

From *Lemonade* to *Homecoming*: Beyoncé's Visual Spaces

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With the publication of her visual album *Lemonade* (2016), pop singer Beyoncé transformed her career. In this album the artist defines her identity according to her own parameters, not those imposed by the politics of respectability. Her later visual productions continued with this unique departure from her previous works. In asserting her aesthetic, Beyoncé engages in a visual paradigm that centralizes the African American experience. In *Lemonade*, the singer performs on a plantation, adopting a powerful role; in “Apeshit” (2018), Queen Bey and her husband Jay-Z dance within the Louvre, making visible how there are not a lot of African art pieces exhibited in it, and on her live album *Homecoming* (2019) Beyoncé uses the space of the Coachella festival to make visible this African American college celebration. This article reflects on the artist's employment of these settings to destabilize and contend with the imposed norm, that of whiteness.

Keywords: Beyoncé; Performance; Space; Identity; African American tradition; Feminism

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De *Lemonade* a *Homecoming*: los espacios visuales de Beyoncé

La publicación del álbum visual de Beyoncé, *Lemonade* (2016), marcó un cambio en la carrera de la cantante. En este álbum la artista se define a sí misma siguiendo sus propios criterios, no los impuestos por la política del decoro. Sus últimas producciones muestran un giro estético en la carrera de la cantante, en la que utiliza un paradigma espacial para centralizar la experiencia afroamericana. En *Lemonade*, la cantante actúa en una plantación y asume un rol de poder; en “Apeshit” (2018), Queen Bey y su marido Jay-Z actúan en el Louvre y ponen de manifiesto cómo este espacio ignora la presencia artística africana en las obras

mostradas; por último, en el álbum grabado en directo *Homecoming* (2019), Beyoncé hace uso del escenario del festival de Coachella para recrear la celebración del evento universitario afroamericano que da título al vídeo. Este artículo analiza el uso que hace Beyoncé del espacio para desestabilizar la norma impuesta, la fenomenología blanca.

Palabras clave: Beyoncé; representación artística; espacio; identidad; tradición afroamericana; Feminismo

I. INTRODUCTION

Beyoncé's breakthrough album *Lemonade* (2016) begins with the singer enunciating British-Somalian poet Warsan Shire's verses to address her husband: "I tried to make a home out of you, but doors lead to trap doors, a stairway leads to nothing. Unknown women wander the hallways at night. Where do you go when you go quiet?" (line 29)¹ With this opening, the singer points to two elements that are essential for her artistic endeavor: space (home) and collectivity, the unknown women who she seems to be asking about. A household is a central location for the development of personal identity. Beyoncé's assertion that she wanted "to make a home out of you" seems to be referring with the pronoun 'you' not only to her husband and her objective of making him stay, but can also be interpreted as a self-address, one directed to her own body and her intention of rooting herself not only in it, but also in the legacy it carries. This connection to ancestral history, embodied in the addressed unknown women, is later further established by more of Shire's verses, which provide a circular framework to the album: "The past and the future merge to meet us here. What luck. What a f*cking curse." This dialectical relationship between subjectivity, time, place and creativity is a constant in the artist's most recent productions, and generates a structuring principle. The aim of this article is to analyze the visual aesthetics of Beyoncé's latest filmic albums, *Lemonade* and *Homecoming* (2019), as well as the "Apeshit" (2018) video that she recorded with her husband, in order to question the ways in which the performer employs space as a way to centralize the black experience in predominantly white enclaves. To structure my analysis of Beyoncé's spatial performance I employ Sarah Ahmed's interrogation of whiteness as a primary object of knowledge that orientates bodies in specific directions by taking up spaces while leaving non-white subjects invisible (2011, 149). In her bodily recreation within historically significant settings, the singer seems to reverse Ahmed's claim about whiteness as the norm and centralizes the Black experience while displacing whiteness. In *Lemonade*, the singer performs in a plantation and adopts a powerful role; in "Apeshit," Queen Bey and her husband Jay-Z dance inside the Louvre and give visibility not only to their status as artists but also to how this gallery does not display a lot of African art. In *Homecoming*, Beyoncé takes over Coachella music festival's space to talk about the African American college tradition of Homecoming. Given this intrinsic relationship between Beyoncé's performances and the way in which they articulate the African American historical experience, this paper examines her employment of place and space as a way of destabilizing and subverting whiteness as a worldly experience in order to reclaim the centrality of the African American experience while challenging the prominence of the normative one.

¹ These lines are adapted from Shire's "For Women Who Are Difficult to Love". Shire, Warsan. 2012. *Warsan versus melancholy (the seven stages of being lonely)*. Bandcamp.com. 14 February.

2. *LEMONADE*: INNER LANDSCAPES

Lemonade's first released single, "Formation," introduces viewers to a deeply intimate portrayal of Beyoncé. The singer emphasizes her creole identity and highlights the specificity of its Southern flavor when she states: "My daddy Alabama, Momma Louisiana / You mix that negro with that Creole make a Texas bamma." Beyoncé identifies how her identity, and all that it encompasses, is rooted in a specific location. Jeff Malpas (2018) defines place in its relationship to identity as:

That bounded open region of possibility in which even space and time, as well as subjectivity and objectivity, first emerge. As such a region, it is fundamentally relational, and that relationality permeates everything that pertains to place, everything that belongs with it, everything that appears in its embrace. It might even be said that it is the relationality of place that underpins the idea of the essential human connection to place since that connection is itself a specific mode of the broader relationality (40).

Human experience presupposes the existence of a place, and *Lemonade*'s engagement of Southern markers, specifically the city of New Orleans, highlights the intersectionality of different frameworks of experience within Beyoncé's self. As Barbara Allen reflects when talking about the Southern conception of space, "the southern sense of place is constructed, maintained, and articulated in a distinctively regional conversational pattern that emphasizes placing people within a social and geographical frame" (1990, 152). Such dialectical spatial exchange is bound to the South's historical relationship with the Caribbean and the European culture that permeated it, one that also extends itself through the diaspora.

Lemonade's description of the landscape of New Orleans parallels that of the album's narrative plot, its 11 chapters portraying a two-sided experience, that of an outside journey through the city's streets and that of the singer's consciousness. *Lemonade*'s external journey coincides with Joseph Roach's view of New Orleans as an enclave that imitates the experience of living on the edge of races, languages and cultures (1996, 13). These contradictions are in themselves expressions of the creole identity that Beyoncé reclaims. Memories and markers blend, creating unique transcultural manifestations, embodied in some of the street performances highlighted in the video, such as the Mardi Grass parade and its Black Indians. These rituals are examples of the diaspora's polarities and regional intersections. The video's street visualization also relates to Roach's description of walking as a means "to gain experience of the cityscape that is conducive to mapping the emphases and contradictions of its special memories" (1996, 13). Roach's description of walking and the video's movement narrative show how one's physical and emotional experience of this city happens along the edges of intersectionality. Likewise, these descriptions intercept Gaston Bachelard's assertion of walking and the road as a life experience:

And indeed we should find countless intermediaries between reality and symbols if we gave things all the movements they suggest. George Sand, dreaming beside a path of yellow sand, saw life flowing by. 'What is more beautiful than a road?' she wrote. 'It is the symbol and the image of an active, varied life.' (Consuelo, vol. II, p. 116). Each one of us, then, should speak of his [*sic*] roads, his [*sic*] crossroads, his [*sic*] roadside benches; each one of us should make a surveyor's map of his [*sic*] lost fields and meadows (2014, 11).

Bachelard describes the experience of walking as something lived; similarly, *Lemonade's* promenade around New Orleans points not only to the city's topography, but also to Beyoncé's personal experience of it. As such, and as described by Roach and Bachelard, it mixes an inner movement (that of lived experience) with a frontier-like quality, one that in Beyoncé's case intermingles her identity and its public and private spheres.² In order to centralize my discussion of space on *Lemonade*, I interrogate its portrayal of New Orleans and the employment of antebellum constructions such as the plantation and the slave quarters in some of the album's chapters.

Lemonade's filmed narrative also resonates with Roach's assertion about New Orleans as the city where space and time conflate. It also parallels people of African descent's double consciousness in the United States, specifically to their experience of "a world which yields [them] no true self-consciousness, but only lets [them] see [themselves] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Dubois 1989, 5). W. E. B. Dubois's assertion about "looking at one self through the eyes of others" emphasizes, like Ahmed criticized, how whiteness can be interpreted as the inquisitive gaze that Dubois describes, and as such it signals how the African American cultural experience as a category disappears and how this vanishing transforms whiteness into the norm (Ahmed 2011, 149). Seeing oneself through the eyes of others is, as Dubois explains, a phenomenon that speaks about culturally not belonging to whiteness as cultural experience, while being judged according to it. This contradiction influences the way in which agency relates to place. An individual's capacity to act is linked to how place presupposes an action, and how the norm categorizes such an action. Places themselves limit what people are able to do in them since they frame habitus³ according to the agent's position; in other words, the understanding and enactment of self-performances are encapsulated within our actual cultural conditions and the legacy into which we were born (Edgar & Toone 2019, 89).

² This assumption about Beyoncé's spatial performance of her private and public life takes my previous work "Beyoncé's Diaspora Heritage and Ancestry in *Lemonade*" in *The Lemonade Reader* (2019) as a starting point, while expanding it to include Beyoncé's other works.

³ Here I employ Pierre Bourdieu's definition of habitus as "a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class" (1977, n.p.).

The visual journey in *Lemonade* begins with a black and white image of Beyoncé taking a bath in what appears to be a bayou shack. This first scene is key not only for what she is about to introduce, one of the main themes of the album (her husband's cheating), but also for how it represents the intimate act of taking a bath. This action portrays agency from a self-possessed point of view. After this intimate scene, Beyoncé takes the audience to experience with her a walk around New Orleans. In this way, the singer attracts the attention of the viewers by articulating how this trip around the city sets out from an intuition, an interrogation, and a possibility that must be corroborated. Furthermore, filming in black and white depicts the scene as old, or antique, and as we continue watching *Lemonade*, we discover that its main settings are New Orleans and some antebellum constructions. As such, this diachronic image already points to Beyoncé's orientation in place: her subjectivity and her capacity for agency within it. She is taking a bath in a space that three centuries ago was not accessible to her. This action within this specific setting inaugurates Beyoncé's disruption of whiteness as the norm and presents a point of departure for viewers to reimagine this daily routine within a different social paradigm. In a way, spectators are not only drawn to this performance, but also to the intimacy it entails. The singer submerges the audience in a unique space, one where subjectivity and historical frames collide. This place involves a duplicity expressed in the mapping and juxtaposition of present and past images of New Orleans, in the use of past and present images of the singer's life and, lastly, how this polarity manifests the collision of the public and private aspects of Beyoncé's identity.

From the bathtub, *Lemonade* submerges us in a body of water, where Beyoncé disguises herself as a mermaid, a symbol charged with spiritual meaning, that of the Atlantic Ocean and the transatlantic experience of the orisha Oshún. African diasporic religious practices are examples of code-switching, a common linguistic technique that also permeates spiritual practices among the Louisiana Creoles and Caribbean people (Faye Harrison 2008, 87). Code switching is also an expression of a diaspora's way of living, one which Roach identifies as a relational one between different cultures. Oshún is an essential spiritual power for the singer's portrayal of identity because it signals both a sensual and spiritual side, one closely related to femaleness. Audre Lorde identifies this site as the *erotic*, a resource "within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling" (2018, 5). Possibility and creativity characterize both the erotic and the insinuation of intimacy described in the bathtub scene. Lorde continues to describe the reclamation of the erotic as an act of self-reaffirmation; because this personal assertion often contradicts part of society's expectations and leads to the articulation of an authentic self. In "Anger," *Lemonade*'s third chapter, we are brought to a parking lot where various African American women are tied together forming a circle. This image describes a very important place within *Lemonade*, that of women's union through witnessing and acknowledging Beyoncé's statement. It also evokes African American filmic tradition, specifically that of the film *Daughters of the Dust* (1991). This movie was the first film

directed by an African American woman released to the public in the US (Sudhinaraset 2018, 46). Its director, Julie Dash, highlights how she “wanted to tell a story that was authentic to African American culture— authentic to the point where it was not like something you could turn on the television and see” (2018, 51). Additionally, as Pacharee Sudhinaraset states, Dash’s film does not intend “to provide content about the Gullah culture, but strives to create an estranging viewing practice that disrupts the fixity of a knowable authentic subject (2018, 51). Beyoncé’s filmic maneuver echoes not only Dash’s disruption, through its centralization of black subjectivity, but also its reproduction of the relationships between women as inclusive safe spaces. Signifying Dash’s movie is also the singer’s way of acknowledging the filmic tradition that informs her own production. Beyoncé’s description of her inner journey has the erotic and the safety of the relationship with other women as constants in her evolution. These two elements are present in each one of the album’s episodes. In our analysis, we will focus on the “Apathy” and “Formation” chapters.

The chapter entitled “Apathy” provides a complex performance of space and geography through its two main settings: a modern-day trip in a bus and a plantation where Beyoncé and tennis player Serena Williams dance. In the bus Beyoncé and her dancers have their faces painted in Ori, a Yoruba tribal paint. This bus journey overlaps with images of Beyoncé and Serena inside Destrehan Plantation, a place charged with historical importance and symbolism because of its historic connection to slave revolts and the cruel ways in which the white master controlled them. This memory crystallizes the plantation’s architecture and inscribes in it notions of identity, nationhood and history (Horstein 2011, 17). *Lemonade*’s employment of the plantation as one of its main settings evokes memory of the trauma suffered by the African descent population. Furthermore, through performance, Beyoncé and her ensemble insert new actions in this antebellum site, thus destabilizing spatial discourse by actualizing it with body movements that challenge the structuring politics of this setting.

The song included in the “Apathy” chapter, “Sorry,” not only contextualizes what the singer tells her husband but it can also be interpreted as a statement, as the singer states: “Sorry, I ain’t sorry / Sorry, I ain’t sorry / I ain’t sorry, nigga, nah / I ain’t thinking ‘bout you / Sorry, I ain’t sorry / Sorry, I ain’t sorry / No no, hell nah.” By twerking and singing inside an antebellum construction, the singer appropriates and redefines spaces by performing in them. More specifically, given the intrinsic relation between memory and place, Serena and Beyoncé’s twerking within such a meaningful setting becomes relevant because they insert a historically impossible act within these memory frameworks. That is to say, twerking is a type of dance charged with meaning; according to Elizabeth Pérez, it “came in for particular censure, defying elite attempts to impose bodily stances associated with meekness, modesty and obedience. The authorities intuited what many scholars now argue: that bodies remember, and flouting one estate’s rules might lead to rebellion against the institution of slavery itself” (2015, 8). Apart from challenging social norms through

dancing, this performance also challenges notions of womanhood because it “violates the politics of respectability that continue to demand chastity, industry, and decorum from Black women in exchange for basic civility and full citizenship” (Higginbotham, qtd in Pérez 2015, 17). Beyoncé and Serena fight the dominating paradigms that are operating within the plantation setting, as well as those that the audience presupposes given the setting where they perform.

As Shelley Horstein further explains, “places themselves are capable of generating memories. We may or may not know a site, or an object in a site, but visual images of sites can generate constructed images that in turn can create a memory of a place” (2011, 3). In this way, Beyoncé and Serena’s performance challenges the memories generated within the context of Destrehan Plantation. Furthermore, the insertion of scenes where Beyoncé appears dressed as Nefertiti in this segment reinforces this redefinition of space from an empowering point of view, signaling a female historical figure in a position of power, and thus defying the subjecting memories generated by a plantation. The meeting of the Nefertiti image and Beyoncé and Serena’s twerking within the antebellum construction also emulates the convergence of past and future in the present moment. This merging, as previously discussed, begins in “Formation,” *Lemonade*’s first released single, but which appears as the album’s closing chapter.

Although it was the first single released from *Lemonade*, “Formation” closes Beyoncé’s inner journey, and in this way it signifies Shire’s circular framework. As previously stated, in “Formation,” Beyoncé openly asserts her creoleness and New Orleans is the city that encapsulates this characteristic. The city’s relationship with its past and memory becomes evident in the cultural festivities that take place in the city and that appear in the visual album. These performances celebrate the city’s past and make visible how they embody an urban honoring of the confluence of different cultural traditions. The past also becomes present through the post-Katrina pictures featured in the video, images that articulate how New Orleans is still mourning the absence of markers of memory in the landscape. These pictures emphasize how the city’s architectural background has changed after the natural disaster, thus they point to how such transformation redefines personal identity in its relationship with the surroundings. In this manner, the post-Katrina architectural remnants highlight the presence of an absence and enacts the mnemonic exercise previously described by Horstein (2011, 3). Confronted with an absence in the landscape, an individual must employ memory or even imagination to recreate what used to be in that place, and their subjective relationship to that space.

Formation also centralizes a denouncement of police brutality, when the singer first appears sitting on top of a police car in a New Orleans bayou. Violence, as Roach points out, lies at the base of circum-Atlantic memory, and “Formation” reflects on this reality; that is, the incursion of the singer’s Black Lives Matter political statement evidences how racial violence is still a constant in US society. The post-Katrina images intertwined with those of Beyoncé dressed as the mistress of an all-black household

recreate a historically impossible image. The vocalist also reclaims her power within this space by employing colonial pictures of aristocratic black which were specifically made for the video and which aim to “visually do the work of lineage-making. In the house’s long hallway, which is lined with bookcases, hang several portraits of women and families—of a deep chocolate hue” (Ford 2019, 197). These paintings emulate those of white aristocratic families and emphasize the singer’s status and that of her family. As Tanisha F. Ford observes, this is a house where the slaves are the masters (197). The singer appears on the front porch to highlight her status as mistress and in so doing, she emphasizes the discursive importance of this strategic location. This is a key setting for the spatial architecture of the South in terms of the way it makes public the private domestic sphere, and it being the place where, as Zora Neale Hurston’s books document, cultural activity takes place (Davis 2011, 82). Beyoncé’s positioning on the front porch as a mistress, and the inversion of her historically “presupposed role” is also employed later in “Apushit,” when Beyoncé and husband Jay-Z, as mentioned before, take over the Louvre to perform. Through the inclusion of children in this episode, *Lemonade* points to future generations, that of the singer—via her daughter, Blue Ivy—and that of the community, which symbolically seems to be embodied in the little boy who is dancing in front of the police and who points to the “Stop Shooting Us” message. The final scene where the singer appears on top of the police car on the gulf coast intensifies the denouncement of the violence previously described, and emphasizes how black women’s bodies have been policed in urban contexts during the twentieth century (Hazel Carby 1992). With this action, Beyoncé employs her own body to emphasize this brutality.

With this final statement, past, present and future converge in *Lemonade*. A visual album where the singer employs space to subvert history, connecting antebellum constructions with her present role as a pop star. As a result, Beyoncé transforms *Lemonade* into a space of self-reaffirmation where she articulates how her own history informs her subjectivity. As L. Michael Gibson highlights, in *Lemonade* Beyoncé takes over her art to define who she is and what her path is (2019, 149). She frames her public image as a black Southern woman who challenges the imposed parameters of respectability and the audience’s perception of her persona. In doing so, the artist subjectively and objectively designs a self-space. This space has at its base the home that the singer introduces in the album’s opening verses, a home like that which Bachelard identifies as a “privileged entity for a phenomenological study of the intimate value of inside space” (1957, 4). In addition, her performance and the place it describes illustrate what Daphne Brooks refers to as the “space for the production of history wherein the work of memory, absence, presence, collective desire, substitution, sacrifice, and expenditure get worked out through the voice and ‘kinesthetic imagination’” (2008, 187). Brooks’s emphasis on bodily imagination coincides with Beyoncé’s attempt to make her body a home for herself, one that carries the genealogies of the unknown women addressed in Shire’s opening verse. Furthermore, throughout her body performance of place

Beyoncé enacts a reproduction of what Pierre Nora describes as a “true memory,” one which he finds in “gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent-self-knowledge, in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories” (Nora 1989, 13). In *Lemonade*, we witness just such an intimate place and discover the importance that politics, history and community have for the artist’s identity. Beyoncé’s bodily recreation attempts to provide new empowering meanings to black women’s bodies and by providing a visual narrative to accompany the lyrics of *Lemonade* through a media platform, she offers new ways of “organizing, articulating and disarticulating feelings and understandings that move people, enlisting and positioning them in different political and social configurations” (Gray 1995, 2). This reconfiguration or “revisualization” of black experience continues in “Apeshit,” where The Carters (Beyoncé and Jay-Z) visualize their experience of the Louvre and redefine their artist status from an empowering perspective and in *Homecoming*, where the singer employs a predominantly white theatrical platform to celebrate an African American communal experience.

3. INTERLUDE: “APESHIT,” PAINTINGS WITHIN PAINTINGS

Paintings are essential to interrogate the way in which Beyoncé reshapes space to centralize her status as an artist. Like in “Formation,” where the artwork points to the singer’s heritage when she plays the role of a mistress in an all-black household, in “Apeshit” they take up space to emphasize her powerful status as a pop star and they also become part of the narrative. In this work Queen Bey and husband Jay-Z walk around the Louvre, as the only tourists who are visiting it. As Ford states, this scene contradicts history because “it is no distant past when black folks were only able to access museums if they worked there” and black guards who worked there “were charged with guarding high-priced artwork in spaces that routinely reject everyone who looks like them” (2019, 199). Ford’s assertion signals how space in “Apeshit” hints at political subtleties through the inclusion of certain subjects, and charging them with meaning. Likewise, Charmaine A. Nelson notes, when talking about neoclassical sculpture, how “the visual processes of representing the bodies are acts of differentiation which delineate the surfaces and boundaries of the body through acts of selective inclusions and exclusions. Often ambivalent, they create hegemonic identifications within dialectical relationships” (2000, 88). Spatial inclusions and exclusions are key to interrogate the employment of space in “Apeshit,” they point to different, though interconnected, issues: the narratives of the paintings and sculptures, the inclusion of domestic scenes to subvert the neoclassical idea of black subjects only being servants and Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s display of wealth and power.

If in “Formation” Beyoncé asserts that she “earned all this money but they never take the country out me” and points out how wealth does not separate her from her heritage, in “Apeshit” the singer and her husband bluntly state: “This is how we made it.” The Louvre is a symbol of cultural wealth and colonialism. As a product of the neoclassical paradigm, the museum emphasizes whiteness as a universal category

that rejects the artistic possibilities of material polychromy as an overly sensual and ornamental distraction (Nelson 2000, 89). Moreover, while employing the neoclassical Parisian art gallery as a background for the video, both artists counteract how this space does not show black subjects in positions of power. By performing in the Louvre, the Carters become the subjects inside this predominantly white space and orientate it according to their own gaze. They are artists whose spatial interpretations and bodily recreations carry political connotations that reshape the audience's perception. Taking over the Louvre allows the Carters to employ the distance that according to Bourdieu (1996, 14) is essential to assert the difference between social and physical space; thus they reshape it to make a statement about their social status. They transform it into a platform from which to address their political and social claims.

"Apeshit" opens with Beyoncé and Jay-Z dressed in pastel power suits in front of one of the most iconic paintings in the Louvre, the "Mona Lisa." They are the sole witnesses of one of the most well-known smiles. Later in the video, the image of Da Vinci's masterpiece is interchanged with that of an African American couple brushing their hair; in this way, the video provides a unique scene that highlights a domestic scene that does not belong there. This disruption within the museum's spatial dynamic takes place by centralizing a foreign daily routine in it. This everyday life custom destabilizes the museum's spatial schema racially and performatively. This challenge continues when both singers appear dressed in white in front of the "Winged Victory of Samothrace." The staircase that leads to this sculpture becomes a stage for dancers dressed in nude shades to dance, thus taking up a space and visualizing a performance that counteracts neoclassical style by inserting different shades of color. The heads of the African American dancers seem to take over the space of the sculpture's absent head. The dancers employ their bodies, particularly their heads, to reclaim the face of a sculpture designed to be completely white. The dancing continues with Beyoncé placing herself as the figure of Josephine in the 1804 Jacques-Louis David painting "The Consecration of Napoleon and the Coronation of Josephine." The dance emulates the one in "Formation" and emphasizes Bey's centrality as she juxtaposes her body with that of Josephine. As Taylor Hosking points out, the Carters "present themselves as a modern kind of royal family, one that is not helmed by patriarchy, but by equal partners" (2018). Later Beyoncé and Jay-Z appear in front of the "Great Sphinx of Tanis" to reiterate the importance of the Egyptian civilization, one whose superiority is often neglected in comparison to that of the Greeks and Romans, evident in the appearance of the Venus sculpture in the same video segment.

4. THE RED BELT: BENOIST AND BEYONCÉ

The last painting in the video, Marie-Guillemine Benoist's "Portrait of a Black Woman" (*Portrait d'une négresse*), has a black woman as the subject of the scene, and Beyoncé and husband Jay-Z appear in front of it, but make no statement. As James Smalls points

out, this painting's representation of its subject, the black woman, within a domestic space engages a male visual discourse in accordance with neoclassicism, and as such it exploits racial and gender difference in line with this paradigm (2004). Following Smalls's assertion, it can be argued that Benoist's painting reshapes the Louvre's neoclassical spatial parameter. It creates a painting within a painting, one in which the museum's space acts as the background and Benoist's painting destabilizes its monochromatic nature. Furthermore, Benoist's black woman as the protagonist of this spatial destabilization offers an alternative gaze, which is echoed by Beyoncé's agency within this space, because the singer, like Benoist's painting, impacts spatial discourse by disrupting its uniformity. As Smalls argues, Benoist's painting offers an "alternate gazing," one that presents a hierarchical struggle because it questions "who is the master/mistress and who is the subordinate" (2004, n.p.). At the time when "Portrait of a Black Woman" was painted, black characters in pictures had a secondary role, one of servitude. In Benoist's painting, however, the black woman is the sole protagonist of the scene. There are elements in the background that suggest that she is a domestic worker, and also the fact that she does not have a name emphasizes how her role makes her invisible. It is important to discuss how Benoist's neoclassical painting is included in the music video and how it adds meaning to Beyoncé and Jay-Z's destabilization of spatial discourse through its disruption of habitus. As Malpas points out:

Agency involves a capacity for action and activity. Activity is, first of all, movement, and since movement presupposes space (as that in which movement occurs as well as that which allows for position and location), so to be capable of any sort of oriented or directed movement must also involve a capacity for orientation and direction with regard to space, and with respect to the parts of space—the latter including the capacity to distinguish between the space of one's own body, and its parts, and the space apart from the body (2018, 49).

When analyzing the figure of Benoist as a female painter, Smalls points to the peculiarities of this profession during the 19th century, specifically to how it determined the agency of the artist and limited the subject matter of their paintings. In this way, Smalls, like critic Janell Hobson, emphasizes how Benoist's portrait challenged the prescribed thematic and like Hobson he links it to 19th century feminism (Hobson 2017, n.p.). Likewise, when analyzing Benoist's portrayal of the black female body in the painting, Smalls highlights its exoticism, whereas Hobson interprets its language in terms of self-assurance. Furthermore, she links Benoist's use of this aesthetic subject to Beyoncé's employment of her body as a canvas. As Hobson reflects, in her performances Beyoncé "elevates the black female body for aesthetic appreciation and critical intervention" to subvert the American protestant apparatus that elevates white masculinity while relegating black femininity (2017, n.p.). Like the protagonist of the painting "Portrait of a Black Woman," Beyoncé's bodily articulation inside the Louvre challenges the

neoclassical paradigm by emphasizing black bodies' aesthetic value. Beyoncé's bodily recreation in order to assess her role becomes a metaphor of how she is the artist that arranges the space to aesthetically elevate black beauty to a supreme category in a space that makes it secondary. She is the agent that arranges a spatial discourse to centralize blackness against the excluding norm.

"Apeshit," like *Lemonade*, has a circular paradigm: one framed by the enigmatic smiles of the Mona Lisa, which appears at the beginning of the video, and that of Benoist's black woman, which closes the video narrative. This coincidence is also extended to Beyoncé's first outfit. When she is looking at Da Vinci's painting she is wearing a red belt around her power suit, an element that is also present in Benoist's painting. As Susan Waller points out, "the only bright colors in this largely monochromatic work ["Portrait of a Black Woman"] are the red of a ribbon holding the white cloth beneath her breasts and the blue of a shawl draped over the back of her chair" (2018). Beyoncé's belt seems, then, to be connecting her to Benoist's subject and accentuates the destabilization of white paradigms through the way the painting counteracted some neoclassical assumptions and the pop singer's reorientation of space, following a paradigm that opposes the normative one.

The Carters' filmic experience of the Louvre shows how there are very few black subjects in the paintings there and also how still today there are not a lot of black artists who exhibit their work there (Araujo 2018, n.p.). The couple employs the museum's space to include black people in domestic scenes as well as to make political statements: Beyoncé's demand to "put some respect on my check" (thus emphasizing her feminist agenda, one that she had previously signified with her inclusion of Chimamanda Adichie's "We Should all be Feminists" manifesto in her single "Flawless") and Jay-Z's support of the Black Lives Matter Movement when he refused to play at the Super Bowl to stand in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick. These statements insert the political movements of feminism and Black Lives Matter within the art gallery, a space built during the eighteenth century when the slave trade was at its peak. Slavery and police brutality collide in this video segment depicting the institutionalization of violence against the African American population: a brutality characterized by the circularity of its past and present apparatus.

Beyoncé and Jay-Z also counteract the institutionalized norm by addressing how their wealth and fame make white America uncomfortable. By displaying capitalism's oppressive tools to insert themselves in the Louvre, they signify their defiance and catapult themselves into a space that does not contemplate the Black presence as high art and they employ their art (music, dance, and film) to become an intrinsic part of it. They destabilize the spatial discourse to redefine it. Like in *Lemonade*, where Beyoncé performs inside a plantation as mistress, in "Apeshit" the Carters take over a predominantly white space to charge it with new meanings and to redefine it according to their own terms. As Kelly Oliver (2001) elaborates, agency involves and expresses subjectivity:

Subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others. Insofar as subjectivity is made possible by the ability to respond, response-ability is its founding possibility. The responsibility inherent in subjectivity has the double sense of the condition of possibility, response-ability, on the one hand, and ethical obligation to respond and to enable response-ability from others born out of that possibility on the other. This ethical obligation at the heart of subjectivity is inherent in the process of witnessing (15).

The audience witnesses how the Carters take over this space, making it personal. We are spectators who observe their way of counteracting the neoclassical space and paradigm. They provide a self-portrait that emphasizes the aesthetic beauty of blackness. Furthermore, by reclaiming their status as artists within a neoclassical space that does not provide a platform for artists of African descent, they redefine it. Their performances in front of pictures that articulate French victories and empire seem also to be destabilizing colonial discourse, given Beyoncé's creoleness reaffirmation in *Lemonade*.

5. COACHELLA: A COMMUNAL PLATFORM

If the Louvre served as a spatial platform for Beyoncé and Jay Z's reclamation of their status as artists, *Homecoming* is the filmic platform to celebrate African American creativity. *Homecoming*, a Netflix film by Beyoncé released in 2019, extends the reflections of "Apushit" about black beauty by celebrating it as something communal. As such, it documents the singer's and her ensemble's creative and personal work before their headline act at Coachella. It was the first time in the festival's history that an African American woman had the headline. Despite being a first timer in such a predominately white space, Beyoncé continues with her spatial reorientation to focus on an African American educational and cultural experience, that of homecoming, a celebration where universities invite their alumni to join current students to watch a football game. *Homecoming* celebrates the culture shared by students. The singer illustrates how it constitutes a safe space because in it she tells her audience that African American people should "stand confidently in a crowd where you are the majority" (2017). In Coachella, Beyoncé "recontextualizes the show in a way that claims the most influential live music event in North America for Black culture" (Berman 2019, n.p.), paying tribute to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU). Departing from her personal assertion that she wished she could have attended one of these institutions, the singer expresses how they are key sites for cultural performance: "So many people who are culturally aware and intellectually sound are graduates of HBCUs, including my father. There is something incredible about the HBCU experience that must be celebrated and protected" (*Homecoming*, 2:12:43). As the singer states, Beyoncé departs from this idea of celebrating and protecting black culture through its portrayal of the value that Black-centered cultural institutions have for the preservation of tradition. Like in *Lemonade*, where the space between chapters was framed by Warsan Shire's

poetry, and in “Apeshit,” where the Louvre’s paintings add to the visual discourse, in the Netflix film the words of African American men and women who Beyoncé admires and who attended or participated in HBCU’s culture fill the space. In addition, *Homecoming* celebrates the African American intellectual tradition represented in these quotes, a culture that engages a paradigm consistent with the African American norm.

The first words belong to Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* (1977), with the quote that frames the novel: “If you surrender to the air, you can ride it.” This novel narrates the search for the personal history and ancestral roots of Milkman, the protagonist. Similarly, *Homecoming* begins by focusing on the importance of history, with Beyoncé appearing dressed as Nefertiti, the Egyptian queen, and begins her festival performance by singing “I Lift Every Voice,” the black national anthem. Beyoncé’s intonation of the anthem and her continuous efforts to make visible African American tradition is a constant in these late productions. From “Formation” in *Lemonade* to Coachella’s celebration of communal tradition, the singer hints at the importance of the Egyptian past when she appears dressed as Nefertiti, later when the Carters appear in front of the Great Sphinx of Tanis in “Apeshit,” and lastly through her appearance at Coachella dressed as a Pharaoh. Beyoncé signifies how the historical past is still present by alluding to the importance of the Egyptian civilization. This ancient legacy, rooted in the African continent, must be acknowledged and taken into account since it informs agency, subjectivity and ultimately identity. For Beyoncé, *Homecoming* also becomes “the space to include and visualize people who were dismissed because of their looks by making them feel that they were on that stage” (Gaither 2019, n.p.). In empowering each member of her *Homecoming*’s ensemble to express their uniqueness, the singer counteracts the attempts to minimize them when whiteness defines the creative gaze. *Homecoming* is about black culture celebrating itself and spectators witnessing it.

The next quote that fills the space between segments is that of DuBois, in which he states: “Education must not simply teach work; it must teach life” (1903, 75). Beyoncé’s *Homecoming* relates in some way to this assertion. It inserts an African American performance and narrates the way in which the participants engage and live it as a process, one in which each individual has an active role in its creative development. Furthermore, the artist seems to be stating, as she did in “Formation,” the need to acknowledge and educate the audience about her cultural heritage. If *Lemonade* illustrates Beyoncé’s struggle to overcome her marital obstacles, assert her identity within the African American tradition, give visibility to the challenges, like police violence faced by Blacks, and use the ancestral wisdom to guide her through this process, *Homecoming* celebrates the strength and creative power that lies in her sense of community. This power departs from the feeling of belonging, because, as the video’s last quote by an African American author, Audre Lorde, states, “Without community, there is no liberation” (2018, 17). Lorde’s affirmation is *Homecoming*’s logo, because as Beyoncé states throughout the documentary, one of the struggles in creating it was to look united despite having multiple performers who stood out. This struggle coincides

with Lorde's interpretation of creativity, which she sees as lying in a difference that "must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic" (2018, 18).

Beyoncé's visual project explores the convergence of her personal history, revealing the challenges deriving from the clash between her public and private life and it acknowledges how her uniqueness stems from a communal tradition. There are multiple individual stories that converge in *Homecoming's* final product; these accounts are important given the polyphonic nature that they provide to the performance. They are a testimony of a communal celebration of the strength that Lorde identifies in celebrating "difference as a raw and powerful connection from which our personal power is forged" (2018, 18). This uniqueness comes from looking at oneself through the eyes of the intellectual and cultural tradition that addresses African American identity through its own epistemology.

6. CONCLUSION: CIRCULAR FRAMEWORK

"In black culture repetition means that the thing *circulates* (exactly in the manner of any flow, including capital flows) there in equilibrium" (Snead 2017, 651) [*italics added*].

Lemonade's visual journey narrates how Beyoncé disarticulates the dominating image of her persona and art and designs a place of self-assertion to counteract those assumptions that framed her persona within the parameters of respectability. "Apushit" transforms the Louvre into a stage where the singer and her husband reveal how they were able to "make it" and Coachella, later renamed Beychella, was transformed into a safe space. Each performance redefines the uses of spaces by employing black bodies as what Mae G. Henderson interprets as a performance testimony, one in which the body "functions performatively as a 'container' figuratively inscribing and literally incorporating memory" (2014, 20). Furthermore, the spatial performances characterized by their centralization of the African American experience parallels Lorde's observation about how "the Master's Tools will never dismantle the Master's House" (2018, 15). In other words, if in *Lemonade* Beyoncé reflects on how she tried to make a home out of her husband, each one of the visual pieces examined enacts her attempt of redefining predominantly white spaces to include performances that destabilize discourses that make the non-white norm invisible. By employing her own tools, those rooted within her own identity, community and tradition, Beyoncé dismantles spaces of oppression. This disarming of the master's space must be done from within. As Shire's verse states, the past and the future merge in the present moment because they design the self, and home is the place where they meet. In describing that merging through these different artistic works, Beyoncé acknowledges the tradition that has given her the base of her artistry and in assessing its value she highlights its importance, one that exceeds artistry and becomes embodied in her performances, as if signaling how her

body is also the space where history and ancestral knowledge integrate. Furthermore, Beyoncé's encounter between home and body signals two important ideas: that the body remembers and that performances, as Roach explains, "offer a substitution for something else that preexists it" (1996, 3). Beyoncé's visualization of empowering performances of daily living routines within settings that historically benefited a white perspective contributes to centralizing a black experience that aspires to replace and embody those that traditionally have been the normative ones.

From Beyoncé's personal reaffirmation to her irruption from a European neoclassical monument that condemned black beauty as aesthetically unworthy to Coachella's spatial enactment of black communal artistry, what predominates is a personal but political apparatus that challenges past paradigms. It proclaims that Black Lives Matter, that Black is beautiful and it points to a future where art is black (Ford 2019, 200). The recent release of *Black is King* (2020) will add more elements to further this discussion.

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