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Exhibitions of the Stereotype in Kara Walker's A Subtlety

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, Kara Walker opened the controversial exhibition 'A Subtlety' in the soon-to-be demolished Domino Sugar Factory. The centrepiece was an enormous sugar-coated sphinx whose face resembled the stereotypical Mammy. Unlike in the classic Oedipus tale, this sphinx did not speak or pose riddles in a literal sense. Rather, she embodied a riddle herself by bearing features of the deliberately desexualised Mammy that contradicted her explicit sexuality. Mirroring the bourgeois confection from the Middle-Ages, the sphinx indeed resembled a giant dessert, waiting passively to be enjoyed by the visitors. However, the scope of this exhibition extended far beyond the walls of the factory. Within days after the opening, the sphinx's enormous breasts, prominent buttocks and brazenly displayed labia became the object of thousands of pictures on social media. Visitors uploaded selfies in which they sexualised and fetishized the sphinx, posing as though licking, pinching or touching her breasts and genitals. Unknowingly, the audience was captured on film by Walker. The after-movie, titled *An Audience*, worked as a mirror to reveal the audience's reactions to the stereotypical and sexualised imagery. In analysing how this exhibition functioned to challenge notions of the stereotype, I have taken the question posed by Mitchell as point of departure: "what if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than reconstituting it?" These 'materials of memory' could be interpreted as stereotypical imagery, confirming the notion that the reductive qualities of the stereotype are sustained by iterating them. Re-examining Bhabha's, Hall's, and Rosello's notions of the stereotype, I argue that this exhibition invokes a reconfiguration of these 'materials of memory', putting into effect processes of reconsideration and overcoming. In conclusion, *A Subtlety* marks the difference between the impossible stereotype and the fluidity of individual identity.

Keywords: exhibition, stereotype, curatorial practice, Kara Walker

INTRODUCTION

A large white sphinx looms out of the dark in the colossal warehouse. The walls are dripping with solidified molasses. Frozen in their oozing shapes, they serve as semi-permanent reminders of decades of non-stop sugar production. The sphinx's raised head almost touches the high ceiling. In response to the breathing of the hundreds of people around her, her sugary skin starts dripping, mirroring the walls of the refinery. Her large breasts, exaggeratedly thick lips, enormous rear end, and brazenly displayed labia light up as phone cameras flash. A critical and multidimensional commentary on the historical relationships between capital, sexuality and race, the sphinx sits proudly as a young man takes a comical selfie, pretending to stick his tongue into her exposed vulva.¹

¹ Description based on several photographs and videos of the exhibition found on Instagram and YouTube.

Kara Walker's exhibition took place in 2014 at the Domino Sugar Refinery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It was titled *A Subtlety, or The Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plan*. According to Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Walker's fame can largely be attributed to her wall-installations featuring elegant black silhouettes frozen in nightmarish scenes of antebellum plantation life. Through these anonymized figures rendered in black cardboard, Walker represents and challenges racist stereotypes, such as the 'Mammy', the 'Uncle Tom' and the 'nigger wench' (Shaw, 2007, p. 18). For *A Subtlety*, Walker lifted her figures off the wall, making them enticingly three-dimensional. The sphinx's body bears enormous breasts, her buttocks are pushed upwards in a cat-like gesture, and her labia protrude from between her rounded thighs. The thumb on her left hand is pushed suggestively through her fingers, reminiscent of the Afro-Brazilian *figa* gesture: a protective talisman symbol, also applied as a symbol of fertility (Sikkema et al., 2014). Her face is that of the stereotypical Mammy, including plump cheeks, large lips, and a flattened nose, topped with a head kerchief. However, despite her explicit features, immense size, and prominent placement, I would like to argue that, ultimately, the sphinx was not the main spectacle of the exhibition.

The sphinx's stereotypical face demands a brief venture into the concept of the stereotype. Bhabha (2003) has defined the concept of the stereotype in his canonical text 'The Other Question' as follows:

The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (that the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the representation of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations (p. 27).

I would also like to refer to Bhabha's description of the stereotype as a 'fixed reality which is at once an 'other' and yet entirely knowable and visible' (p. 23). According to Bhabha, the stereotype works to simplify the 'colonised' in order to reduce this other to a comprehensible and closed reality. In the eyes of the 'coloniser', individual differentials must be ignored or rejected in order to maintain these stereotypical notions. Departing from this definition of the stereotype, I will explore how the inclusion of stereotypical imagery into *A Subtlety* works to challenge the concept of the stereotype.

Moving beyond her face, the sphinx's exaggerated nudity also demands attention. The black body has been an object of peculiar fascination from the period of slavery until today. Although representations of black bodies, both male and female, have become abundant in contemporary mainstream culture over the last few decades, their imagery and presence very rarely challenge or subvert the stereotypical or racist notions that emanated from the period of slavery and 19th century imperialist culture. Fanon (1952) described these processes of racial objectification in his canonical work *Black Skin, White Masks*. Through personal experiences in which he felt objectified because of his skin colour, Fanon draws from Marx's *Das Kapital* in describing racial objectification as the reduction of social relations to things (p. 95). In his key text 'The Spectacle of the Other' (1997), Stuart Hall explores these ideas further through historical and contemporary examples that all demonstrate an ongoing practice of the stereotyping of people of colour. He draws from Kobena Mercer in explaining how black bodies can be 'looked down upon and despised' yet also function as an object of 'awe and envy as the black subject is idealized as the embodiment of its aesthetic ideal' (Hall, 1997, p. 276). Mercer (2013) himself has described the process of racial objectification as 'a deconstructive strategy which begins to lay bare the psychic and social relations of ambivalence at play in cultural representations of race and sexuality' (p. 199).

The black female body in particular has been - and continues to be - subjected to racist and explicitly sexualising or de-sexualising stereotypes such as the 'Jezebel' and the Mammy, respectively. Hall (1997) calls upon the famous 19th century 'case' of Saartjie Baartman, perhaps the most well-known and disturbing example of racial fetishism (pp. 265-66). Baartman was a South-African woman who was brought to England in 1810 and became a sensation in London. She was dubbed 'the Hottentot Venus' and displayed 'on a raised stage like a wild animal' so that her anatomy could be scrutinized by a paying audience (Hall, 1997, p. 264). Apart from her size (she was only 1,37 metres tall), Baartman became an attraction because of her 'unusual' anatomical features: her relatively large breasts, her protruding buttocks, and her enlarged labia (Hall, 1997, p. 264). As summarized by Hobson (2018), Baartman and her story have ultimately 'shaped representations of blackness and beauty'. Although sometimes argued to have been overly theorised and conceptualised, Baartman's case remains highly relevant and illustrative in discussions surrounding representations of the black female body.

Reaching for more contemporary examples, bell hooks (1992) discusses her personal experiences before drawing attention to the ongoing objectification and subsequent fetishisation of the black female body in contemporary culture in her essay 'Selling Hot Pussy'. She explains the seemingly unnecessary sexualisation of black female singers, such as Tina Turner and Aretha Franklin, as 'a sign of displaced longing for a racist past when the bodies of black women were a commodity, available to anyone white who could pay the price' (hooks, p. 122). Turning towards the visual arts specifically, Farrington (2003) explores the shifting politics behind representations

of black female bodies by black women artists themselves in art from the 90s through the works of Renee Cox and Alison Saar. She explains that, although the figure of the female nude is abundant in Western art, the black female body ‘has been virtually invisible within this context’, thus emphasizing ‘the value of the African-American woman artist’s endeavour to represent her own body’ (Farrington, p. 19). Today, female African-American artists such as Walker continue to challenge racist and sexist notions that remain part of American cultural heritage.

A SUBTLETY

In this particular exhibition, stereotyping and the politics behind the representation of the black female body were not the only issues being raised. Walker (2014) stated in an interview that through *A Subtlety*, she wanted to address ‘the sugar trade, the slave trade, the various meanings that are put upon sugar, as an industry, and then the by-products of the industry, like the molasses, by-products not just of industry but of slavery’ (Sikkema et al., 2014). Indeed, the sphinx was completely covered in historically suggestive processed sugar, causing her to be blindingly white (Carpio, 2017, p. 552). Surrounding the sphinx, fifteen brown cartoonish human-sized statues of children stood scattered throughout the vast warehouse, carrying baskets stuffed with the spoils of agriculture. Twelve of these figures were cast in resin and coated in molasses and sugar, the remaining three were made of sugar completely. These figures melted away or collapsed to varying degrees over the course of the exhibition, depending on their build (Carpio, 2017, p. 551). One visitor recalled feeling disturbed by the deteriorating sculptures and remarked: ‘It was like finding the remains of small children by the side of the road during high summer’². Walker (2014) herself referred to these sculptures as ‘sugar boys’, stating that ‘they [change] every day. There’s little drips, things coming from the interior, they leak. [They] sort of live and breathe in a way’ (qtd. in Sutton). Their dark hues and human size allowed them to almost blend in with the audience, emphasizing the interactive element of the exhibition.

An interesting analysis could be made of the selection of colours that featured in the exhibition. The whiteness of the sphinx’s sugary skin was almost blinding, even more so through the contrast with the dark brown sugar boys that surrounded her. The refinement process, in which brown sugar is refined into white sugar, was gradually undone, as the sphinx’s skin showed discolouration over the course of the exhibition, tainting the whiteness of the sugar. The sugar boys slowly melted away, bleeding a dark red liquid from their base. The pools that formed on the concrete floor were reminiscent of blood. Although this symbolic play of colours alone could form the basis for an interesting analysis, I have decided to focus on other aspects of the exhibition. I found that the questions raised by this play of colours could also be answered through other perspectives, which provided equally, if not more so, interesting answers.

The many layers of this exhibition were not confined within the walls of the Domino Sugar Refinery. Along with geo-tagged, or location-bound, filters accessible through the Snapchat app, a hashtag was launched, inviting the 130,554 attendees of the exhibition to share their own pictures of and with the sphinx and her companions through Instagram (Munro, 2014). Within the initial couple of days after the opening, social media was flooded with pictures of the exhibition. Visitors uploaded selfies and pictures in which they sexualised and fetishized the sphinx, posing as though licking, pinching or touching her breasts, buttocks, and labia (Munro, 2014). Although many people responded to these pictures with outrage and anger, Walker herself expressed a lack of surprise:

I put a giant 10-foot vagina in the world and people respond to giant 10-foot vaginas in the way that they do. It’s not unexpected. [...] Human behaviour is so mucky and violent and messed-up and inappropriate. And I think my work draws on that. [My work] comes from responding to situations like that, and it pulls it out of an audience. I’ve got a lot of video footage of that [behaviour]. I was spying (qtd. in Miranda, 2014).

The revelation that Walker anticipated these reactions and worked to capture them, suggests that Walker intended these reactions to be a fundamental part of the exhibition. In fact, within six months after the closing of the exhibition, Walker released a 27-minute documentary-style film centred around the behaviour of the visitors of *A Subtlety*. The film, titled *An Audience*, functions as the concluding yet crucial chapter to the exhibition. Although the sphinx appeared to be the tangible centrepiece of *A Subtlety*, I would like to argue that the audience as portrayed in *An Audience* was the main spectacle of the exhibition as a whole. Building up to this conclusion, I will analyse the sphinx herself, the presentation and discussion of the exhibition both at the site itself and through social media, and finally the audience of the exhibition, as portrayed by Walker in her film *An Audience*. It is important to realise that *An Audience* is not an autonomous documentary film, rather, it should be treated as an

² Review posted by Karen S. from New York on Yelp: <<https://www.yelp.com.au/biz/a-subtlety-by-kara-walker-brooklyn>>

essential part of the exhibition. It is through this film and its ability to retrospectively hold up a mirror to the audience, that notions of the stereotype are challenged, rather than simply reiterated.

The exhibition was organised by Creative Time, a public arts organisation based in New York that 'works with artists to contribute to the dialogues, debates and dreams of our times' (Projects, n.d.). In the curatorial statement found on the Creative Time website, the chief curator of Creative Time, Nato Thompson (2014), states that 'Walker has appropriated racist imagery throughout her career, frequently depicting scenes of intense violence and sex that are peculiarly -and uncomfortably- alluring'. In the exhibition, the sphinx 'stands mute, a riddle so wrapped up in the history of power and its sensual appeal that one can only stare stupefied, unable to answer' (Thompson, 2014). Thompson (2014) also explains that the title of the exhibition, *A Subtlety*, refers to the small sculptures made of sugar paste and almonds that were served at aristocratic bouquets in the Middle Ages. They were sculpted to be representative of important figures or events, and could only be consumed by royalty (Thompson, 2014). Thus, the subtlety as a medium carries notions of power at its core, whilst potentially functioning as a vehicle through which to discuss issues of colonialism, inequality and sexuality.

The title of the exhibition and the sphinx's sugary skin inevitably evoke theories on cultural consumption. Halfway through the 90s, Peterson and Kern (1996) rejected Pierre Bourdieu's notion that aesthetic taste could be determined, sustained, and reinforced by social hierarchies, and argued that cultural consumption could no longer be characterised by 'higher' and 'lower' tastes. Rather, they suggested that the divide between 'high' and 'low' culture was fading, allowing for an 'omnivorous appropriation' of culture (p. 900). Around the same time, Hall collaborated with Raymond Williams in describing the social dynamics at play in cultural consumption. Through the case-study of the Sony Walkman, Hall and Williams (1997) examined how post-structuralist notions had changed the way we consume culture, as culture became increasingly more tailored to the individual (p. 104). However, with the ongoing developments in technology, (social) media, and the changing role of the individual, cultural consumption has transformed even further. In 2007, Oriel Sullivan and Tally Katz-Gerro suggested that contemporary omnivorous consumption can be defined by 'cultural tasting and switching among, or differently combining, [cultural] activities', indicating a growing sense of 'independence and flexibility' in the cultural consumer (qtd. in Eriksson, 2011, p. 481). Recently, a new mode of cultural consumption has appeared, in which the tendency towards omnivorous cultural consumption and the move towards individualisation have crystallised into a new medium: the selfie. The selfie has become a sharable commodity, and has even been dubbed 'a celebration of consumer culture' (Iqani and Schroeder, 2016, p. 411). Although I will return to the impact of selfie-culture on art exhibitions later, I would like to keep these omnivorous and individualised tendencies in contemporary cultural consumption in mind throughout the analysis of Walker's exhibition.

THE SPHINX

I would first like to turn to the tangible centrepiece of the exhibition, the sphinx. Walker's sphinx brings to mind the majestic Egyptian monument, not only in form but also in sheer size. Measuring 75 feet from paws to rump, her raised head almost touching the ceiling of the five story-high warehouse, *A Subtlety* is 'the largest single piece of public art ever erected in New York' (qtd. in Carpio, 2017, p. 551). The sphinx also appears in Greek mythology in Sophocles' tragic tale of 'Oedipus'. When Oedipus meets the sphinx he is presented with the riddle 'what walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three at night?', which Oedipus answers correctly. Defeated and enraged, the sphinx throws herself off a rock, thus killing herself and relieving the nation of her terrors. Oedipus is granted the honour of marrying the queen, who also happens to be his mother (Karas and Megas, 2018). However, the sphinx in the exhibition does not speak or pose riddles in a literal sense. Rather, she embodies a riddle herself by bearing symbols of sexuality and fertility that contradict her features of the deliberately desexualised Mammy stereotype. As will become clear towards the end of this paper, I would like to argue that the riddles posed by both sphinxes can be solved with the same answer: 'humankind'.

As mentioned before, the title of the exhibition, *A Subtlety*, is also a reference to the small sugar statuettes that were consumed by royalty and the clergy. As a female African-American artist, Walker has described feeling like 'a desirable outsider, a delicious new confection [...] to be moulded and sculpted, cultivated and cuisined, consumed and defecated and consumed again' (qtd. in Shaw, 2007, p. 139). Shaw (2007) explains that 'like Basquiat before her, [Walker] is the flavour of the month, a product presented to a hungry white art audience to see how good she tastes' (p. 139). This description mirrors the passivity of the sphinx as sugary sculpture. Coated in an estimated 40 tons of sugar, the sphinx does indeed resemble 'a giant dessert that has been set out for visitors to enjoy' (Davidson and Guadalupe, 2016, p. 180). Thus, the sphinx could be understood as a mute confection, in the sense that it represents only its tangible self. In this sense, the featuring of the Mammy stereotype could be interpreted as problematic. As Rosello (1998) points out, the repetition of stereotypes is always a form of enactment and consequent endorsement of the stereotype. In other words, 'there is no innocent reference to a stereotype' (Rosello, 1998, pp. 38-9). Through this approach to the stereotype, the incorporation of the Mammy stereotype and the

choice for sugar as material would suggest that the sphinx indeed sits patiently, waiting to be consumed by her spectators. This treatment of the stereotype also brings to mind the question posed by Mitchell (1994) in the chapter 'Narrative, Memory, and Slavery': 'What if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than reconstituting it?' (p. 200). In this question, the 'materials of memory' could be interpreted as stereotypes, implying that the reductive qualities of the stereotype are sustained by iterating them.

However, apart from referring to a dessert, the term 'subtlety' also invokes the spectators' ability to perceive the deeper meanings that prevail beyond the initial glance. This double meaning of the word 'subtlety' signals towards the other way in which Walker's sphinx could be understood within the context of the exhibition. The word 'subtlety' invokes a deeper analysis of the sphinx herself, of the materials used, of the historical context into which the work is embedded, and how she herself interacts with the world around her. In her exaggerated size, her radiant colour, and her brazenly displayed genitalia, however, the sphinx is far from subtle. Hence, this analysis aims to move beyond the superficial and uncover the subtleties hidden behind the sphinx's sugary exterior. A deeper analysis of the sphinx would, arguably, uncover how the incorporation of the stereotype into this work does not simply serve to repeat the stereotype. Rather, it would reveal the implicit absurdity and violence of the stereotype, challenging its legitimacy.

The African-American stereotypes that proliferated after the Civil War were intended to 'undermine the social status and mobility afforded to people of colour' (Farrington, 2003, p. 17). These stereotypes became part of popular discourse and functioned to 'make fast, firm and separate what [was] in reality fluid and much closer to the norm than the dominant value systems care[d] to admit' (Dyer, 2009, p. 16). Thus, African-Americans were depicted as being 'stupid, shiftless, lazy, irresponsible, and dangerous' (Farrington, 2003, p. 17). As mentioned before, female stereotypes specifically were often rooted in sexual bias, depicting African-American women as either sexually promiscuous 'Jezebels' or physically unattractive 'Mammies' (Farrington, 2003, p. 17). The Mammy stereotype was posited by mainstream white America as proof that black women were content and happy to be enslaved (Pilgrim, 2012). According to Pilgrim (2012), the Mammy stereotype was also deliberately constructed to be the opposite of the mainstream definition of attractiveness at the time. In a society that considered white skin the beauty ideal, the Mammy was portrayed with a dark, often pitch black, skin colour (Pilgrim, 2012). She was overweight, sometimes morbidly so, and often portrayed as old, never younger than middle-aged. This deliberate attempt to desexualise the female slaves in the household and to de-eroticise their bodies was meant to eradicate any suspicion that the man of the household could be physically attracted to these women (Pilgrim, 2012). Sexual exploitation of black women by white men was very common during the antebellum period, which illustrates the 'necessity' of this stereotype: if the female slaves were rendered unattractive, desexualised and de-eroticised, the white wife and her family would be safe (Pilgrim, 2012).

Both historical and contemporary stereotypes could be considered a type of colonial subject. As Bhabha (2003) points out, in order to construct a colonial subject, forms of difference need to be articulated based on predetermined notions of race and gender (p. 19). Thus, if 'the epithets racial or sexual come to be seen as modes of differentiation, realised as multiple, cross-cutting determinations', a discourse is enforced 'that inform[s] the discursive and political practice of racial and cultural hierarchisation' (Bhabha, 2003, p. 19). Also the Mammy stereotype could be argued to have been constructed upon the intersection of these notions of differentiation and hierarchisation. The Mammy was created by virtue of colonial discourse, through the establishment of a particular and preconceived set of qualities, brought together to form an 'arrested, fixated form of representation', thus functioning both in the discursive and the political realm (Bhabha, 2003, p. 26). From the moment of its emergence, the Mammy stereotype did not only serve to relieve the burden of slavery in the eyes of the coloniser, but also in the eyes of the colonisers' wives and family. Furthermore, the Mammy stereotype actively served to reinforce and maintain the colonial discourse of 'racial and cultural hierarchisation' (Bhabha, 2003, p. 19). Within the exhibition, however, the Mammy stereotype is presented in a paradoxical context. Her distinguishing desexualising qualities are countered by her exaggerated and overly sexualised female features, thus dismantling and undoing her original aim and purpose.

According to Collins (2006), the Mammy stereotype remains prevalent in contemporary culture, particularly though popular television, in the form of the 'Modern Mammy'. She explains that the Modern Mammy requires a delicate balance between being appropriately subordinate to white and/or male authority yet maintaining a level of ambition and aggressiveness needed for achievement in middle-class occupations' (p. 140). These familiar notions of 'strong black women', who are 'tough, independent, smart, and asexual' strongly resemble those that were previously used to define the Mammy stereotype (Collins, 2006, p. 141). Collins (2006) proposes Oprah as famous example of the Modern Mammy: '[a] good deal of Oprah's success lies in her ability to market herself within the familiar realm of the Mammy, not violate the tenets of being a black lady, yet reap the benefits of her performance for herself' (p. 142). I would like to argue that examples such as this one could be difficult to identify precisely because they are so ingrained in popular contemporary culture. However, the inclusion of the historical Mammy

stereotype in this exhibition challenges the concept of the stereotype exactly by bringing it into a paradoxical and contemporary context. By confronting visitors with the violence and inadequacy implicit in historical stereotypes such as these, while linking historical notions with contemporary popular culture, processes of identifying and challenging contemporary stereotypes could be initiated.

In the context of the exhibition, this uncanny hybrid of traditional Mammy and markedly sexualised femininity is presented through and mirrored in the mythical body of a sphinx. As mentioned by Davidson and Guadalupe (2016), Hegel, in a turn towards Orientalism, describes the sphinx as 'a liminal creature, standing along the dividing line between the human and the animal' (p. 188). In his interpretation of the sphinx as a symbol of the ancient Egyptian spirit in relation to Oedipus who symbolises Western civilisation, Hegel determines that the sphinx's suicide marks the triumph of Oedipus and Western civilisation over the liminal creature and, thus, over the Egyptian spirit. Davidson and Guadalupe (2016) explain how Walker's work 'performs a recombination and reversal of the Hegelian reading of the sphinx' by identifying the sphinx as a stereotypical black female (p. 190). As became clear in the analysis of the Mammy stereotype, mainstream white America conceptualised the black female body as less-than-human, and thus as a liminal figure too: she had to be recognised as human before consequently being dehumanized. The embodiment of the sphinx as Mammy thus 'identifies the black female body as a liminal threshold of Western culture' (Davidson and Guadalupe 190). Keeping in mind that the sugar trade depended greatly on slave labour, the 'utilisation' and consequent destruction of the black female body was a prerequisite for the development of American sugar production. Thus, like the sphinx, the black female stands at the origin of a fragment of both Western civilisation and capitalism, which were dependent upon her destruction for the establishment and maintenance of an autochthonous entity.

This 'destruction of the black female body' also echoes in the sugary bodies of the sphinx and her companions. Davidson and Guadalupe (2016) quote Lisa A. Lindsay in reminding us that the sugar industry alone 'was responsible for more than half of the estimated 11 million slaves who were brought to the new world', meaning that 'sugar production was by far the single largest slave occupation' (p. 190). According to historian Elizabeth Abbott, the majority of workers on sugar plantations were women. She states that these 'slaves, many of them women, were then working eighteen to twenty hours a day' in dangerous conditions (qtd. in Davidson and Guadalupe, 2016, p. 191). Lindsay adds that 'with plantation profits high, planters calculated that it was more economical to work a slave to death and buy a replacement' (qtd. in Davidson and Guadalupe, 2016, p. 191). Sugar and sugar production are therefore intrinsically linked to black female slavery and to the destruction of the black female body. Thus, the sugar that coats the sphinx and its history are deeply entwined with the same black female bodies that are themselves being monumentalised.

The deterioration and discolouration that occurred over the course of the exhibition rendered the sugar spoilt, resulting in the melting and discarding of all 40 tons of sugar after the exhibition was over. Recalling Shaw's (2007) description of Walker as 'a desirable outsider, a delicious new confection' and of the original meaning of the term 'subtlety' as sugary statue, I would like to argue that this deterioration process gives the sphinx and her companions agency (p. 139). Although it seems that they are passively subjected to the visitors and their sometimes vulgar or offensive reactions and remarks, they actively react to the presence of the visitors, regardless of the visitors' individual behaviour. They 'spoil' themselves, rendering their bodies useless and disposable. Even the most respectful visitors contribute to this 'consumption' of the sphinx and the sugar boys, mirroring how sugar consumption contributed to the endorsement of slavery, regardless of any consumer's individual political convictions.

Returning to the notion of the sphinx and the black female slaves as liminal creatures, I would like to argue that the concept of the stereotype itself could also be interpreted as liminal. Bhabha (2003) has stated that the 'stereotype gives access to an 'identity' which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defence, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it' (p. 27). In other words, the concept of the stereotype is unstable and when tested against 'the real world' appears to be in constant transition between being recognised and being renounced. Through Hegel's interpretation, the hybridity of the sphinx's body could be seen as a metaphor for the historical conception of the black female body as a liminal figure, which in turn can be found mirrored in the very concept of the stereotype that is featured in the sphinx's face.

The markedly feminine hybridity of the sphinx also evokes the feminist literary concept of female hybrid monsters. Lidia Curti (1998) describes how 'hybrid creatures have been creeping into women's narratives, putting to question the frontier between foulness and loveliness, the human and the animal, me and you, female and male' (p. 107). These female hybrid bodies become uncanny, as they represent both the Freudian familiarity of the female womb, as place where we all come from, and a sense of mystery and the unknown. Curti (1998) explains how the incorporation of female monsters into literature can be interpreted as 'a derisive counterpoint to the stereotypes of the feminine' (p. 107). I would like to argue that Walker's sphinx functions as a way to counter these stereotypes of the feminine as well as the African-American Mammy. Through the hybrid-figure of the sphinx, an identity is

articulated ‘-in the sense in which that word itself denies an ‘original’ identity or a ‘singularity’ to objects of difference-’ that stands separate from colonial discourse despite, or even thanks to, previous negative stereotypical notions (Bhabha, 2003, p. 19).

The incorporation of monsters into feminist discourse has also been discussed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her analysis of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Spivak (1985) notes how the insertion of the monster into the narrative undoes binary notions of male and female, and of self and other (p. 254-55). In *Frankenstein*, the magistrate explains that ‘if it is in my power to seize the monster, be assured that he shall suffer punishment proportionate to his crimes’ (qtd. in Spivak, 1985, p. 258). However, he is then forced to admit ‘from what you have described to be his properties, that this will prove impracticable’ (qtd. in Spivak, 1985, p. 258). The monster is rendered too different to be held accountable according to human law, too different to be humanized. Thus, the monster is ‘the absolutely other’ that cannot be related to the self (Spivak, 1985, p. 258). Curti (1998) quotes Jane Dallop in stating that:

[t]he word *monstrous* here refers to a ‘continuous multiple being’ ... a being whose multiple parts are neither totally merged nor totally separate [...] thus calling into question the fundamental opposition of self and other. Such a being is terrifying because of the stake any self as self has in its own autonomy (p. 110).

Arguably, the sphinx represents both this ‘absolutely other’ and this ‘other self’. The uncanniness that emerges from the female sexuality combined with the stereotypical Mammy features, portrayed on the canvas of a mythological creature known for its riddles, results in another that defies the recognisable fragments it is made up of. Precisely by existing as a ‘continuous multiple being’, made up of fragments that seem to contradict each other, and yet form an absolute whole, the sphinx gains her own autonomy by embodying an alternative approach to the binary self/other discourse. Thus, any self that stands in front of the sphinx, becomes riddled in his attempts to articulate any ‘forms of difference’ that would be needed to construct ‘the object of colonial discourse - that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity’ (Bhabha, 2003, p. 19). Thus, the hybridity of the sphinx allows her to be too different to be humanized, too different to be othered, putting the self into question.

SOCIAL MEDIA

I would like to turn to the way in which the exhibition was presented at the site itself and on social media over the course of the exhibition. The exhibition was organised at the soon to be demolished Domino Sugar Factory. This historical building was responsible for over half of the United States’ sugar refining within 25 years of its opening in 1855 (Diamond, 2017). The building continues to carry the marks of its labour: ‘Walls are stained by rust and oxidised sugar, and the bottoms of massive bone char filters are streaked where the sugary syrup had dripped’ (Diamond, 2017). The decision to place the exhibition in a factory rather than a gallery or museum is interesting. Arguably, its location and the fact that it was freely accessible, positions the exhibition in society and at the contemporary end of history, rather than within the art-world. The boundary of museum walls that separates more ‘traditional’ art works from direct interaction with society has been removed. Thus, the rich but problematic history of the building contributes to the meanings of the exhibition and very directly links the content of the building with society outside. Walker has stated in an interview that the site worked to inspire and develop her ideas for the exhibition and that she was inspired by the molasses that covered the walls from top to bottom, creating what she refers to as a ‘really powerful space’ (qtd. in Sutton, 2014). Furthermore, the specific processes that originally took place in this particular refinery, in which raw sugar was refined into processed sugar, carry another metaphor in them. The ‘refinement’ of raw, brown sugar into white processed sugar could be interpreted as a nod towards ongoing notions of white supremacy in the United States. Thus, the historical weight of the refinery, which functions as the literal context of the exhibition, places the exhibition into the historical discourses of slavery and sugar production.

Upon entering the factory, visitors encountered signs encouraging them to take pictures and selfies and to post them under the hashtag #KaraWalkerDomino. Over the course of the exhibition, Creative Time also launched several social media campaigns that invited people to post their selfies and pictures taken at the exhibition. Controversial pictures in which visitors posed in front of the sculptures in obscene or profane poses appeared online, sparking debate and outrage. In an article discussing these ‘offensive Instagram photos’, Munro (2014) points out that ‘official hashtags are not an uncommon practice for art exhibitions and events, but for a controversial show addressing sensitive issues, the need and desire for it is confusing. It’s not exactly a work that’s suited for a light-hearted selfie’. Furthermore, a website was launched called ‘Sugar Selfie’ on which people who

couldn't actually make it to the exhibition could 'pose' in front of the sphinx with the help of their webcam.³ The title of the website referred to the exhibition as 'the selfie event of the season', emphasising this interactive element of the exhibition.

These invitations to 'contribute' to and 'interact' with the exhibition could be regarded as problematic. The presentation of a naked Mammy figure with her breasts, buttocks and labia in full view evokes, again, the case of Saartje Baartman. Arguably, Walker frequently features or alludes to Baartman as an 'abstract concept' throughout her oeuvre, a practice which is explored and problematized by Keizer (2011). Rather than treating Baartman as an individual historical example, Keizer (2011) proposes that Walker employs generalised and stylised representations of 'the body of the 'Hottentot Venus' within the frame of reference of minstrelsy' (p. 205). She argues that Baartman is still denied agency over her own body, as Walker 'merely makes use of Baartman's body for US cultural politics' as a result of cross-diasporic borrowing (p. 205). Returning to Walker's sphinx, the anatomical features that are on display, and that have become the main focus of many 'offensive Instagram photos', indeed ring (un)surprisingly familiar (Munro, 2014). As stated by critic D'Oyley (2014):

I look at [the sphinx], then at all the (mostly white) people with their smartphones enthusiastically photographing 'it', specifically the butt. I don't want to think of the Hottentot Venus because I don't think that every black body that's displayed should be compared or reduced to the 19th-century kidnapped South African woman who was forced to be on display as some sort amusement. [But] here's a(nother) big, black booty on display, and here are (mostly white) folks gawking at it, some even posing with it.

This sense that 'history [is] unintentionally repeating itself' is based on the notion that the visitors taking offensive or vulgar pictures with the sphinx are missing the deeper messages, historical context, or the subtlety, behind the exhibition (D'Oyley, 2014). Returning once again to the double meaning of 'subtlety', I would like to argue that these visitors engage only with the first definition of the word, that of the sphinx as sugary sculpture, waiting to be consumed. Their engagement with the sphinx's features occurs only on a superficial level, meaning that they take the stereotypical features of the sphinx 'straightforwardly, as realities', rather than as the historical stereotypes that they represent (Davidson and Guadalupe, 2016, p. 180). Although Keizer's argument would certainly ring true for most cases where Baartman is summoned *again* into a compromising position, I would like to argue that this particular exhibition calls for a reversal of the gaze which has 'traditionally' been directed towards the black naked body. Although the blatant nakedness of the sphinx might function as a metaphor for the exhibition of Baartman, in this exhibition it is the audience that is eventually put on display.

THE AUDIENCE

Thus, in conclusion, I would like to analyse the audience, their behaviour, and their reactions, as portrayed by Walker in her film *An Audience*. This 27-minute film was presented at Walker's 2014-15 exhibition, appropriately titled *Afterword*. For *An Audience*, Walker instructed six cameramen to film the audience of *A Subtlety* during the final hour of the final day of the exhibition. In reaction to the abundant portraits of the sphinx shared online, Walker turned the camera on the visitors instead, capturing them 'in the act of looking - at the work, at themselves, at one another, and especially looking their phones and cameras' (label qtd. in Wilson, 2014). It should be noted that this film was purposely edited and included into *Afterword* by Walker, rendering it a part of the exhibition, rather than an objective documentation of the audience of *A Subtlety*. In short, I would like to emphasize that the audience we see is the audience Walker wanted us to see.

The film begins outside of the refinery, following an African-American woman as she works her way through the crowds, clutching her two young children by their hands and dragging them along behind her. Once inside, the camera stops following her, focusing instead on different people in the crowd. Initially, visitors are filmed standing in awe, mouths open, gazing up at the sphinx. Several people stare silently, others point out details to their companions or step closer to peer at the sphinx's skin or into the sugar boys' baskets. Two children pose in front of the sphinx, their photographer telling them to 'hold it right there' when they smile broadly. Next is a teenage girl, posing model-style, hand on her hip. When the camera moves to the side, we see the line of visitors waiting for their turn to pose in front of the sphinx's enormous breasts. Photographers are being instructed to 'take [a picture] from down here', to capture specific poses, and to 'take one with the head on it'. Through screens of

³ The 'Kara Walker selfie generator' website boasted the following introduction: "CANT MAKE IT TO THE DOMINIO FACTORY TO TAKE PICTURES OF YOURSELF IN FRONT OF KARA WALKER'S SUGAR BABY?? YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY NEED NOT KNOW!! REALISTIC SELFIE GENERATOR!!! ITS LIKE YOU ARE REALLY THERE!!!!". The website featured an app with which it was possible to insert a picture of yourself into pictures of the exhibition, 'like you are really there'. The website is currently offline. <www.SugarSelfie.us>

phones, iPads, and cameras, people are shown taking selfies alone or in small groups. Several people step in to photograph a young boy who has touched the pool of molten sugar that oozes from one of the collapsed and melting sugar boys. The boy stares into the camera as it zooms in on his hands that are dripping with thick resin-like goo. A voice echoes through the hall: 'Ladies and gentlemen, on your way out, the artist would like to invite you all to carefully touch the sphinx'. While the film shows different people gingerly placing their hands on the sugary surface, we hear an off-camera voice ask 'can I touch the nipple, do you think?'

This documentation of the audience photographing themselves and each other invokes a further expedition into the development of the practice of cultural consumption in relation to the upcoming field of selfie-studies. The practice of taking selfies in proximity to art works in particular has been explored by Hunter (2018) in her article 'In the frame: the performative spectatorship of museum selfies'. She explains how the taking of a selfie at an exhibition or in a museum not only allows visitors to 'announce their embodied appropriation like a trophy', but also illuminates social capital through the sharing of pictures through social media (Hunter, 2018, p. 60). Hunter (2018) calls upon Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst to explain that this sense of performativity is a defining characteristic of contemporary culture:

So deeply infused into everyday life is performance that we are unaware of it in ourselves or in others. Life is a constant performance, we are audience and performer at the same time; everybody is an audience all the time (qtd. in Hunter, 2018, p. 58).

In other words, visitors no longer only visit museums or exhibitions to see the objects on display there. Seeing others and making sure oneself is seen at the exhibition has become an equally important aspect. This shift of focus from the works on display to the spectator *viewing* the works on display could also indicate a disruption in exhibition narratives, as the placing and photographing of oneself in front of an exhibited object redirects the focus of the exhibition. Arguably, the practice of taking and sharing selfies even allows the visitors to become an active part of the exhibition themselves. This is exactly what happened in Walker's exhibition. The audience was encouraged to take and share pictures and thus to become an exhibited object themselves. The documentation of this act in the film *An Audience*, which was also displayed in the exhibition, reinforces this notion. Ultimately, the inclusion of the audience as a curated and stylised object put on display, functioned as a mirror for the audience to view themselves and others in.

Throughout my research, I noticed that the vast majority of articles and reviews of *A Subtlety* reacted indignantly to other visitors, referring to them as 'white people. Lots of white people' (King, 2014). Visitors were persecuted online for posing with the sphinx, for taking pictures of "it, specifically the butt", and for missing the 'deeper meaning' of the exhibition (D'Oyley, 2014). Critics wondered if 'the mostly white visitors [would be able to see] the violent history the art reflected' (Powers, 2014), and if 'the cluelessness of the white audience [participating] in a spectacle without knowing they're part of it is an inside joke for black folks to laugh and shake their heads at' (D'Oyley, 2014). However, this 'overwhelming whiteness of viewers' has not been mirrored in the audience portrayed in Walker's film (King, 2014). Throughout the 27 minutes, the film captures many different people of all ethnicities, genders, and ages, all documented responding to the sphinx in their own way. Apart from focusing only on those holding a camera, the film features people wiping away tears, or pretending to pinch the sphinx's buttocks. Children are filmed laughing and running around, a grown man is shown doing somersaults in front of the sphinx's breasts. I would like to argue that the stereotypes incorporated into this exhibition are challenged and countered by Walker's representation of the audience's diverse responses to these stereotypes.

Davidson and Guadalupe (2016) point out that a fragment of the audience fails to see the stereotypical features of the sphinx 'as stereotypes and instead take them straightforwardly as realities' (p. 180). However, the reactions of other visitors remind us that this exhibition does not 'simply repeat the historical stereotypes, instead [it offers] a critical dimension that makes manifest their implicit violence and absurdity' (Davidson and Guadalupe, 2016, p. 187). Taking into account that the film was incorporated into *A Subtlety* as a concluding chapter, I would like to argue that the sphinx was never the main attraction after all. If the exhibition is interpreted as a setting in which Walker documented the audience's encounter with historical stereotypes, *A Subtlety* becomes a surprisingly contemporary affair. The seemingly oblivious audience here serves as a passive object in front of the cameras, their gaze is reversed, allowing us to scrutinise *them* in a triangular line of vision. The 'many offensive Instagram photos' thus become as much a part of the exhibition as all the critical articles that sprung up to discuss them. Rather than documenting either the superficial or the critical reactions, *An Audience* demonstrates that both reactions -and everything in between- were equally represented. Thus, the film appears to refrain from employing 'modes of differentiation, realised as multiple, crosscutting determinations, polymorphous and perverse' with the aim of portraying the audience in a certain way (Bhabha, 2003, p. 19). Whereas some of the audience members knowingly or unknowingly contributed to the 'political practices of racial and cultural hierarchisation', it is precisely the variety in approaches to these practices that reminds us that there is no such thing as a fixed identity (Bhabha, 2003, p.

19). In response to the range of reactions to the exhibition, Walker concludes: 'People are stupid, but the greater majority are conscientious, if not always respectful' (qtd. in Miranda, 2014).

TOWARDS CLOSURE: FROM STEREOTYPES TO HUMANKIND

A Subtlety is an exhibition in which historical images, such as the sphinx and the Mammy stereotype, are reiterated and re-examined. I would like to return to the question posed by Mitchell (1994): 'What if the materials of memory are overwhelming, so traumatic that the remembering of them threatens identity rather than reconstituting it?' (p. 200). Rather than answering this question directly, I would like to argue that my analysis of this exhibition inspires a reformulation of the question. In this case, 'the materials of memory' that Mitchell refers to could arguably be interpreted as stereotypes, in the sense that any repetition or iteration functions only to confirm that which people would prefer to deny or forget. As argued before, the hybridity of the sphinx offers an alternative approach to the self/other binary. She embodies the articulation of a *new* identity, 'in the sense in which [the word 'articulation'] itself denies an 'original' identity or a 'singularity' to objects of difference' (Bhabha, 2003, p. 19). With this in mind, I would like to argue that this particular iteration of the stereotype works neither to threaten nor to reconstitute identity, rather it works to formulate a new, separate identity. Thus, the sphinx invokes a reconfiguration of 'the materials of memory', putting into effect processes of reconsideration and overcoming. Furthermore, the variety of reactions that emerged as a response to the invitation to iterate, repeat, and objectify the sphinx and her stereotypical features do not only illustrate different approaches to these 'materials of memory', but also pose new riddles about the impulse to condemn the reactions and approaches of others. In this sense, *A Subtlety* offers alternative approaches to the concept of the stereotype through what appears to be a surprisingly contemporary exhibition. Although some reactions to the sphinx could be considered more respectful than others, *An Audience* reminds us that it is precisely this variety in approaches and responses that differentiates us, as individuals, from the stereotype. Ultimately, the riddles posed by both sphinxes call for the same answer: humankind.

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