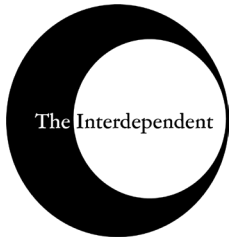


“Get Your Own Stuff”: The Colonial Canon and the Subversive Art of Appropriation



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B.A. Global Liberal Studies 2022 | New York University, New York

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<https://doi.org/10.33682/q3ks-21k3>

Abstract

This article analyzes the various ways in which artists of color are using appropriation in their work as a subversive tactic to undermine the historically exclusionary white European or ‘Western’ canon that continues to permeate throughout various aspects of our globalized societies. Colonial tropes of the other versus the white-body continue to affect many of the ways we perceive not only art but one another. These acts of appropriative subversion then make the socio-cultural power of the colonial canon redundant and shift the asymmetrical power relations held within it. By utilizing a blend of contemporary and historical case studies ranging from fifteenth-century Italian paintings to nineteenth-century colonial monuments to contemporary artists like Kara Walker, Titus Kaphar, and Harmonia Rosales, I examine the various hypocrisies that this art form helps to pinpoint in the Eurocentric canon. To do so, I employ iconoclasm and mimicry as two theoretical approaches to distinguish between the various forms of subversive appropriation in our contemporary world.

Keywords

Representation; Appropriation; Mimicry; Iconoclasm; Colonization; Globalization; Art; Monuments; Cultural Memory; Museums

As young children, we are all artists. The innocence of childhood allows a level of freedom of expression and creativity that sadly begins to break down as we age. Before we know it, we are taught to observe art for its aesthetic qualities and not for its social utility. However, art has never existed in a neutral vacuum without socio-cultural implications. Art is a physical repository for socio-cultural memory that ebbs and flows through multitudes of geographies, times, peoples, and spaces and its influence should be examined as such. During colonial periods, art was a primary means of currency, power, hybridization, and exchange of cultures. In so many ways, both colonialism and art still have as much social-utility and authority in our globalized societies. This article offers a post- and neo-colonial consideration for the context of art history and focuses on the use of appropriation as a distinct way in which artists of color are reaching into history, signifying upon colonial ideologies, and subverting them to make their socio-cultural power redundant (Sheehan).

Appropriation can be loosely defined as the taking of an existing idea, image, or object “as one’s own or to one’s own use” (“Appropriation, n”). In art, appropriation refers to the practice of artists intentionally using, borrowing, copying, and then altering or transforming a pre-existing image or object in some way (“Appropriation”; “Pop Art: Appropriation”). When we think of appropriation as an artistic movement, we recall Andy Warhol’s prints, Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, commercial pop culture, collages, and pop-art. In this form of appropriation, the mid-twentieth century rise of consumerism, technology, and the movement away from “high [representational] art” proliferated the re-use of pre-existing commercial images to bring into question the very nature of art itself (“Pop Art: Appropriation”). Growing globalization and industrialization bred a lack of uniqueness within various post-war contexts leading many scholars and artists to engage in conversations about originality and the nature of creativity. However, this scholarship leaves out important colonial contexts of the intermingling and creation of culture.

Regardless of its lack of scholarship, appropriation has always been utilized by marginalized peoples as an intentional way to target and critique the ruling class. These acts could be as simple as “false compliance, parody, pretense, and mimicking,” yet, they have functioned as ways for

the marginalized to “detach themselves from the ideologies of the powerful, retain a measure of critical thinking, and gain some measure of control over their life in an oppressive situation” (Pennycook 587). For fear of further ostracization, these acts of resistance often had to be hidden or they would be met with condemnations symptomatic of the *othering* that marginalized peoples would have already experienced, like claims of feeble-mindedness, subservience, laziness, and unoriginality followed by statements like: “Get your own stuff” (Kantian nightmare).

In spite of being hidden, any alteration of an image adds new meaning onto it. The act of alteration is not passive, accidental, or disinterested, but rather active, subjective, and motivated (Nelson). In her *Laughing Fit to Kill: Black Humor in the Fictions of Slavery* Glenda Carpio examines the history of Black comedians, writers, and artists utilizing appropriations of racial stereotypes as a means of redress from the nineteenth century forward. Through appropriation, parody, mimicry, iconoclasm, and caricature, the artists and figures in this article set these same stereotypes into motion by also both employing and inhabiting images, exaggerating them, and dislocating them “from their habitual contexts” to subvert the status quo (Schulman 2; Carpio 13-14). These appropriations are powerful in their re-contextualization of colonial imagery, they produce, as Carpio states, “layer upon layer of association,” (142). Thus, the art in this article does not merely describe these colonial stereotypes, but rather, conjures them, brings them to life, and then, alters them to make them bigger than life (Carpio 15).

The Colonizer, The ‘Other,’ and the Space Between

In the age of globalization, technology, and social media, information is being transferred across the world at much faster rates and higher quantities than ever before, effectively blurring the lines of ownership of ideas and who can claim certain aspects of cultural production. In the colonial era, European colonizers hypothesized a much simpler binary perception of culture and the concept of us versus them became popularized as a way to justify their subjugation of peoples globally. Us versus them, from the white European perspective, designates white European customs as the correct way of life, allotting their culture a higher status on the scale of social hierarchy, based

on arbitrary notions of intelligence, while subjectively defining any aspect of the other culture as both wrong and subordinate. What is necessary to note about this seemingly clear-cut notion of superiority is that it is not so clear after all. What the colonizer aimed to define as a strict ruling of authority in theory is, in fact, malleable in practice, with forced assimilation as its fatal flaw.

The colonizer justifies their act of colonization by othering the colonized through claiming that they are inferior and primitive in some way.¹ However, in order to establish authority and display power, the colonizer forces the colonized, in their subjugated state, to integrate themselves into the colonizer's culture. In order to address this ideological inconsistency throughout colonization, white Europeans attempted to modify the ways in which they defined people of color's existence in their homogenous European society. Here lies the birth of scientific racism, which became fully formulated in the nineteenth century. In this period, the concept of race as a distinct social category was created as well as the demarcation of the races to imply superiority or inferiority (Lowe, "Introduction" 7).

In 1455, Pope Nicholas V pronounced that it was permitted to acquire Black Africans from Guinea as long as efforts were made to convert them to Christianity (qtd. in Lowe, "Introduction" 12). Under the *Romanus pontifex*, numerous popes pronounced that those who were already Christians should not be enslaved (Lowe, "Introduction" 12). However, as Europeans began to import and enslave large numbers of Black Africans, the definitions of who could or could not be enslaved were adjusted to continue justifying the enslavement of people of African descent (Lowe, "Introduction" 13). This type of fundamental change would occur in order to account for hypocrisies, justify the enslavement of the colonized, and continue to leave a seemingly definitive line between the colonized and the colonizer. In this way, the colonizer both wants and needs to reform the other, but despite their integration, the colonized must continually be a completely

¹ These descriptors come from a text entitled "History of Jamaica" (1774) by Edward Long. Long was a British slave owner whose family of slave owners had lived in Jamaica since the seventeenth century. The book is often used as a reference for the beginnings of written pseudo-scientific racism. Despite Long including his speculative and prejudicial opinions on the continent of Africa, he was neither a historian nor a scientist, had never stepped foot onto African soil, and assumed authority to define Africa because of his position as a slave-owner. As discussed in Dania Dwyer's scholarly introduction to Long's text entitled, "*History of Jamaica or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island.*" (2016).

recognizable other (Bhabha 126).

In using a late fifteenth-century/early–sixteenth century painting as a case-study, this section will begin to answer: How is authority assumed by the colonizer? As such, what does it mean to the colonizer’s assumed authority when the colonized begins to reflect the colonizer’s hypocrisy? What does it mean to the colonizer when that fine line between the colonizer and the colonized is blurred?

We begin this inquiry into representation with a tempera and gold on wood panel painting entitled *The Coronation of Mary, St. Jerome and St. Anthony of Padua* [Fig. 1] currently located at the Christian Museum (Keresztény Múzeum) in Esztergom, Hungary. It is attributed to the Florentine painter Davide Ghirlandaio or to a painter in the workshop of Davide’s brother, Domenico Ghirlandaio (“Coronation of Mary”). The semi-circular framed panel is separated into two registers: a heavenly realm above, illustrating the Virgin’s coronation by God the Father and Jesus, and an earthly realm below.



Fig. 1. Davide Ghirlandaio (attr.). *The Coronation of Mary, St. Jerome and St. Anthony of Padua*. Late–fifteenth century/early–sixteenth century, Florence, Italy. Keresztény Múzeum, Esztergom. Photograph by Attila Mudrak (Lowe, “Black Africans” 80).

The earthly realm depicts St. Jerome on the left, and St. Anthony of Padua on the right, on the outskirts of a walled Tuscan town in the distance. On their knees, as if just fallen from reverence in the presence of the scene happening above, the saints’ hands are in gestures of prayer as they hold their respective attributes. The remaining figure appears in profile in the bottom right-hand corner of the painting’s earthly realm in bust-length. His presence is less prominent than the other divine figures, as is commonplace in a Christian religious

scene next to divine figures.

In a now edited online entry about this painting, published sometime before 2004, the Esztergom Museum asserts that the figure was likely an attribute of St. Anthony of Padua. As St. Anthony of Padua already holds his attribute, a flaming heart, in his hand, this is not entirely logical. Two other paintings from the Ghirlandaio workshop feature extremely similar compositions as *The Coronation of Mary* painting and include a non-divine bust-length figure in profile at the bottom of the panels: *The Madonna and Child with Sts. Louis of Toulouse and Thomas with donors Ludovico Folchi and his wife Tommasa* [Fig. 2] and *Christ in Glory with St. Benedict, St. Romuald, St. Attinia, St. Grecinia and the donor, abbot Buonvicini* [Fig. 3].



Fig. 2 (left). Davide Ghirlandaio. *The Madonna and Child with Sts. Louis of Toulouse and Thomas with donors Ludovico Folchi and his wife Tommasa*. 1486. 151.1 x 80 cm. Saint Louis Art Museum, Missouri, U.S.



Fig. 3 (right). Domenico Ghirlandaio. *Christ in Glory with St. Benedict (c.480-547), St. Romuald (c.952-1027), St. Attinia, St. Grecinia and the donor, abbot Buonvicini*. 1492. 308 x 199 cm. Pinacoteca e Museo Civico, Volterra, Italy.

The only difference between the paintings being that the bust-length figures in both *Madonna and Child* and *Christ in Glory* are both confirmed to be donors of the paintings. The formats of the paintings “follow a type used repeatedly in Ghirlandaio’s workshop,” which include the enthroned Virgin or Jesus flanked by two saints and profile donors in which these elements “were combined in many variations in the products issuing from the shop” (Cadogan 327). Given the bulk of evidence that it was commonplace for the Ghirlandaio brothers to place the donors’ portraits in the bottom corners of the religious scenes which they had commissioned, it is bizarre to not come to the same conclusion that the unidentified man in Figure 1 is also the donor of the painting. After the 2004

post was edited, and currently as of 2021, the Christian Museum in Hungary states that it is in all likelihood that he is both the commissioner of the painting and a Saracen (“Coronation of Mary”).

However, what are the roots of this man’s perceived difference from the Abbot and the couple? The only conclusion that can be made is that this man’s faith is denied simply because of his race. This is likely in that if he is considered as both a Christian and the painting’s donor, there are significant socio-cultural implications. One is that his presence indicates that he was wealthy enough to commission his own religious altar. This makes for compelling yet unique evidence of African acceptance of European Catholicism. This man’s commission of a likeness of himself stood as a gesture of his devoutness and willingness to participate in Catholic customs (Lowe, “Black Africans” 75). Thus, a second implication of this painting being that the “successful” assimilation of Africans to white European culture acts as a threat to established European colonial social hierarchy.

In straddling the line between the colonized and the colonizer, the *Coronation of Mary* addresses a rather nuanced conversation on the binary cultural boundaries created in colonialism and how just one person stepping outside of those colonially-ascribed cultural bounds may prove the bounds themselves to be futile. This so-called appropriation subverts the dominant white European colonial culture’s expectations of the colonized. Moreover, the assumed power of this “appropriation” is made clear by the lack of scholarship surrounding the Ghirlandaio painting and those like it throughout the colonial Western world. In fact, the field of Art History examining the representations of Black figures in history only truly began as a niche field in the 1960s and has been slowly progressing into the mainstream ever since, with seminal texts only written in the last 20 years.

In thinking about scholarship, it is also necessary to note who made these modern associations of race, religion, and othering about the man in the *Coronation of Mary*: a museum. In Carol Duncan’s “The Art Museum as Ritual,” a chapter from her book *Civilizing Rituals*, she emphasizes that because a museum’s purpose is to preserve “the community’s official cultural memory,” what we see or do not see in a museum then defines what is valued in this community

(474). Museums both establish and preserve social norms, instilling cultural values into their communities. To control a museum is to control “the representation of a community and its highest values and truths” (Duncan 474).

Confrontation: The Destruction of an Idol

In the early morning hours of January 24, 2022, police officers on patrol in San Juan, Puerto Rico received a report of a loud bang in the capital’s Plaza San José. Upon arrival, the *Statue of Juan Ponce de León* [Fig. 4], which stood in front of the Church of San José—the original burial site of Ponce de León—lay toppled in pieces on the ground [Fig. 5] (Liu).

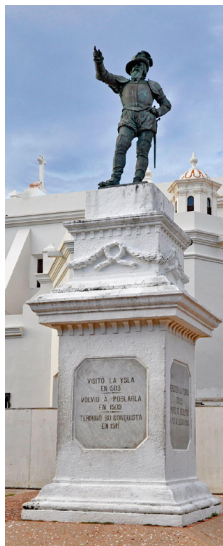


Fig. 4 (left). Statue of *Juan Ponce de León*, 1882. Bronze. San Juan, Puerto Rico.²



Fig. 5 (right). Image of the statue of *Juan Ponce de León* toppled and broken in two pieces, 2022. San Juan, Puerto Rico (Liu).

Ponce de León was a Spanish conquistador who was sent to the island of Borikén, now known as Puerto Rico, in 1508 on a royal mission of exploration and conquest. After forcefully taking control of the native Taíno populations,³ he served as the first colonial governor of the newly colonized Puerto Rico (“La Estatua de Ponce de León”). The statue itself was cast in 1882 in New

² The plaque on the front of the statue reads: “Visito la ysla en 1508, Volvio a Poblarla en 1509, Termino su conquista en 1511,” [translation mine: “He visited the island in 1508, He returned to populate it in 1509, He finished his conquest in 1511,”]. The side of the left of this face reads: “Compañero de Colon en su segundo viaje. Descubridor y primer adelantado de la Florida e yslas de Bimini.” [translation mine: “Companion of Columbus on his second voyage. Discoverer and first pioneer of Florida and the islands of Bimini.”]

³ A member group of the Indigenous Arawak people who occupied modern-day Cuba, Dominican Republic, Haiti, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and Bahamas.

York as a commemoration of the successful Spanish defense of the island from the British in 1797 and forged from melted bronze and steel from captured British cannons (Liu; “La Estatua de Ponce de León”). Ironically—and consciously—enough, the Spanish King, Felipe VI, was scheduled to arrive in Puerto Rico on the evening of January 24th to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the founding of San Juan. The group ‘Fuerzas Libertarias De Borikén’ [Borikén Libertarian Forces] claimed responsibility for this protest action in an online statement:

Faced with the visit of the King of Spain, Felipe VI, to Puerto Rico and the escalation of ‘gringo’⁴ invaders taking over our lands, we want to send a clear message: neither kings nor ‘gringo’ invaders, Borikén is ours... We demand that Law 22 (60) be repealed immediately and that all activities related to the supposed 500-year history of San Juan be canceled. We want the Puerto Ricans to begin to know the true history and for all the statues of Columbus, Juan Ponce De León and other tyrants to be removed. (“Grupo se responsabiliza”)

Later in the day of January 24th, surrounded by protests, the statue was restored and its reinstallation was protected by armed police officers, barricades, and security cameras. Meanwhile, the Spanish King had an uninterrupted visit to the island and was given a key to the city of San Juan.

Throughout the next couple of days, critics of the act chimed in with their opinions of the short-lived destruction of the statue. In an article about the toppling of the statue on local Puerto



Fig. 6. Twitter user María Flipante (@CyberQuijota) tweets about the toppling of the colonial statue: “Muchos gringos ignorantes aplaudiendo la destrucción de símbolos hispanos” [translation mine: “A lot of ignorant *gringos* applauding the destruction of Hispanic symbols”]

Rican media outlet *Primera Hora*, user Angel Rivera labels this as “un acto de terrorismo” [“an act of terrorism”] and user Butterfly states: “Qué vandalismo!” [“What vandalism!”] (“Miguel Romero Reacciona”). In an interview with Telemundo Puerto Rico, the Mayor of San Juan, Miguel Romero, responded to

⁴ *Gringo* is a term used in a negative humorous way in Latin-American countries and contexts to denote an English-speaking foreigner, especially an American, who is not Latino.

this subversive act by stating: “The Spaniards from 500 years ago are not the same ones of today... Freedom of expression is protected, but what cannot be protected is vandalism. I believe vandalism is the most cowardly form of expression” (Coto). An online media platform from Barcelona, Spain wrote that the “message against the Spanish monarchy is clear: ‘Felipe VI is a ‘gringo’ invader.’ Before the Borbon had even arrived on the Caribbean island, he had received a first expression of contempt, with the destruction of **the symbols of what was once the Spanish Empire**” (Albertus).⁵

Despite the overwhelming critical responses to this act, there were responses of support as well. To counter the mayor’s rhetoric, protestors occupied the plaza where the statue was held with black and white Puerto Rican flags—a version of the island’s notorious red and white and blue flag that has become synonymous with Puerto Rican independence and resistance to the oppressive United States occupation of the island (Pérez, “Plaza San José”). One sign read: “VÁNDALOS SON NUESTROS GOBERNANTES” [translation mine: “OUR RULERS ARE THE VANDALS”] (Pérez, “No son dioses”).

In the life of artefacts, it “is their normal fate to disappear,” (Gamboni, “A Historical Outline” 33). As such, their “use” and “misuse” is subjective, and their lives are not meant to be simply contained in an ahistorical context of their time. As Ponce de León—or any other statue of a figure—sits on a pedestal ten feet above the ground, the audience is forced to look up at him. This signals to the viewer that he is both physically and metaphysically superior to them. When he stands confidently in contrapposto with his dominant hand pointing forward, he signals to the audience that he will continue his colonial pursuit. Because we live in a reality where Puerto Rico continues to exist under colonial occupation, we know that his power and pursuit to subjugate the island did, in fact, never end.

Iconoclasm

Iconoclasm, as we know it in a Western sense, usually refers to the opposition to religious icons in the eighth century, stemming from the second commandment given to Moses: “Thou

⁵ Translated from Catalan to English automatically by Google.

shalt not make any graven image. . . thou shalt not bow down before them” (“Iconoclasm”). Yet, iconoclasm can more generally be described as referring to a “recurring historical impulse to break or destroy images for religious or political reasons,” and “the attacking or overthrow of venerated institutions and cherished beliefs” (Brooks; “iconoclasm, n.”). As such, an iconoclast is any “person who attacks settled beliefs or institutions,” (“Iconoclast”).

In Ancient Egypt, pharaohs carved out the name and visage of predecessors whom they did not support. In the sixteenth century, Protestant Reformers chiseled out the eyes and hands of religious icon sculptures in churches. In the eighteenth century, French revolutionaries knocked the heads off statues of kings and took down the plaques that celebrated them. Between 1937 and 1945, the Nazis destroyed hundreds of works of modern art that they deemed to be “degenerate.” Since the end of the last century, extremist groups Isis and the Taliban have sacked museums, broken artifacts, and even bombed the enormous Buddhas in Bamiyan, Afghanistan. Yet, despite all of these acts of destruction having different socio-cultural and political backgrounds, their effects can be similarly understood through the two distinct parties involved, there is a *perpetrator* behind the destruction and those who the act *was against*. By considering the perceived social, political, or cultural authority of each distinct party, as examined by German art historian Martin Warnke and discussed by Gamboni, there are two main ways to classify the destructive acts against artworks: iconoclasm ‘from above’ and iconoclasm ‘from below.’

Iconoclasm ‘from above’ corresponds “to the interests of those in power, [which] tended to lead to replacement of what they destroy by new symbols and to the prohibition of further destruction” (Gamboni, “Theories and Methods” 23). I will label the perpetrator in this framework as the colonizer. Whereas iconoclasm ‘from below,’ according to Warnke, springs from “political impotence” and fails to establish new symbols (Gamboni, “Theories and Methods” 23). Although I disagree with his use of the word ‘impotence’ in relation to this distinct perpetrator, I will label this actor as the colonized. The choice of the word ‘impotence’ to describe those who may not have as much perceived authority as the colonizer, completely disregards the amount of personal and socio-cultural agency it takes to commit any form of destruction of ideology against colonial hegemony.

In this way, the ‘impotence’ is placed onto the colonized by the colonizer. Acts of iconoclasm and appropriation ‘from below’ are not enacted from a place of impotence nor ignorance, but rather—as put by Glenda Carpio in *Laughing Fit to Kill*—from a place of non-impotence, out of necessity:

Today, the expression of both grievance and grief is crucial in working toward and keeping alive the dream of radical social transformation. . . .grief over the immense tragedy of slavery is necessary . . . because slavery remains ingrained in the sociopolitical and economic fabric of America. (Carpio 11)

It is necessary to note how the colonizer reacts to iconoclasm ‘from below’, this ‘act of grievance’ for the continual state of oppression the colonized must survive within.

As seen in the reaction to the toppled *Juan Ponce de León Statue* in Puerto Rico, those ‘above’ attempted to stigmatize the perpetrators to make them seem simpleminded, shameful, and above all, ignorant to the value of history before them. Because the colonizer already has a pre-existing ideal of the colonized as ignorant, “the sculpture he is about to deface defines him as an enemy of beauty and culture much more than of tyranny” (Gamboni, “Theories and Methods” 15). This point is elevated by the fact that “encouragement of the arts” is a key feature of an ‘enlightened,’ i.e., colonial society, and iconoclasts ‘from below,’ in this case, the marginalized, are presented as “blind not only to the value of what they destroy, but to the very meaning of the acts they perform” (Gamboni, “Theories and Methods” 13). Differently to the donor in *The Coronation of Mary* [Fig. 1], already knowing they will continue to be stigmatized as ignorant, artists throughout the global diaspora, distinct from activists, are purposefully appropriating art from the colonial canon and employing its destruction as a destruction of its warped ideologies in distinct and dynamic ways.

In 2017, artist Titus Kaphar created an almost exact copy of a seventeenth-century painting entitled *Family Group in a Landscape* [Fig. 8] with five figures and a dog visible in an outdoor landscape. The difference between Kaphar’s painting and Hals’ is quite direct:



Fig. 7. Titus Kaphar. *Shifting the Gaze*, 2017. Oil on canvas, 83 × 103 1/4 in. (210.8 × 262.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum. © Titus Kaphar



Fig. 8. Frans Hals. *Family Group in a Landscape*. 1645-1648. Oil on canvas. 202 x 285 cm. © Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, Spain.

In Kaphar’s work, four of the five figures are covered in white paint. The four hidden figures are white, and the standalone figure, left untouched by Kaphar, is Black. In the seventeenth-century painting, the young boy, likely the family’s servant, almost goes unnoticed as he is painted into the background. Not only is this figure physically relegated to the background, but his presence is also not mentioned in the online caption of this painting at the Spanish Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, even though everything from the dog symbolizing ‘loyalty’ to Frans Hals’ “unrivaled skill in capturing the personality of his sitters” is described (“Family Group in a Landscape”).

While images like these are meant to confirm ideas of the subservience of Black people, Kaphar’s intentional appropriation and iconoclastic white-washing of Hals’ painting not only undermined its anti-Black messages, but made the messaging conscious (Sheehan). Kaphar’s act of white-washing could be considered outrightly iconoclastic of Hals’ original painting. Yet, because it was not perpetrated onto the actual seventeenth-century painting, it only gestures at the possibility of the destruction of the original. By appropriation, Kaphar destroys the original associations held within Hals’ painting and creates its own meaning built atop the iconoclastic rubble.

As reactions to white perceptions of people of color, modern artists and activists, like Titus Kaphar and Fuerzas Libertarias De Borikén, appropriate and stage elaborate destructions of artworks that harness these perceptions as means of communication, redress, and subversion

(Gamboni, “Theories and Methods” 22). By attempting to destroy any amount of agency of marginalized peoples, colonizers simultaneously create a new perception of those people. Kaphar and activists are also both simultaneously creating and destroying. The subversive taking down of statues which hold so much cultural significance is an attempt to amend the history held within the statue. Yet, they do not destroy or erase the memory present within the statue. In fact, they destroy its unquestioned history and challenge not just the viewer, but the institutions that uphold these histories. Instead of the overt destruction of these colonial ideals, artists in the next section utilize appropriation through mimicry to subvert the Eurocentric canon.

The ‘Urban Legacy of Empire’⁶

As a new nation in the late–nineteenth century, the recently-unified Italian state had high aspirations to place itself on the global imperial stage. The Battle of Dogali, which took place in present-day eastern Eritrea on January 26, 1887, is a major battle that stands as a testament to the Italian imperial wars fought throughout Eastern Africa for colonial conquest. To commemorate the lives of the 500+ Italian soldiers killed in the Battle of Dogali, which resulted in Ethiopian victory, there currently stands a 15-meter (~50 foot) monument near Rome’s Piazza della Repubblica that was erected in 1887, only months after the battle’s occurrence [Fig. 9].



Fig. 9 Monument to the 500 Fallen at Dogali. Rome, Italy.



Fig. 10 Period postcard of the Piazza dei Cinquecento with the Dogali obelisk in front of Termini station, Rome, Italy. c. 1900.

⁶ Reference to concept explored by Krystyna von Henneberg in her chapter “Monuments, Public Space, and the Memory of Empire in Modern Italy” in *History and Memory*.

This commemorative monument was one of the first memorials to be unveiled in Rome since the city had only been declared as Italy's capital in 1870. Thus, it demonstrated the new Italian government's intention to leave symbolic nationalistic gestures of authority on the land (Weststeijn 332). This gesture of both authority and commemoration was spearheaded by Italian architect Francesco Azzurri.

The main feature of the monument is the appropriated Ancient Egyptian obelisk created for Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II, who lived from about 1303 to 1213 B.C. (Rattini). The obelisk was recovered in Ancient Roman ruins in 1883 by archeologist Rodolfo Lanciani but sat nearly untouched in storage until 1887. At this point, the government, and Azzurri, decided that this African artifact would be a great resource by which to present “the 500’ of Dogali as martyrs who sacrificed their lives ‘for the honour of the fatherland’” (Weststeijn 336). The obelisk, carved with ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and re-contextualized with the placement of an Italian Military star at its summit, was installed atop a massive stone base affixed with bronze plaques that list the names of the fallen soldiers (Henneberg 44). This act of appropriating an African monument by the Italian government was neither passive nor by accident.

The utilization of past forms to gain power and mobilize collective memory is extremely relevant in this Italian monument. Yet, appropriation by the colonizer from the colonized and appropriation by the colonized of the colonizer hold extremely different socio-cultural and political weights and intentions. The *Monument to the 500 Fallen* is a means of appropriation ‘from above’ which corresponds to the interests of those in power and is employed as a means of replacement and repression of those they marginalize (Gamboni, “Theories and Methods” 23). Whereas the acts of appropriation ‘from below,’ or *mimicry*, which appear in the bulk of this section, are inversions of the former and a means of necessity, redress, agency, and refuge for the marginalized.

Kara Walker: Mimicry and Monuments

Mimicry is an “act, instance, or mode of copying or imitating,” but involves imitation as a form of ridicule (“Mimicry, n.”). In acting as a form of ridicule, mimicry becomes a transgressive

art form that, through mockery and irony, challenges the norms of colonial language, identity, and ownership that continue to be extremely present in our everyday lives. Mimicry mocks the colonizers' pre-existing image by bringing to light its discrepancies and hypocrisies. As the colonized mimics the colonizer—utilizing their images and forms that they hold so high on a pedestal to legitimize their authority—the distinction between both parties becomes blurred. The similarity “is not comforting” as the resemblance between the two, or the existence of the two in similar positions of power, serves as a “reminder of the shaky foundations of racial stereotypes, and therefore the unjustifiable nature of colonialism” (Huddart 41). Thus, in order to mitigate this risk of the crumbling foundation of colonial hierarchies, how does the colonizer frame this act of mimicry? And what does that say about the fragility of the colonial dynamic and illegitimacy of racial typographies in the first place?



Fig. 11 Kara Walker. *Fons Americanus*. 2019. Tate, London, England.



Fig. 12 *The Queen Victoria Memorial*. Unveiled in 1911. Buckingham Palace, London, England.

American artist Kara Walker aimed to invert the usual omnipotent function of monuments like the *Italian Battle of Dogali Memorial* and the Puerto Rican *Juan Ponce de León Statue*, by utilizing appropriation and mimicry to outwardly question how these monuments dictate the ways we remember history (“Kara Walker’s *Fons Americanus*”). Her almost forty-three-foot-tall four-tiered working fountain *Fons Americanus* [Fig. 11] is directly modeled after the *Queen Victoria*

Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace in London, England [Fig. 12] (“Hyundai Commission”).

The *Victoria Memorial* was unveiled in 1911 to commemorate the death of Queen Victoria—the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (1837-1901), as well as the Empress of India—in 1901 (“Kara Walker’s *Fons Americanus*”). The eighty-two-foot-tall memorial uses 2,300 tons of white Carrara marble⁷ and depicts Victoria sitting triumphantly on a throne surrounded by personifications of “courage, constancy, victory, charity, truth and motherhood” (“The Queen Victoria Memorial”). What is not acknowledged in this memorialization of the Queen was her role in the brutality and violence of British colonialism and imperialism. Thus, instead of a celebration of the British Empire, Walker’s appropriation of the *Victoria Memorial* explores the tragic interconnected histories between Africa, America, and Europe, unsurprisingly left out in the triumphant narrative of Queen Victoria (“Kara Walker’s *Fons Americanus*”).

In juxtaposition with the *Monument of the 500* in Italy, Walker’s *Fons Americanus* also employs appropriation as a means of power over the original image in a multitude of ways. However, in her “colonial encounter” with the British empire’s punitive legacy, Walker creates her own symbolic allegories, associations, and legacy through her unique visual programming and personifications (Pennycook 582). At the summit of the *Victoria Memorial*, a golden winged-figure shines triumphantly as a representative of the achievements of the British empire. In *Fons Americanus*, the figure at the summit is now a play on the representation of Venus who is resurrected as a priestess of an Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Caribbean religion (“Kara Walker’s *Fons Americanus*”). Water expels profusely from her cut open neck and breasts as her body is caught in a liminal space, about to fall backwards into the pool of the fountain from which her breasts nourish. On the second tier, Queen Victoria, renamed as Queen Vicky, is now removed from her both figurative and corporeal throne of power to face the back of the monument, where she is caught mid-laughter with a personification of ‘melancholy’ crouching at her feet [Fig. 13]. To the left of these two figures, a man kneels with his hands clasped upwards towards the front of the statue [Fig. 14]. This

⁷ Compared to Kara Walker’s statue that is built from recyclable and reusable material and the surface is made from non-toxic acrylic and cement composite (“Hyundai Commission”). Walker’s statue was also only temporarily exhibited as opposed to the static and impermeable *Queen Victoria Memorial*.

man is a caricature of the West Indies Governor Sir William Young who owned sugar plantations and enslaved laborers throughout the Caribbean (“Kara Walker’s Fons Americanus”).



Fig. 13 Detail of *Queen Vicky* from Figure 11



Fig. 14 Detail of *Kneeling Man* and *The Captain* from Figure 11

Walker places this figure in a position of vulnerability as he seemingly begs for mercy hoping that his remorse may deliver him from the same cruel fate he had placed on the lives of others. On the other side of Sir William Young, there sits a rotted tree with a noose tied to it, alluding to the modern legacy of lynching, murder, and subjugation of Black people throughout the colonized globe. In place of where Queen Victoria would have sat, Walker puts a figure she names “The Captain:” a generalized composite of important Black individuals who rebelled against European colonialism like François-Dominique Toussaint L’Ouverture and Marcus Garvey [Fig. 14].⁸ According to Glenda Carpio, figures like Toussaint L’Ouverture came to represent “both the dream of freedom for the enslaved and the nightmare of rebellion for the master” (Carpio 164). Thus, by placing ‘The Captain’ in a position of power, Walker mimics, replaces, and makes a mockery of the power that Queen Victoria or Sir William Young would have originally held (“Kara Walker’s Fons Americanus”).

⁸ L’Ouverture (1743–1803) was the leader of the Haitian Revolution who instigated a slave revolt that led to the abolishment of slavery and the founding of the sovereign state of Haiti. Garvey (1887–1940) was a Jamaican-born nationalist and leader of the pan-Africanism movement in America who wrote *The Declaration of Rights of the Negro Peoples of the World* (1920) (“Kara Walker’s Fons Americanus”).

Oftentimes, taboos and stereotypes of marginalized peoples are addressed through sublimation, projection, and displacement. However, Walker's work relishes in exposure and her mimicries of power structures and histories are so absurd that it leaves the audience somewhere between laughter, disgust, and astonishment (Carpio 163). By leaving Sir William Young in a state of complacency and fear, and Queen Vicky in a state of erratic laughter, Walker mocks their power and employs a rich history of 'Black Humor' which understands the fact that the stress imposed by global histories of colonial rule is so extreme that it oftentimes calls for comedy (Carpio 141). In this way, Walker creates "aesthetically beautiful but conceptually grotesque images that signal to, without claiming to represent, the cruel and bizarre intimacies of American slavery," and her work combines fact and fiction (Carpio 142, 163). Given the various hypocrisies of colonial stereotypes, their representations in imperial monuments are absurd: "When the situation is ridiculous, you deal with it through silliness and irony" (Carpio 142).

Thus, this deliberate performance of ironic sameness which modifies the original becomes, as Alastair Pennycook has stated in another context, "a weapon for the non-Western or colonized subject...that undermines the status and distinction of the West" (Pennycook 586). The histories that Walker placed into *Fons Americanus* through her newly contextualized figures did not previously exist on the *Victoria Memorial*. Yet, through her act of mimicry, by utilizing and appropriating the form of the most revered monument of the Western world, she effectively makes a connection between official British history and the tragedies of colonial subjugation. In doing so, she effectively re-contextualizes the history and memory of the British empire, an act of subversion. As such, Walker describes her work as a gift "from one cultural subject to the heart of an Empire that redirected the fates of the world" ("Kara Walker's Fons Americanus").

Harmonia Rosales: Mimicry and Representation

When we think of the most popular artworks of all time, there are iconic images that immediately come to mind each with their own sphere of influence in 'Western' popular culture today—*The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel and *The Birth of Venus* by

Sandro Botticelli being two of them. In a quick Google search of “the most iconic artworks of all time,” these paintings were consistently included at the top of list—from CNN’s “10 most famous paintings in the world” to Ranker.com’s “Best Paintings of All Time.” However, most of these survey lists of the most iconic artworks in history are limited to mostly white European paintings and artists. Oftentimes unbeknownst to the viewer, the uplifting of these iconic white Eurocentric artworks forms a canon that perpetuates both colonial stereotypes of the marginalized other and the superiority of the white body, the white artist, and white ideals. Thus, the Afro-Cuban American artist Harmonia Rosales also employs appropriation and mimicry throughout her body of work. Her 2017 series of paintings, entitled *B.I.T.C.H. (Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony)*, aims to address the unconsciously imbued stereotypes and associations that are pervasive throughout our modern world and continue to suggest the alterity of Blackness. Rosales’ painting from this series, *Birth of Oshun* (2017) [Fig. 15] directly mimics Sandro Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus* (1485–1486) [Fig. 16].



Fig. 15. Harmonia Rosales. *Birth of Oshun*. 2017.

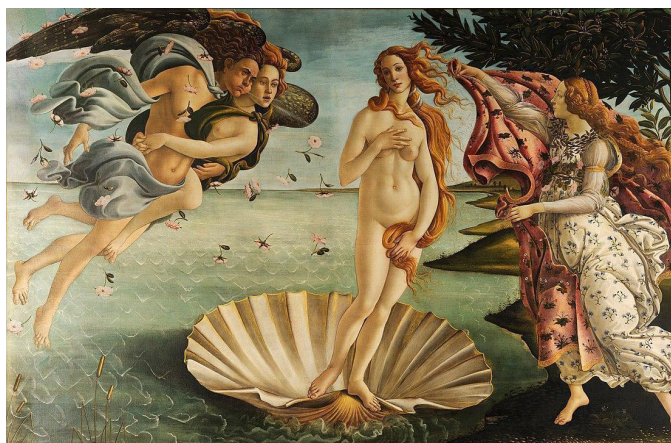


Fig. 16. Sandro Botticelli. *The Birth of Venus*. 1485–1486. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy.

In the *Birth of Oshun*, Rosales replaces the iconic image of Venus, the Roman goddess of love, fertility, prosperity, and victory, with Oshun, a Yoruba goddess of fertility and femininity. Both goddesses are associated with similar themes of fertility and femininity, yet, through Eurocentric and ‘Western’ perspectives, the white body of Botticelli’s Venus is most often intimately linked with the pinnacle of beauty and womanhood. Whereas depictions of Black femininity have been historically used as ways to essentialize, exotify, and commodify Black women. This is clear in

images of Sara Baartman, who was displayed throughout Europe in the early nineteenth century as the “Hottentot Venus.”⁹ In the forceful commodification of her scantily clad body, she served as a reflection of white Westerners’ hypocritical simultaneous desires for and fear of what they labeled as exotic and “primitive.” Thus, by connecting Baartman’s image to the image of Venus, European audiences continue to juxtapose her as the other, as innately different to the white, straight haired, and slim Botticelli-esque Venus they associated with “true” femininity. Thus, in Rosales’ intentional appropriation of Venus, she re-presents the associations that are imbued in the original painting to “begin to recondition our minds to accept new concepts of human value” (“Art Series”). Yet, the colonizer, who created and continues to perpetuate these concepts of human value and hierarchy, does not want to recondition these associations. To do so would be to undermine their authority as superior and crumble the very foundations of the colonial hierarchy.

On May 18th, 2017, BuzzFeed, a popular online media outlet, tweeted a link to an article on their website entitled, “This Woman Reimagined Michelangelo’s ‘The Creation of Adam’ With Black Women and It’s Beautiful.” The tweet itself, which read, “This artist re-created “The Birth of Adam” with black women, and it’s stunning <http://bzfd.it/2qO6QhT>” soon began garnering hundreds of replies from users who both liked and disliked Rosales’ work:

“Get your own stuff...” (Kantean nightmare)

“How dare they ruin one of Michelangelo’s most famous works. Destroy it! It’s a disgrace towards his legacy.” (Rynosaurus Rex)

“Very original.” (OkKid)

“replacing white art with black people= stunning
replacing black art with white people= cultural appropriation.

You are the problem buzzfeed.” (Avery)

“They’re European paintings, by European men no less. They reflect the European spirit.

I can’t understand the thought processes behind this. It seems so mindlessly vain and

⁹ Hottentot was a colonial-era term used by Europeans to describe the Khoikhoi people of South Africa. However, the term was widely used in a negative manner to generally describe anyone with darker skin and is now considered a derogatory term.

oblivious to the fact it admits to a lack of African artistic tradition.” (Iskalla)

Stereotypes, like curse words, elicit knee-jerk reactions and these are only a handful of the replies which were tweeted in response to Rosales’ paintings (Carpio 14). However, even just these five tweets are evocative of the imminent threat that Rosales’ appropriation posed to established hierarchical narratives. Within them, there is a consensus that European art distinctly envelops a certain “European spirit.” Essentially, in a rather roundabout way, the above Twitter users believe that Europeanness inherently coincides with whiteness, and not only has nothing to do with Blackness, but opposes Blackness. This, of course, could not be further from the truth. Africa and Europe had been engaging in trade centuries before the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism began. Once these oppressive systems of slavery began, the diaspora of Africans in Europe continued to grow and new Black European— “Afropean”— identities began to form. In this way, Blackness is, and has been, an integral part of European history and in the formation of so-called “Europeanness.” Thus, by plainly confronting these stereotypes of B.I.P.O.C. and their lack of inclusion in European narratives, Rosales’ and Walker’s work begins to “defang the potency” of these stereotypes and reactions (Carpio 14).

Moreover, in a similar way to the previously discussed responses to iconoclasts ‘from below’, these tweets also generally express that artists like Rosales lack originality and are also ignorant to the value of the previous forms which they appropriate and mimic. In the scholarship of appropriation, there are constant debates on whether “appropriation artists” are “creative” or “original.” However, paradoxically, repetition actually produces difference rather than sameness. In linguistics and literature, “[e]ach repetition of a word is always a different inauguration of that word,” which transforms the word’s history and context (qtd. in Pennycook 585). This can be similarly applied to artistic creation through visual media. Any repeated event, act, or artistic form is necessarily different in its repetition, even if different “only to the extent that it has a predecessor” (Pennycook 585). By utilizing the original canonical artwork and altering it ever-so-slightly, the act of intentional sameness effectively changes the original as well as creates a new piece of art in the new iteration. Interestingly, this act is not passive but completely intentional on the behest

of the artist and, in order to make a new iteration of the original, relies on the artist's complete understanding of the original's context. Thus, the insinuation that these acts of appropriation and mimicry are not rooted in creativity or agency is not only false, but simultaneously ignores the fact there has always been a tradition of artists borrowing, copying, altering, learning from, and working with other artists' work, whether in a subversive way or not (Pennycook 581).

Thus, in order to mitigate this risk of the crumbling foundation of colonial hierarchies, the colonizer frames this act of mimicry as ignorance of the "value" of the subject matter which is being appropriated. However, once again, this could not be farther from the truth. When asked about religion as a consistent theme in her work, in an interview with *Dazed*, Rosales stated that religion and power have always gone hand in hand in history and emphasized how colonizers used Christianity to manipulate and control millions (Manatakis). Kara Walker referenced allegories and histories from a global African diaspora from the Middle Passage as well as histories of lynching, motherhood, femininity, rape, and water as the lifeblood of all human life. These artists are extremely well-versed in the histories that inform their work and are completely intentional about the ways in which they engage with them. By creating a lineage and mapping the past, these artists are then inserting their own experiences into history and asserting their modern dominance and agency over it (Pennycook 581). In this case, repetition is their intentional mode of difference, mimicry, re-contextualization, re-presentations, and renewals (Pennycook 580). And because their acts are a threat to the colonial narratives embedded into every sector of our society, the colonizer will always find ways to re-invent new stereotypes of the other to conform to their preconceived notions of the other.

Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic's text, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (2001) explains the ways in which the dominant society racializes and categorizes different minority groups at different times as a general response to what is needed from said group:

Popular images and stereotypes of various minority groups shift over time, as well. In one era, a group of color may be depicted as happy-go-lucky, simpleminded, and content to serve white folks. A little later, when conditions change, that very same group may appear in cartoons, movies,

and other cultural scripts as menacing, brutish, and out of control, requiring close monitoring and repression. (8)

To reiterate, appropriation, recontextualization, mimicry, irony, and humor are means of power for the oppressed. So, in this “unique paradox” of our contemporary time in which Black lives have “never been more empowered and yet, in many ways, are still so disenfranchised,” that small chance of agency, if chosen to be weaponized by the marginalized, threatens to disrupt the order that colonialism has set in place for so long (Drew and Wortham XIII). In this case, once the minority group or individual artist assumes this transgressive, dissident position, the Western neo-colonial society will adjust its perception of the marginalized other to whatever way it sees fit. From unoriginal, to not creative, to ignorant, to non-existent, these are the ranges of the perception of the marginalized appropriation artist ‘from below.’

Conclusion

Although not comprehensive, this article has examined many examples of the diverse utilizations of appropriation as a subversive artistic phenomenon. These artists and their art were selected because they are representative of the nuances of subverting white supremacy and colonial tropes through art. As mentioned by Drew and Wortham, “Blackness is infinite—a single book cannot attempt to contain the multitudes and multiverse” that exists within the global diaspora (XIII). There are infinite paths of existence that this article cannot cover. Despite the different time periods, art mediums, and subversive tactics, one commonality that is clearly important to the power of these artworks is the perpetuation of colonial tropes and power dynamics by institutions. As Carol Duncan has examined in “The Art Museum as Ritual,” museums both define and preserve the values and social norms of the community around them. Thus, museums which were originally created either as cabinets of curiosities filled with colonial trophies or salons full of white art, tend to continue to perpetuate these same colonial tropes in the communities around them.

Is the only way to undermine colonial social standards to put B.I.P.O.C faces in seats of power? Do people of color have to be in positions of power to be valid? The short answer to

these questions is no. There is a delicate art to the balance between highlighting those in power, and people existing within everyday realities. The existence of Harmonia Rosales' spectacular portraits of Black gods and goddesses does not undermine the existence of the quiet beauty in the mundane portraits of people of color from artists like Amy Sherald, Kerry James Marshall, and James VanDerZee. In fact, the coexistence of both forms is necessary to denote the existence of the lives, experiences, and histories of marginalized peoples and artists, and by doing so, it undermines the colonizer's insistence on labeling such histories as irrelevant, inconsequential, and homogenous. However, as stated by Rosales, appropriation simply offers a direct critique that gains the attention of the colonizer:

I had to use an image of theirs to catch their attention. If I had painted my own composition of a black female god, it would have been subcategorized as "black art" and therefore not impacted mainstream America. Throughout history it has been white men who have been the deciding force behind choosing what is art and what is beauty. (Mercado 157)

It is clear that the act of appropriation by using these dichotomies of power is inherently reductive. Yet, this reductivity is both acknowledged and embraced by the artist as a form of agency, parody, mimicry, and irony.

Can the matter of race ever truly be resolved? Can art institutions built within a system of oppression ever truly shed this oppression? Can an oppressive system like colonialism ever truly be undermined, or is appropriation more of a form of agency and amelioration? There are infinite paths of existence, identities, and acts of hidden and outright subversion taking place in our world with infinite questions that this study simply cannot cover. I wholeheartedly hope that the reader is left with more questions than answers and that this post- and neo-colonial survey of the power of art is only a beginning in the field of Art History.

Acknowledgments

This article is a revised excerpt of my undergraduate senior thesis. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Lindsay Davies, for her unwavering support in helping me realize this expansive topic. I would also like to extend my thanks to *The Interdependent* staff for their assistance in editing this thesis into its new form.

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