chorus of dancers, all men and women of colour, Beyoncé and Jay-Z stage a take-over of the museum and, in doing so, powerfully dance, rap and sing, underscoring themes of cultural ownership, protest and the resistance of black bodies and histories in whitewashed spaces and, by extrapolation, throughout History. As art historian James Smalls has written, this video is «all about bodies [...] about establishing a new order in which black bodies seize and command cultural and physical spaces from which they have traditionally been excluded and are typically marginalized»<sup>14</sup>. Indeed, as Jay-Z raps in a lyric that repeats throughout the track, the perspective on how this performance work presents black history and the representation of bodies of colour is clear: «this a different angle». This is a work about reimagining history, and about reassembling "collections" so that they include, and focus on, black bodies<sup>15</sup>.

Above all, it is important to note the high and complicated stakes of the video's location given the Louvre's status as one of Europe's most famous art and history museums. On one level, in a track that

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([www.sensorystudiesinantiqy.com](http://www.sensorystudiesinantiqy.com)) for pointing me towards the current promotion of the study of senses in the ancient world among archaeologists and ancient historians.

13. See my performance in *Likely Terpsichore? (Fragments)*, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, Oxford (UK), 2018, online: <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/likely-terpsichore-fragments-solo-durational-dance-work> (accessed 19/6/2020).

14. James Smalls, *Crazy in Louvre how Beyoncé and Jay-Z Exploit Western Art History to Ask Who Controls Black Bodies*, in «Frieze», 29<sup>th</sup> June 2018, online: <https://frieze.com/article/crazy-louvre-how-beyonce-and-jay-z-exploit-western-art-history-ask-who-controls-black-bodies> (accessed 19/6/2020).

15. Throughout this essay, following definitions outlined by Reni Eddo-Lodge, I use bodies of colour to describe bodies that are not white; and the word black «to describe people of African and Caribbean heritage, including mixed-race people», cf. Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, Bloomsbury, London 2017, p. xvi.

speaks of Beyoncé and Jay-Z's fame, wealth and having "made it" despite the odds – «I can't believe we made it», as they rap throughout – that the Carters can afford to hire out the Louvre for two nights to make a music video in which the first and last shots of them show them in a private audience with Leonardo da Vinci's *La Gioconda* (c. 1503-1506) is a clear demonstration of their wealth. Yet the choice of location for this particular video goes deeper. Indeed, it is about *status* in all senses of the word. As I have outlined above, museums are where we come to remember our past, and our art and our cultural history. Furthermore, they are complicated spaces where not only is culture and history displayed but where it is curated. They are public archives in the ancient Greek sense of the home of the ἄρχων, the tyrant who holds the power – and it is those in power who choose what is displayed in, and excluded from, museum collections. As classicist Helen Morales is quick to point out, the Louvre museum houses about six thousand paintings, «but only twenty-one women artists have works in the collection, and none are identified as women of colour»<sup>16</sup>. In addition, there are few works in the collection that feature people of colour who are not slaves<sup>17</sup>. Originally a royal palace and a private art collection, the Louvre was turned into a national, public and free space in 1783. Its layout – and the layout of the galleries that are principally featured in *APESHIT* – was originally designed to show France as the rightful heir to the traditions of ancient Egypt, Greece, Rome and the Italian Renaissance. However, like many other archaeological and art history museums that face accusations of theft, unethical acquisition and cultural appropriation, the Louvre's is a murky history with many "masterpieces" stolen by Napoléon Bonaparte, emperor of France. Stories of plunder and of cultural appropriation lie at the very heart of the Louvre's transition from private palace to public museum. As Morales outlines, further complicating matters is the vision of Napoleonic France as the "new" Rome. The Louvre's foundational narrative is that of classical antiquity as the basis for Western European civilisation, «a by-word that is once more becoming code for white Euro-American superiority»<sup>18</sup>. The Napoleonic galleries of the Louvre are whitewashed spaces. What is significant in Beyoncé and Jay-Z Carter's "takeover" of the Louvre is exactly that: theirs is a takeover of a traditionally white space with bodies of colour. However, not only does *APESHIT* «criticise the exclusion of black people and culture from the Louvre [...] it also goes beyond that, by reimagining the space and its collections in ways that create new icons, perspectives, and priorities. It acts as a kind of restorative myth-making»<sup>19</sup>.

16. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths*, Wildfire, London 2020, pp. 99-119: p. 110.

17. Most of the art from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas is housed in another of Paris' museums, the Musée du Quai Branly; and only a very small collection is displayed in the Denon wing of the Louvre.

18. *Ivi*, p. 108. Recent classical scholarship (Donna Zuckerberg, *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2018; Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit.) has pointed out that this may be partly due to the current rise of online "red pill" communities who appropriate ideas from classical antiquity to justify misogynist and racist narratives.

19. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., p. 111.

As such, *APESHIT* is quite clearly dance performance as radical historiography. The title of the work itself is indicative of this: “apeshit” is a North American slang term for “expressing wild excitement and anger”<sup>20</sup>. When the Carters sing here about the «crowd going apeshit», they mean it in a double sense: not only in terms of excited audiences enjoying their performances, but in terms of a crowd of angry protestors. While protest and social consciousness are not new themes in hip-hop culture<sup>21</sup>, a hip-hop protest in such a space as the Louvre is a new development<sup>22</sup>. Beyoncé, Jay-Z and their dancers are indeed raving in the Louvre, in both senses of the word, and they have every cause to do so<sup>23</sup>.

## Re-framing History

*APESHIT* opens reflectively, in relative silence, which might be likened to the ambient silence of the museum, bar the noises of passing traffic, a church bell tolling and the wail of a police siren denoting the sign of things to come. It is night and outside the museum a black male dancer with angel wings (reminiscent of a figure from director Wim Wenders’ *Wings of Desire*, 1987) crouches on the stone steps of the Louvre’s *parvis*, clasping his hands in a gesture of prayer or even, perhaps, wringing them in anguish. The video then cuts to a shot of the ceiling of the Louvre’s *Galerie d’Apollon*, bathed in pink, blue, green and yellow light. There is a series of fragmented close-ups of a painting of the Virgin Mary, perhaps holding the body of Christ, once taken down from the cross in some sort of *Pietà*, a motif that will later be repeated in the video with a woman holding a male body close to her. We hear the sound of footsteps on the museum’s marble floors drawing closer and as soon as the beat begins, an establishing

20. Nor can we ignore the title’s allusion to the racist trope of comparing black people to apes, an idea that is also clear in Jay-Z’s final solo verse («I’m a gorilla in the fuckin’ coupe/Finna pull up in the zoo/I’m like Chief Keef meet Rafiki, who been lyin’ “King” to you?»). Furthermore, at various points underneath the beat, there is a sample of the sound of apes screaming. In the Eighteenth Century galleries of the Louvre, these lyrics and sound effects resound loudly: we cannot help but be reminded of racist Eighteenth Century anthropological studies of racial difference.

21. Since its origins in the Bronx, New York City (USA), in the early 1970s, protest has been a motif running through hip-hop culture and hip-hop has spoken loud to racial inequity. Early examples include Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five’s *The Message* (1982) and Public Enemy’s *Fight the Power* (1989).

22. However, as Alicia Caticha has pointed out, rap has been performed at the Louvre before: in 2006, writer Toni Morrison invited slam poets from Paris’ suburbs to perform in front of Géricault’s *Raft of the Medusa*, the same painting we see Jay-Z rapping in front of in *APESHIT*; cfr. Alicia Caticha, *Madame Récamier as Tableau Vivant: Marble and the Classical Ideal in Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s Apesh\*t*, in «Journal 18: A journal of Eighteenth Century Art and Culture», 27<sup>th</sup> January 2020, online: <http://www.journal18.org/nq/madame-recamier-as-tableau-vivant-marble-and-the-classical-ideal-in-beyonce-and-jay-zs-apesht-by-alicia-caticha/> (accessed 19/6/2020). On the 2006 performances, see further Alan Riding, *Rap and Film at the Louvre? What’s Up With That?*, in «New York Times», 21<sup>th</sup> November 2006, online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/21/books/21morr.html> (accessed 19/6/20).

23. While the analysis that I offer here is predominantly from a dance perspective and a musical analysis is beyond my intention, it is worth noting *APESHIT*’s connection to trap music, a sub-genre of hip-hop that emerged in Atlanta (USA) in the 1990s. *APESHIT* adheres to common trap conventions, alternating between sung and shouted moments, the rapid triple flow of the rapping punctuated by vocal adlibs and noise elements. As such, the song itself is «a sonic palimpsest» (Gabriel Ellis, *On APESHIT’s Trapness*, in «Journal of Popular Music Studies», vol. XXX, n. 4, December 2018, pp. 22-24: p. 23), a complex layering of musical and verbal fragments, marked by striking antiphony that serves to both express individuality and affirm collective identity (cf. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Boston 1993, p. 79).



shot shows Beyoncé and Jay-Z in his and hers pastel suits standing in front of *La Gioconda* and looking directly to camera. A tracking shot pulls focus away from the famous painting to the figures standing in front of it: the famous white face fades away, as the famous black faces come into view. More than the white face figure fixed in pigment on the canvas, the Carters' are living, breathing faces and bodies. The shot that follows sees the Carters standing at the top of the museum's famous Daru staircase, standing underneath the winged *Nike of Samothrace*, a chorus of female dancers wearing flesh-coloured bodysuits in a variety of skin tones lying on the staircase. As the first lyrics begin, the dancers rise up in unison in a series of Graham-style "pleadings" (a series of repetitive contraction and release movements lying prone). With this movement, and the still, sculptural bodies suddenly stirring into dance action, a collection of statues come to life, so begins the Carters' fast-paced museum tour which throughout combines striking juxtapositions of movement and stillness, interspersing Cherkaoui's choreography with still images from the museum collection. As such, this is a (art) history tour being re-written in the moment of performance by the bodies of colour occupying the traditionally "white" space<sup>24</sup>. As several commentators (Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, 2020; James Smalls, *Crazy in Louvre*, 2018) have pointed out, throughout the video, there is a vibrant juxtaposition between the sculptural or painted white bodies in the museum and the dancing black bodies, between the stillness of the white marble sculptures and the mobility of the black dancers: «There is a sheer joy in the contrasts here: between the white bodies on the walls and the black bodies in front of them, between the powerful movement of the dancers and the stillness of the artwork, between the reverent silence of the museum and the exuberant sound of the music»<sup>25</sup>.

However, from a dance analysis point of view, I would argue that the relationship between stillness and movement here is yet further meaningful and complex. It is more than a simple juxtaposition of "white" fixity and "black" mobility. At several points, as I will argue further below, it is the shifting of the dancers themselves between stillness and movement that is perhaps more significant.

Throughout, the Louvre's collection becomes the backdrop for the dance and the music; the viewer's focus is consistently drawn to the dancing, singing bodies in the foreground. This shift in focus points to the Carters, and not the Louvre collection, as the real artwork<sup>26</sup>. In another shot that occurs later in the video, a chorus of dancers positioned on plinths supplant the museum's white classical sculptures. Here, I am reminded of the Bristol protest where, once Colston had been toppled, black

24. Interestingly, following the video's release, in July 2018 the Louvre began to offer ninety-minute guided tours based on the works featured: <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/louvre-beyonce-jay-z-apeshit-video-696636/> (accessed 19/6/2020).

25. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., p. 112.

26. This is not a new approach for Jay-Z, who used a similar technique in the video of his single *Picasso Baby* (2013), which was filmed at New York's Pace Gallery (USA) and inspired by the work of performance artist Marina Abramović (in particular, *The Artist is Present*, 2010). In the video, Jay-Z is positioned on a stage as the "artwork", and gallery visitors queue to have the opportunity of him performing the song directly to them as a one-to-one experience.

activist bodies took up the empty space on the plinth to further protest. By their action of taking up Colston's place on the plinth, they could be seen to be "re-writing" history, their bodies supplanting his. In *APESHIT*, the Carters and their dancers quite literally step into the museum collection, and through such an action, they ask the viewer to reflect upon how the art collection – and history – is being re-framed. Choreographically, the apotheosis of this re-framing comes with Beyoncé's powerful dancing as she agitates swathes of white material in front of the winged *Nike of Samothrace*. The headless body of the sculpture is here eclipsed by the vibrancy of the live dancer: the classical "white" Nike (the ancient Greek goddess of Victory) is eclipsed by a victorious and famous black woman, re-making herself into a living mythological heroine, framing herself as no less than a living goddess<sup>27</sup>. At another moment in the video, Beyoncé stands in front of the famous *Venus de Milo* sculpture – the first time she is in stillness, at two later- points she is dancing – and both her still pose and then her movements echo the statue's form and point out its fragmentation. Beyoncé's arms "complete" the fragmented statue and, as such, the dance does the work of the restoration and the reworking of history. For me, both these examples of Beyoncé's dance in the Louvre work as examples of what I call the "fragmentary monumental", an action that – by "completing" the fragmentary presentation of monuments in the museum, through the dance, present a different angle of the collection and might thus be able to resituate oppressed bodies on the inside of power but on their own terms, and, eventually, to enable an alternative means of viewing history.

Furthermore, as she dances in front of both of these classical sculptures, the juxtaposition of Beyoncé's «black body with the white marble challenges long-held assumptions about whiteness, antiquity and beauty»<sup>28</sup>. It reminds the viewer to question the power of the "whiteness" that is at stake in the museum. Indeed, as recent classical scholarship<sup>29</sup> has reminded us, not all ancient statues were white. They were polychromatic: they were brightly coloured, and they did not always portray white people. The striking way in which the statues in *APESHIT* are lit – particularly the blue light cast on the white *Venus de Milo* and on *Hermes Tying His Sandal* – points out this forgotten polychromy. The lighting of the statues and the dancing bodies in front of them remind us that history is not always what it seems; it is not always what those in power have told us it is. The juxtapositions at work here again

27. It is important to note that Beyoncé has a history of reworking mythical heroines and goddesses into her imagery and her performances: she has previously cast herself as Venus (in a series of photographs on Instagram in 2017 to announce her pregnancy), Nefertiti (Coachella performance, 2018), and as the Yoruba goddess Oshun, Venus and the Virgin Mary (Grammy Awards ceremony, 2017). On this, see further, Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., pp. 104-109. As Helen Morales points out, in this, Beyoncé is part of a wider tradition of black activist feminist art – see Kara Walker's installations *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) and *Safety Curtain at the Vienna State Opera House* (1998-1999); hip-hop artist Monae Smith's work as Medusa, "the lyrical seducer", Dorothea Smartt's poetry collection *Connecting Medium* (2001) and Robin Coste Hughes' poetry collection *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (2017).

28. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., p. 113.

29. Especially Sarah Bond, *Why We Need to Start Seeing the Classical World in Color*, in «Hyperallergic», June 17<sup>th</sup> 2017, online: <https://hyperallergic.com/383776/why-we-need-to-start-seeing-the-classical-world-in-color/> (accessed 19/6/2020).

point out how the traditionally curated vision of European history has, like its classical statuary, been whitewashed. Throughout this video, it is the power and “liveness” of the dance that helps the viewer to see this.

One of the video’s most powerful dance sequences sees Beyoncé in the centre of a chorus-line of female dancers in their nude bodysuits, positioned directly in front of Jacques-Louis David’s *Sacre de l’empereur Napoléon I<sup>er</sup> et couronnement de l’impératrice Joséphine dans la cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris, le 2 décembre 1804* (1807). In the way that the shot is framed both choreographically and cinematographically, it appears that Napoléon is crowning Beyoncé rather than the Joséphine. The black Creole woman<sup>30</sup> replaces the white Creole woman, just as «Beyoncé and Jay-Z become the new royalty of the Louvre»<sup>31</sup>. The choreographic crowning physicalizes the motif of the couple as Twenty-First Century royalty taking over the Louvre “palace”, a space previously denied to bodies like theirs; a motif that echoes throughout the song in the recurring lyric, «I can’t believe we made it». This same lyric takes on greater significance when it occurs first with the couple’s sculptural stillness in front of the sculpture of the *Great Sphinx of Tanis*, and then again with the group shot of the crowd of dancers moving furiously and “going apeshit” in the same location. For while the Louvre displays ancient Egyptian art along with the ancient Greek and Roman art, and can thus be seen to be appropriating and claiming African art as part of a Eurocentric art history, this lyric sees the Carters claiming this heritage back: the line «I can’t believe we made it» here speaks to African artists and their descendants. There is something significant in the stillness within the dance at these moments, in the ways in which Beyoncé, Jay-Z and the dancers shift from sculptural stillness into sudden, vibrant motion. For me, this speaks back to performance theorist André Lepecki’s reading of anthropologist Nadia Seremataki’s concept of «still-acts»<sup>32</sup> as the moment of the refusal of «the sedimentation of history into neat layers»<sup>33</sup>. It is that moment of stillness before the eruption into movement where the layers of history come crashing away, that «*moment of exit from historical dust*»<sup>34</sup>. In such moments, the stillness in the dance allows for a different temporality, a new relationship with the time and space of history, one that is no longer chronological, but unstable, contractile and fragmentary, one that is no longer diachronic but synchronic, allowing different angles, different stories, different bodies and different histories to emerge.

As such, *APESHIT* consistently reframes European art history and thus also reframes perspectives on race, bodies and power. Not only is background swapped for foreground, but tiny details in paintings are focussed on and positioned in sharp juxtaposition with the dancing, moving bodies, so

30. Beyoncé makes claim to her Creole ancestry in her song *Formation* (2016). Joséphine de Beauharnais was born in Les Trois-Îlets, on the Caribbean island of Martinique.

31. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., p. 113.

32. André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement*, Routledge, Abingdon 2006, p. 15.

33. *Ibidem*.

34. Nadia Seremataki, *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, p. 12 (my emphasis).

that bodies that have previously been hidden or rendered invisible in the art-works themselves are revealed. While several art historical studies have already to date examined this in detail<sup>35</sup> and the close focus of this article is on the choreographic, I do want to cite one example here and that is Paolo Veronese's *Le nozze di Cana* (1563). In this canvas, the black bodies of servants are present in the painting, but they are hidden in corners and easily overlooked; juxtaposed with the vibrancy of the dancers' bodies, they are suddenly thrown into sharp relief. The viewer is called to do the work to see the bodies that have historically been overlooked: it is the dancers' dancing bodies that offer the lens through which we might re-view these painted bodies, and begin to reassemble bodily histories previously rendered invisible. This re-viewing becomes yet more pressing as, throughout the video, there are significant allusions to artworks by artists of colour that have, until now, been "invisible" in such a canonical space as the Louvre. For example, the hair-styling scene in front of *La Gioconda* echoes a painting from Carrie Mae Weems' *Kitchen Table Series* (1990) and the hand-holding dance of Beyoncé and her chorus in front of David's *Coronation* is reminiscent of Faith Ringgold's story quilt, itself significantly entitled *Dancing at the Louvre*<sup>36</sup> and from which I have borrowed the title for this essay. Through such rich visual allusions, akin to the culture of inter-textual and musical sampling in hip-hop, the Carters can be seen to be reclaiming a space for artists of colour in the "white" space of the Louvre: and it is both the positioning and movement of the dancers' bodies that enable this powerful re-visioning. *APESHIT*'s visual and choreographic call to review received historical narratives gains in urgency throughout its six minutes: however, it is particularly potent at the moments where the choreography becomes explicitly one of protest.

## Broken bodies, protesting bodies

It is undeniable that protest is a central theme of *APESHIT*. At times, the crowd «going apeshit» is an angry, dancing crowd. This anger is no less eloquent, but arguably more so, for the shifts between the fluidity and vibrancy of the choreography and the stillness at work within it. As I have pointed out above, sometimes this is a shift between the still images of the artwork and the moving, dancing bodies; sometimes, it is the stillness within the choreography that does the work of protest. In the following section, I want to offer a close examination of three striking examples of where in the video this can

35. See especially Constance Grady, *The meaning behind the classical paintings in Beyoncé and Jay-Z's Apeshit*, in «Vox», 19<sup>th</sup> June 2018, online: <https://www.vox.com/culture/2018/6/19/17476212/apeshit-video-beyonce-jay-z-carters-portrait-negresse-benoist> (accessed 19/6/2020); Ariel Lebeau, *An Art History Expert Breaks Down Beyoncé and Jay-Z's APESHIT Video*, in «Fader», June 18<sup>th</sup> 2018, online: <https://www.thefader.com/2018/06/18/beyonce-jay-z-apeshit-art-history-expert-louvre-mona-lisa> (accessed 19/6/2020); Carol Vernallis, *Tracing the Carters Through the Galleries*, in «Journal of Popular Music Studies», vol. XXX, n. 4, December 2018, pp. 11-70.

36. See Dan Cameron (edited by), *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1998.

be seen to be happening. The first is the inverted still image of the still bodies of the dancers on the Daru staircase mentioned above. Following the shot of their bodies moving in bursts of contraction and release, in convulsive Graham-style pleadings that, traditionally in Graham-based technique, can express moments of extreme emotional power, the dancers' bodies become quiet and motionless. Here, the shot is inverted and we see the still bodies of colour seemingly suspended or hanging upside down. There is a clear visual and spatial allusion to historical drawings of enslaved bodies in the hold of a slave ship. It is perhaps the first indication in *APESHIT* of the oppressed black body<sup>37</sup>. Furthermore, commenting on the Daru staircase sequence, Cherkouai states how he felt that this moment was «my way of paying homage to the contraction of Martha Graham. I made it my own, so it had this kind of crunch effect, yes. You pull inside and then back, *like you're broken and then returned to stillness*»<sup>38</sup>.

Cherkouai's image of the contraction and release movement here being a moment of the body breaking, fragmenting, and then returning to sculptural stillness, in addition to the stillness of the freeze-frame on the suspended "broken" bodies on the staircase, can be seen as another moment of the "fragmentary monumental": it is a moment of not so quiet protest.

Similarly, another striking moment of stillness is the lingering shot of two dancers seated in front of David's *Portrait de madame Récamier* (1800). The dancers are connected by their heads to the same length of white cloth turban, which prefigures the white wrapped head-cloth in Marie-Guillemine Benoist's *Portrait d'une femme noire* (1800), formerly known as *Portrait d'une négresse*, which appears towards the end of the video. The dancers' connected bodies echo the composition of the painting: there is no dancing, singing or rapping at this point, just a moment of quiet stillness between the dancers' bodies and the painted body on the canvas. However, in its choreographic composition, this is a moment of choreographic quietness that speaks volumes. As art historian Alicia Caticha has argued, the image can be seen to be reworking the *tableau vivant* tradition of the Eighteenth Century, with the Carters appropriating «this self-referential parlor game as a visual analogy for their own success in a culture of systemic racism»<sup>39</sup>. While art historian and curator Georgina Downey<sup>40</sup> has noted how

37. The suspended, "hanging" image is perhaps also reminiscent of the «strange fruit hanging from poplar trees» that Billie Holliday sings of *Strange Fruit* (1937), a song protesting about the lynching of black Americans in the American South.

38. Cherkouai cited in Michelle Kim, *The Choreographer for the Carters' APESHIT Video on Being Inspired by Mythology and Martha Graham*, June 21st 2018, online: <https://pitchfork.com/the-pitch/choreographer-beyonce-jayz-apeshit-video-interview-inspired-by-mythology-martha-graham/> (accessed 19/6/2020), my emphasis.

39. Alicia Caticha, *Madame Récamier as Tableau Vivant*, cit. This is not the first time that performance in the museum has used the idea of reworking the *tableau vivant* to make a political statement – see further Manuel Pelmus and Alexandra Pirici's *Public Collection* (2016) where, through what the artists term «continuous actions», performers in the museum use their bodies to re-enact artworks on display, and physical, bodily enactment becomes a strategy to attempt to (re)-claim history. Another example might be the museum dance works of choreographer Alexis Blake such as *Allegory of the Painted Woman* (2012-2015) and *Conditions of an Ideal* (2016).

40. Georgina Downey, *Beautiful No-Bodies? The Dancers in Beyoncé and Jay-Z's Apeshit*, August 6th 2018, online: <http://www.georginadowney.com/writing-and-art-a-blog/2018/8/6/beautiful-no-bodies-the-dancers-in-beyonc-and-jay-zs-apeshit> (accessed 19/6/2020).

this scene may also have echoes of Ulay and Marina Abramović's performance *Relation in Time* (1977) where the two artists knotted their hair together for seventeen hours, Caticha points out how the long white headscarf more significantly makes reference to photographer John Edmond's 2017 series, *Du-Rags*. The du-rag itself has its origins in headscarves of enslaved women and so the dancers in front of the Récamier portrait through their «bodies [...] make present what is absent: the slave labor that was responsible for the consumerist luxuries in David's *Portrait de madame Récamier* and Eighteenth-Century French culture writ large»<sup>41</sup>.

Furthermore, the du-rag is a motif that is positioned in opposition to the white ideal of the neo-classical dress of Madame Récamier and in its sculptural folds, it also stands in opposition with the marble statuary that we see throughout the video. Beyoncé too embraces this artefact as an object of resistance and re-appropriates it: at another point in the video, we see her reclining in the gallery, in a pose not too dissimilar from Madame Récamier's, wearing a silk headscarf.

In fact, perhaps the most striking still image is the video's final cut to Benoist's *Portrait d'une femme noire*, the sitter recently renamed through research by Anne Lafont (2019) and, in some way, rescued from the erasure that comes with anonymity. As art historian James Stalls argues, of all the art-works re-appropriated in the video, this

highly complex painting with many things happening in it across the realm of politics, race, gender, class and strategies of looking and being looked at [...] is the [...] one that most significant to Beyoncé's strategic manipulation of the bodily presence and absence of black women [in the museum collection]<sup>42</sup>.

Significantly, the portrait is never directly visually paired with Beyoncé. The painting is cropped so that we only see the sitter from the neck up and the camera lingers on her facial expression. This has two effects: first, we are forced to confront her gaze; second, her exposed breast (which is in the full portrait) is strategically removed so any opportunity for the "traditional" objectification of a woman of colour in Western art tradition is also removed. In such a way, the black woman is given back her body; and that black body is one that is not longer objectified, subjugated or oppressed, but that is celebrated by the bodies of Beyoncé and her female dancers moving powerfully through the museum, dancing a dance of resistance.

However, perhaps the most explicit choreographic reference to resistance and protest comes later in the video where there is a shot of young black men outside the Louvre "taking the knee". This pose is a direct allusion to the physical gesture of kneeling during the national anthem that marked the National Football League (NFL) player protests against police brutality and the killing of unarmed black men, first started in 2016 by player Colin Kaepernick. It is a pose that has also marked the most

41. Alicia Caticha, *Madame Récamier as Tableau Vivant*, cit.

42. James Smalls, *Crazy in Louvre*, cit.

recent Black Lives Matter protests; and it is a gesture that can now be read as horrifyingly similar to the police officer's pose as he knelt on the neck of George Floyd. In *APESHIT*, the shot of the kneeling protestors directly follows a shot of a classical statue, a Roman version of a Greek statue by Lysippus of *Hermes Tying His Sandal*, which is in a similar pose. It occurs on a lyric where Jay-Z is critical of the NFL («I said no to the Superbowl / You need me, I don't need you / Every night we in the end-zone / Tell the NFL, we in stadiums too»). This is the concluding criticism of a verse that may also allude to Donald Trump (as the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the USA). As Jay-Z warns, change is coming: «4-5, I got change for you». As Morales has noted, the juxtaposition between the kneeling statue and the kneeling protests is striking:

The juxtaposition of the image of Hermes with his knee bent inside the Louvre with that of the kneeling protestors outside the Louvre co-opts the statue, bringing the ancient god on board as part of the modern protest. Hermes becomes an advocate for black lives mattering; he is given a better purpose than fiddling with his footwear. The modern ennobles the classical (a reversal of the expected dynamic)<sup>43</sup>.

What Morales does not further unpick here is the relationship between exterior and interior. While “white” Hermes is inside the museum, the black male protesting bodies remain, at least momentarily, on the outside. However, the exterior shot is followed by an interior shot of Jay-Z, having «made it» and rapping in front of Théodore Géricault's *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (1818-19). As art historian James Smalls has commented:

This painting contains three black men among the human debris who are used emblematically by the artist to relay the story of a human tragedy. The most visible black figure is located at the apex of the composition. He is energetic and heroic in his display of a muscular back [...] at one brief moment, Jay-Z is caught gazing up at the black Hercules who constitutes the focal point of the drama and symbolizes black people as both survivors and saviours<sup>44</sup>.

This theme of survival, despite oppression and restriction, continues choreographically throughout the video. It is visible in a powerful montage that includes shots of bone-breaker and hip-hop dancer Nicholas “Slick” Stewart contorting his arms in front of *La Gioconda*, his limbs seemingly breaking; in the recurring motifs of the coiling, twisting arms of the female dancers juxtaposed with still shots where the camera zooms in on close-up, detailed images of the coiled ropes of *Le Radeau de la Méduse*, and of dancers' hands apparently bound in rope, and the liberating, invigorating «cross-cut breaking free of ropes; a black female dancer vigorously dancing; the same dancer in full flexion with her hair thrown back»<sup>45</sup>. This is a danced and sung story about the survival of oppressed and broken bodies; about how we might re-assemble them those broken bodies through revisions of history, and about

43. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., p. 116.

44. James Smalls, *Crazy in Louvre*, cit.

45. Carol Vernallis, *Tracing the Carters Through the Galleries*, cit.

how that necessitates a deep work of protest. What *APESHIT* reveals is that through such protest, spaces and history can be re-appropriated, and previously invisible or partially visible bodies be made more visible. Such “statue toppling” can be a cause for celebration: at such a time, the dancing crowd can indeed «go apeshit».

### **Conclusion: «this a different angle»**

Re-viewing this video in the context of the Black Lives Matter protests and the calls for colonial statues to fall, I am struck by how vital *APESHIT* is for thinking about how dance in the museum can be a mechanism to give a space for previously invisible or erased bodies to resurface and tell their stories. Perhaps the dance is, in fact, more than “metaphorical” statue toppling; for it also does the work of protest, reassembling broken bodies into an alternative fullness. It does the work of re-constructing history; it is historiography in artful action. In *APESHIT*, the protest seeps through most powerfully in the choreographic juxtapositions of movement and stillness, where the layers of history fall away and the statues crumble, until life and movement emerges anew from the historical dust. Here, we can read dance as the “fragmentary monumental”, an action for re-assembling the fragments of bodies that History has broken, that does the vital work of *remembering* the deliberately forgotten, lost and erased<sup>46</sup>. Piecing together the fragments and recognising who and what has been made to slip through the cracks is where we, the viewer, have to do the work:

It is not just the *content* of *APESHIT* (the lyrics and the things featured in the video) that is a form of protest, but also the *process* in which it engages the viewer and the listener. The insistence that the viewer makes connections, the refusal to simplify, and the sheer richness of historical, artistic and ideological textures created: all this is a form of cultural resistance<sup>47</sup>.

In re-examining the particular ways in which the stillness and movement of both the choreography and the cinematography are woven together in *APESHIT*, as well as how bodies of colour surge into a public space that has historically been denied them in a dance that is simultaneously protesting and celebratory, we can make a claim for dancing in the museum as a radical means of powerfully challenging and resisting the art historical status quo. Through dance in the museum, we can begin to call History to account and look at it from a “different angle”. In the public spaces where we come to remember uncomfortable and difficult histories, the ground is shaking. In Paris, the crowd is going apeshit; in Bristol, a colonial statue comes crashing down. From the dust, previously invisible bodies rise up, and as they do, they dance.

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<sup>46</sup>. The way in which *APESHIT*'s complex sonic layering re-assembles fragments of song, shouts, noise elements and vocal adlibs (see above, footnote 23) reinforces this idea of the “fragmentary monumental” musically as well as choreographically.

<sup>47</sup>. Helen Morales, *Antigone Rising*, cit., p. 116.