

## “All the Rumors are True”: Polychromy and Representation in Lizzo’s “Rumors”

The song “Rumors” by the popular singer and rapper Lizzo and its accompanying music video utilize imagery from Greco-Roman antiquity to assert the presence, importance, and influence of Black people throughout history, from antiquity to modernity. This paper analyzes the ways in which the music video combats prevailing narratives of an ancient world purported to value whiteness above all else, along with several damaging stereotypes about Black women. The Greco-Roman statues in the music video are painted in vivid colors, which may intentionally confuse the audience. In recent years, there has been increasing awareness of the use of polychromy in ancient statuary and its implications not only for Greco-Roman culture, but for the field of classics itself and broader issues of representation, including the whitewashing of history. For centuries, influential scholars in Classics and adjacent fields have reinforced the impression that Greco-Roman sculpture was originally white, and should be presented as such. These scholars support the idea that ancient artists “confirmed their superior rationality and distinguished their aesthetic from non-Western art” by avoiding color (Talbot, 2018). Additionally, the dearth of paint remaining on statues enabled scholars to argue that ancient Greeks and Romans had white skin, and that there were no people of color in the ancient Mediterranean (Talbot, 2018). As this paper will argue, when Lizzo and her creative team decided to incorporate polychromy into the visuals for “Rumors”, they not only corrected a false historical narrative, but boldly asserted the presence of people of color in antiquity— and their place in its reception, past and present.

Helen Morales has done excellent work discussing “the subversive power of the ancient myths” in her book *Antigone Rising* (2020). She explores various facets of cultural representation

as they existed in antiquity, and how our current culture interacts with Western canon. Her chapter on Beyoncé and Jay-Z's music video "APESHIT" is especially instrumental for my research methodology. Morales analyzes how the music video deliberately challenges narratives surrounding "great art" in Western societies, offering a model for my examination of the reception of Greco-Roman imagery in Lizzo's video. Additionally, Morales discusses the pervasive image of a white Venus/Aphrodite, and how Beyoncé has worked to combat narratives of both the white Venus/Aphrodite and the sexually degenerate "ebony" or "sable" Venus/Aphrodite; my own analysis explores how Lizzo achieves something similar with the visuals and lyrics in "Rumors".

To date "Rumors" appears to have received very little attention from the academic community. One undergraduate paper by David Devine focuses on the relationship between fatphobia and racism, and specific racist stereotypes and tropes. Devine only briefly touches on the video's reception of Greco-Roman culture and history, and does not discuss its statuary and polychromy at all. Another article by PhD candidate Grace McGowan does touch on the erasure of polychromy from a broad cultural perspective, while I focus more specifically on the video's use of imagery, allowing for more in-depth analysis. Additionally, unlike Devine and McGowan I examine the rapper Cardi B's appearance in the video—particularly her costume and set dressing, and their relationship to the ancient world. I believe it is crucial to analyze Lizzo's work, as she is a leading force in pop culture, whose work is consumed by millions of people, many of whom may not be very familiar with antiquity. Her music video makes history accessible and riveting while simultaneously delivering a more informed and inclusive understanding of the Greco-Roman world and Black history. The "Rumors" music video proclaims a cogent, historically correct, and artistically inspired argument that Black people have

been present throughout history, and further refutes dominant narratives that engender and support white supremacy. Through artistically and critically engaging with imagery from Greco-Roman antiquity, Lizzo and her creative team work to uplift fat, dark skin Black women, highlighting and celebrating their sexualities, and demanding that they be recognized as worthy. Lizzo's celebration of her culture, and her reclamation of Classical culture, proves some of the most dangerous rumors wrong: Black women have always belonged.

### Selected Bibliography

Devine, David. "“They Don't Know I Do It for the Culture, Goddamn’ :” *Perceptions*, 30 May 2022, <https://tuljournals.temple.edu/index.php/perceptions/article/view/570>.

Johann Wolfgang Goethe University Frankfurt am Main. "Gods in Color – Polychromy in Antiquity." *Liebieghaus Skulpturen Sammlung*, <https://buntegoetter.liebieghaus.de/en/>.

McGowan , Grace. "In 'Rumors,' Lizzo and Cardi B Pull from the Ancient Greeks, Putting a New Twist on an Old Tradition." *The Conversation*, 13 Sept. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/in-rumors-lizzo-and-cardi-b-pull-from-the-ancient-greeks-putting-a-new-twist-on-an-old-tradition-166318>.

Morales, H. (2021). *Antigone Rising: The Subversive Power of the Ancient Myths*. Bold Type Books.

Talbot, M. (2018, October 22). *The myth of whiteness in classical sculpture*. The New Yorker. 28 August 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/10/29/the-myth-of-whiteness-in-classical-sculpture>.