Absence and Presence: Nona Faustine and the Black Body in the National History of the United States

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How should the history of Black Americans be included in the physical landscape and memorialised? What new visual vocabularies are needed to expand the idea of the nation? Nona Faustine's *White Shoes* series (begun in 2012) provides a compelling counternarrative to stereotypical and racist representations of Black Americans in public spaces. With her body, Faustine explores the links between colonialism, racism, and capitalism that continues to be celebrated in public monuments in the United States. Her works invite viewers to participate in and interact with the built environment in new ways that acknowledge these public spaces as sites of nationalism intimately connected to the history of US racism – slave labour, Jim Crow, and police violence. In *White Shoes*, Nona Faustine contests dominant and entrenched national myths through the materiality of her body – her Black body. Her interventions in public space re-inscribe a neglected history onto the urban landscapes of New York City. Faustine's work challenges white patriarchal dominance through mediated images of Black bodies by creating presence where there is absence.

Keywords: Black nationalism, urban landscape, commemoration, Black Lives Matter, public art.

Introduction

In stark contrast to the 1,747 Confederate statues remaining in the United States, there are few monuments honouring Black Americans' stories or contributions. While the laws and policies that institutionalised segregation have largely been overturned, the antagonism, intolerance, and indifference towards Black Americans in the United States persist. This indifference is visible on school grounds, public squares, courthouses, and even in the United States Capitol Building, which contains statues of Confederate military officers from eight Southern states. Public and academic discourse surrounding the dismantling of Confederate monuments coincided with the waves of activism, in the 2010s, that arose from Black Lives Matter, a group dedicated to bringing attention to the injustices wrought upon people of colour. Activists also challenged the colonisation of public space by an antiquated Western memorial tradition and a neoclassical visual language. As reported by the Southern Poverty Law Center, over one hundred Confederate symbols had been removed, relocated, or renamed as of October 2020. However, the destruction, removal, or relocation of problematic monuments does not solve issues of representation. How should the history of Black Americans be included in the physical landscape and memorialised? What new vocabularies are needed to expand the idea of the nation? How can Black Americans publicly assert their *own* agency? The question of how to nationally recognise slavery and the violence directed towards Black Americans has predominantly focused on reparations.[1] Public memorials to Black figures have materialised more slowly.[2] To consider these questions, I first examine the problematic visual representations of emancipated Black Americans in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century statues and monuments. Through the example of Fred Wilson's unrealised sculpture *E Pluribus Unum*, I describe the challenges of attempting to understand nineteenth-century monumentality through a twenty-first century lens. My primary

focus, however, is artist Nona Faustine's *White Shoes* series (begun in 2012), which provides a compelling counternarrative to stereotypical and racist representations of Black Americans in public spaces.

In 1992, author bell hooks asked for new visualisations of a 'Black body politic', a new 'revolutionary visual aesthetic that re-appropriates, revises, and invents'.[3] The counter-monumentality of Faustine's performances create experiential landscapes that move beyond the observational gaze. Her works invite viewers to participate in and interact with the built environment in new ways that acknowledge these public spaces as sites of nationalism that are intimately connected to the history of US racism – slave labour, Jim Crow, and police violence. In *White Shoes*, Faustine contests dominant and entrenched national myths through the materiality of her body – her Black body – and her interventions in public space. Her site-specific work is ephemeral, but through documentary photographs (a more permanent record), she creates the sign or trace of a presence as a means of re-inscribing a neglected history onto the urban landscapes of New York City. Because those who benefit the most from forgetting are part of larger power structures, Faustine directly challenges institutionalised forgetting. However, she remains only as a fragment of the history she wishes to reinvoke; her impermanent installations seem to state, 'I was here' while simultaneously underscoring how people of colour continue to occupy marginalised spaces within the national narrative of the United States.

Urban Landscapes of Commemoration

Kirk Savage's 1997 book, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monuments in Nineteenth-Century America*, was one of the first scholarly projects to address how the Civil War reshaped the cultural and physical landscape of the United States during the latter decades of the

nineteenth century.[4] As Savage shows, the shift from slavery to emancipation forced US citizens to confront their country's changed identity, which spurred one of the most prolific periods of monument-building in the country's history. Typically, it is the victors who raise statues to the heroic dead. But following the Civil War, it was the supporters of the former Confederate States of America who erected such monuments in order to create a landscape that supported the Lost Cause mythology: a nostalgic view of devotion to the Old South and a celebration of its soldiers, who, under its interpretation, fought heroically to preserve an honourable Christian life; this myth helped Southerners assuage the material and economic devastation of the South following the war.[5]

Monuments to the former Confederacy were commissioned as part of an explicit Civil War remembrance practice; rather, they were created in three distinct phases in reaction to the changing political and social landscape of the United States. The first phase was immediately after the end of the War. The period of greatest activity was around 1910. These monuments were erected primarily in former Confederate states in the South, but some were raised, and remain, in former Union states, including in New Jersey, Washington (state), Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, California, Delaware, Indiana, and Iowa. Commemorative programs that commissioned Confederate monuments were not top-down affairs imposed by governmental agencies on a passive populace.[6] Private organisations were responsible for such initiatives, including various ladies' memorial associations, the Sons of Confederate Veterans (est. 1896), and the United Daughters of the Confederacy (est. 1894), which alone was responsible for roughly two hundred monuments.

In the second phase, Confederate monuments were added to the US civic landscape, such as courthouses and community squares, in the late nineteenth century, in conjunction with the rise of Jim Crow laws and the Ku Klux Klan in the South, and in the 1950s, in reaction to the rise of the

Civil Rights Movement. Such statues and memorials functioned as signs that materialise, externalise, and publicly archive white supremacy. A few were dedicated as recently as 2015. As noted in James Young's indispensable book *The Texture of Memory*, public monuments have traditionally been the most prestigious forms of commemoration, because they were designed as permanent showcases of public memory.[7] As Karen Cox explains, monuments are not just 'pillars of stone' but a reflection of a particular belief system.[8] The intended permanence of Confederate statues stands in stark contrast to the vulnerability of the churches, homes, schools, and lives of Black Americans that have been beset by violence. During the third phase, the monuments raised during Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954,[9] and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, coupled with strategic violence directed towards Black Americans and racially motivated gerrymandering and heritage laws, were an attempt to recreate the social, political, and economic order of the pre-emancipation era. Public spaces were thus colonised by a white historical narrative. As Cox notes, statues to the Confederacy served as beacons of white supremacy.[10] Some, however, have used the same statuary and monumental forms to combat it.

The first statue to be associated with anti-slavery sentiment was *The Greek Slave* (1844), by American sculptor Hiram Powers (1805-1873) (Figure 1). Powers' intention was not to create an abolitionist symbol but to present the American public with a nude sculpture in the neoclassical tradition. However, with its depiction of a youthful and diffident woman, *The Greek Slave* became a benign way for Americans to sympathise with those enslaved.[11] The 'classical' white nude body and downcast, non-confrontational gaze provided a safe symbol on which abolitionists could project their views. Poems and soliloquies inspired by the statue were published in anti-slavery publications, some of which connected the

plight of the white Greek slave to Black enslaved persons in the United States.[12]

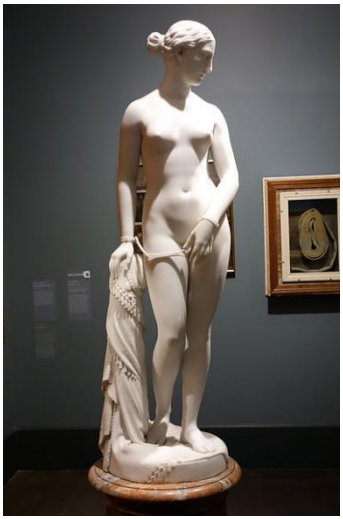


Figure 1: Hiram Powell, *The Greek Slave*, 1866, marble, 166.4 x 48.9 x 47.6 cm, Brooklyn Museum of Art. [CC0]. Image credit: Daderot.

Sculptures of Black bodies were produced after the Civil War, but they were limited in scope. A common trope was the grateful Black man beholden to the benevolence of white America. The story of the formerly enslaved was largely shaped by white sculptors for white (often private) audiences. A case in point is *The Freedman* by John Quincy Adams Ward (1830-1910), which was exhibited to the public in New York in 1863. The statue was variously described by a contemporary critic as a 'naked slave' who has 'burst from his shackles, and with uplifted face thanks God for his freedom' and claims that the statue represents 'the whole story of slavery and the bright story of emancipation.'[13] Another describes the figure as 'a man looking very quiet at his fetters'.[14] A third thought he resembled a 'fugitive' with a hand 'grasping his broken manacles with an energy that bodes no good for his pursuers'.[15] All of these statements

inaccurately describe the figure, and thus say more about the white viewers than the artwork: The man is not nude; a cloth is draped from his waist to his thighs. He gazes towards something off in the distance, not up towards God. He holds the broken manacle in his right hand, which is placed on a small support, and he rests his left forearm on his thigh. It is a posture of repose, not one of energy.

Unlike Ward's *Freedman*, which was created for a white audience, *Forever Free* (1867) by Black and Native American sculptor Edmonia Lewis (1844-1907) was intended for a Black audience. In 1869, it was presented to Leonard Grimes (1815-1873), a Black pastor, abolitionist, and conductor on the Underground Railroad (Figure 2). *Forever Free* was displayed at his church, Boston Baptist Tremont Temple Church, also known as 'The Fugitives Church', which suggests that Black audiences accepted the half-nude male figure as a depiction of the formerly enslaved. In *Forever Free*, Lewis utilised the established visual language of the newly emancipated. The male figure is bare chested, holding aloft broken chains; the female figure kneels in a prayer-like pose, her gaze lifted. There are few signifiers, apart from the male figure's curly hair, that mark the figures as Black, and the statue is free of sexual stereotypes about Black bodies – which may have been a deliberate choice by the artist.

Figure 2: Edmonia Lewis, *Forever Free*, marble, 104.7 × 27.9 × 43.1 cm, 1867. Howard University Art Gallery. [CC0]. Image credit: https://arthistoryproject.com/artists/mary-edmonia-lewis/forever-free/

Statues to emancipation, such as *Forever Free*, were largely privately commissioned and funded. Even the public monument *Emancipation Memorial* (1876), by Thomas Ball (1819-1911), was funded through private donations (Figure 3). Several contributions for this memorial came from emancipated citizens. Contributors, however, did not have any input into the design. The memorial, which was dedicated eleven years after Abraham Lincoln's death and is located in Lincoln Park in Washington, DC, is essentially a statue to Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln stands, holding pages from the Emancipation Proclamation in his right hand and hovering his left over a Black man kneeling at his feet. The

Emancipation Proclamation rests on a plinth upon which is a relief of George Washington, fasces, and a shield inscribed with thirteen stars representing the original thirteen colonies of the United States. The depiction of the emancipated man was originally modelled on Ball's own likeness, a white man.[16] Ball decided to rework the figure to resemble Archer Alexander, the last enslaved person to be captured under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. But this is not a portrait of Alexander, only a recognisable racial type. His wide nose and textured hair mark him as different from Lincoln. His muscles still suggest his value as a commodity. His partial nudity is a deliberate contrast to Lincoln's long coat and top hat, which signal the latter's civility.

The relationship between the two figures in *Emancipation Memorial* troubled Frederick Douglass (c. 1817-1895). Douglass spoke at the inauguration of the monument, but later that day he sent a letter to the newspaper *The National Republican*: 'What I want to see before I die is a monument representing the negro, not couchant on his knees like a four-footed animal, but erect on his feet like a man'.[17] Calls to remove the monument began in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, as part of the Black Lives Matter movement and protests for racial justice. In 2020, protestors drew on Douglass's words to argue for the monument's removal. On 8 September, a cardboard sign was placed at the pedestal, quoting the words of Douglass from 1876: 'Admirable as is the monument by Mr. Ball in Lincoln's Park, it does not, as it seems to me, tell the whole truth […] there is room in Lincoln Park for another monument'. It included the hashtag #morehistory2021. Red paint was also splashed on the monument. Removing this memorial will be difficult, however, because it is on federal lands (the mayor of Washington, DC, does not have the same authority over public parks as the governors of the fifty states). A replica of *Emancipation Memorial* in Boston was successfully removed after local artist Tory Bullock gathered 12,000 signatures for an online

petition.[18] In the petition, Bullock wrote, 'I've been watching this man on his knees since I was a kid'.[19] Other residents said they felt it reinforced a racist and paternalistic view of Black people.[20] The monument was removed on 29 December 2020 after a unanimous vote by the Boston Art Commission.[21]

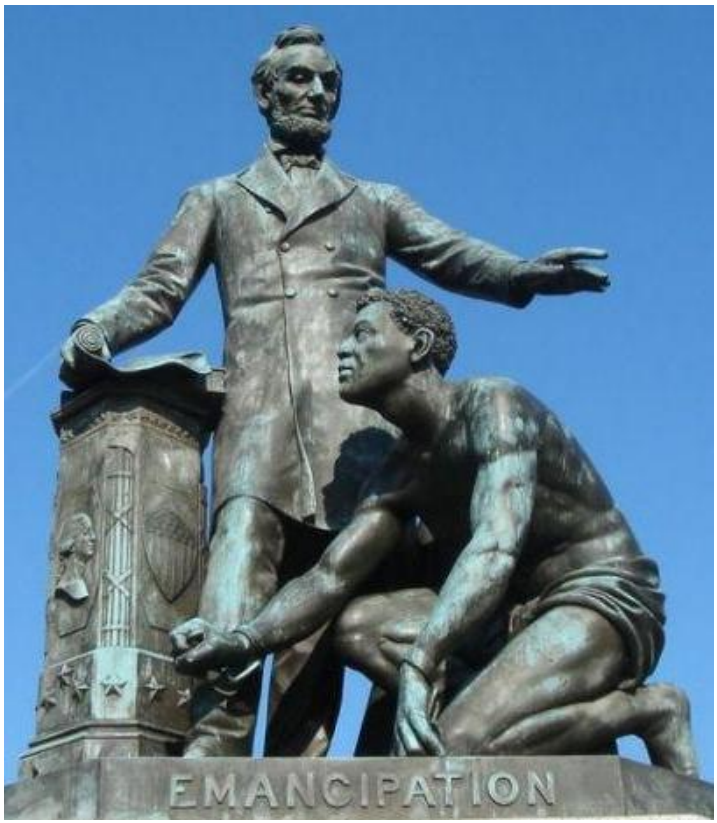


Figure 3: Thomas Ball, *Emancipation Memorial*, 1876, bronze (CC0).

Yet it is far simpler to call for the removal of offensive monuments than to agree on appropriate replacements. Many of the pedestals that

supported the likes of Robert E. Lee, the commander of the Confederate army, or Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederate States, remain vacant. This emptiness, when read through iconoclasm, may be a form of calculated forgetting or a clearing for the next iteration or interpretation of a historical event. Jaś Elsner suggests that the act of forgetting is just as active, purposeful, and collectively performed as that of preservation.[22] For those monuments that remain, they are supplemented rather than supplanted. The uneven approach to the treatment of monuments (their raising and razing) has meant that monuments honouring Black history are often in close proximity to monuments considered or near empty pedestals or plinths. An example can be seen in the equestrian statue of Confederate general Wade Hampton, which is mounted on a very high plinth, gazes out and over the African American History Monument (2001) at the South Carolina State House grounds.[23] The result may be a vivid contrast between two messages, which may risk cancelling each other out.[24] Often in such cases, the presence of Black history in monumental form is considered incidental to the dominant white history. Artist Fred Wilson (b. 1954) attempted to bridge the gap in these two histories in his unrealised *E Pluribus Unum* [Out of many, one].

In 2008, the Central Indiana Community Foundation commissioned Wilson to design a sculpture adjacent to the 1902 Soldiers and Sailors Monument as part of a larger public art project for the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, a bicycle and pedestrian path in Indianapolis, Indiana (Figure 4).[25] The Soldiers and Sailors Monument dominates downtown Indianapolis standing at 86.6 metres, only 4.7 metres shorter than the Statue of Liberty. It was designed to honour Indiana veterans, but does not name any of the Black companies that fought or individual men who died for the Union.[26]

Wilson proposed to add a statue a short distance from the monument that would critically challenge the statue group and insert a Black

individual very publicly into Indiana history. *E Pluribus Unum* was an effort to recontextualise the relief sculpture on the south side of the base, which depicts, among other figures, a nameless and semi-nude emancipated Black man (Figure 5). This man holds the lowest position amongst those in the statue group. He is seated on the ground at the feet of an allegorical female figure intended to represent liberty and peace. He holds his broken chains above his head in thanks for his freedom. As in other works depicting formerly enslaved persons, his posture and upward gaze imply an indebtedness to his benevolent white liberators, removing any agency formerly enslaved persons may have in the shaping of their own history. In *E Pluribus Unum*, Wilson planned to lift the image of the Black man directly from the monument and to place a replica of this figure on its own pedestal. *E Pluribus Unum* would have elevated the historical position of Black Americans in Indiana history. Shifted forwards on a tilted and three-tiered pedestal, Wilson's figure would appear to move into public space, no longer constrained by his subordinate position and no longer looking up, but out. In place of the shackles, he was to hold a flag composed of patterns representing the African diaspora. Wilson's aim was to create an image of a self-possessed man, not a metaphor.

Figure 4: Rudolf Schwartz, Soldiers and Sailors Monument, 1902. (CC0. Image credit: https://thisisindiana.angelfire.com/soldiersandsailorsmonument.htm)

Figure 5: Fred Wilson, *E Pluribus Unum,* scheduled to be unveiled 2011, 3 x 3.6 metres, unrealized. (CC0. Image credit: www.indyculturaltrail.org/E_Pluribus_Unum.html

Wilson hoped that his addition would inspire public discussions on the role of civic space within the context of racial history, and he assumed that modifications to his ideas would be part of the creative process. He was surprised by the intensity of opposition, from both Black and white communities, to his design. The Concerned Clergy of Indianapolis joined forces with the Citizens Against the Slave Image, which was formed explicitly in opposition to Wilson's design.[27] Leroy Robinson, a local history teacher, objected to the statue's semi-nudity and its placement in relation to the Soldiers and Sailors Monument.[28] In an op-ed piece for the *Indianapolis Recorder*, Robinson likened Wilson's statue to reproducing the racist stereotype of a 'lawn jockey' – a black-faced caricature holding a lamp or a hitching ring – and an afterthought installed in service to the larger monument. [29] Others perceived the figure's seated position as undermining the implied strength and power of standing statues, which are culturally linked to classical representation of athletes, statesmen, and warriors.

The Black figure in the 1902 monument was often overlooked and misunderstood. Some members of the public assumed that the shackles, which he raises in thanks to Liberty, were a symbol of his status as an enslaved person. This misunderstanding compromised Wilson's project, because some assumed that he was creating an image of slavery itself. In

the planning of the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, members of the community were not consulted about its form or context, unlike for Wilson's *E Pluribus Unum*. Community engagement regarding Wilson's work ultimately highlighted differing views of how Black bodies – and Black history – should be represented in public space. Due to a failure to respond to the disputes over the meaning of *E Pluribus Unum*, the project was put on hold in 2010 and cancelled in December 2011.

Confederate figures or outdated racial stereotypes located in the spaces of government buildings – both in the interior and exterior – serve as reminders of the pervasive racism that was embraced and upheld in the very buildings that purported to support the citizenship of Black people. Nona Faustine inserts her body into the complicated narrative of those very sites. The titles of her works emphasise the implicit relationship between the wealth of the United States and the disenfranchisement of Black Americans, and she subverts the monumentality of that narrative in the landscape of New York City.

Nona Faustine: A Black Body Politic and a New Revolutionary Visual Aesthetic

With her series *White Shoes* (begun in 2012), Brooklyn-born and based artist Nona Faustine (b. 1977) aims to reinsert the truths and traumas of racism into the narratives of US history. The project consists of self-portraits taken at locations significant to the hidden history of slavery in New York City. Wearing white pumps, symbolic of the white patriarchy, Faustine documents her body as a conduit or receptor – in both protest and solidarity – for people whose names have been forgotten and whose contributions remain unacknowledged. For Faustine, self-portraiture enables her to respond to images of people who were put on display as examples of inferiority and thus to reclaim visibility for Black women

whose histories were not only subsumed by those of white owners but were also erased through marriage and the loss of original family names. Faustine draws on the historiography of statues and monuments from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and turns her body into monuments to Black history as well as a monument to the erasure of that history.

For 'The White Shoes Series', Faustine stands at sites in New York City that are still occupied by enslaved people who are literally buried under steel and concrete or otherwise obscured. In *Negro Burial Ground*, an image in the series, Faustine stands at the Metropolitan Transit Authority bus depot at East 126th in Manhattan, under which lies a burial ground dating from 1658 (Figure 6). The cemetery became part of the Reformed Low Dutch Church of Harlem, founded in 1660. In 2008, archivists from the Elmendorf Reformed Church, which now stands at the site of the Reformed Low Dutch Church, found records indicating that free and enslaved Africans were buried at the site. In 2015, 140 bone fragments were found at Elmendorf Reformed Church.[30]. The bus depot closed in 2015, and a memorial on the site is planned.

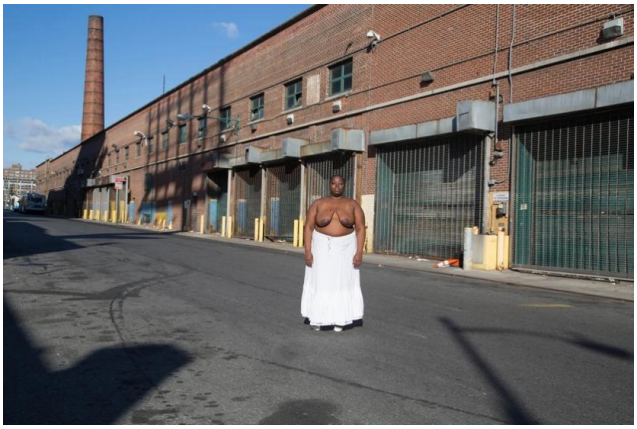


Figure 6: Faustine, *Negro Burial Ground* from the 'White Shoes Series,' 2021. Chromogenic photograph.

In *Negro Burial Ground*, Faustine stands on the foundation, so to speak, of New York City, the first national capital of the United States after the Constitution was ratified in 1788. Faustine looks directly out at the viewer in contrast to the emancipated, kneeling men of the nineteenth century. She meets each of us as an equal and not in submission or with gratitude. The tips of her white high-heeled shoes peek out from beneath the hem of a bright white floor-length cotton skirt. Her white skirt is in stark contrast to both her dark skin and the blacktop making for a visually arresting and jarring image. Each of the sites she includes in 'White Shoes' has a complex and contradictory history that is concealed, often by the very process of memorialisation itself. Faustine's work is in part grounded in the rhetoric of Black nationalism, which challenges the historical and contemporary distribution of power in the United States in opposition to white racial and colonial domination, cultural hegemony, economic exploitation, and poverty. Black nationalism promotes Black self-determination and considers it essential that Black Americans be able to exert control over institutions, and their visibility in those institutions, within the overarching national narrative of the United States. Faustine places herself at the sites and spaces of Black American experiences as a symbol of the forgotten, the un-memorialised within the larger framework of the United States, which privileges a white-narrative as nationalist rhetoric. After the Civil War, the idea of the nation was cast in the form of the ordinary white man placing the black man on the margins of history.[31] They became the focus of collective participation in public life embodying a perceived essential historical certainty.

Faustine's process owes a debt to Yoko Ono's 'Fluxus' performances of the 1960s and Ana Mendieta's earth-body performances of the late 1970s and 1980s.[32] Both women transgressed personal boundaries by placing themselves in vulnerable positions either emotionally or physically. Their work was produced during a period of social protest

and political agitations in feminist and identity-based art. The early performance artists were instrumental in using their bodies to challenge fixed perceptions of identity. The corporeality of the body was used as a temporary means to move from the margins to the centre of visibility, with the body becoming a transformative agent, a symbolic bridge between the self and the collective. Mendieta worked outdoors, outside traditional museum and gallery spaces. *Silueta* (1973-1980), was a series of performative actions in which she created outlines of her body directly onto and into the earth that serve as a referent to mark the site. As in Mendieta's works, Faustine's sites appear empty, but are laden with the history and ideologies that produced them. In this way, Faustine's work is closely related to that of Land artist Agnes Denes (b. 1938). For her work *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (1982), Denes planted a two-acre field of wheat in Battery Park, in Lower Manhattan, across from the Statue of Liberty. *Wheatfield* reminded New Yorkers of the consequences of colonialism on the Lenape's Manahatta island. After the fall harvest, the project was available only through documentary photographs, which provided a trace of the site-specific work.

Faustine relies on a similar technique in *White Shoes*; by photographing each site, she makes her performance more than just a temporary monument. Her indexical presence creates an almost ghostly remnant that recalls the historical presence of human bodies and that, in turn, calls attention to the indexical past of the site. The indexicality of a photograph is balanced by deixis, a term first introduced in linguistics that explains how language is context-dependent.[33] Deixis establishes the point of origin for the referents 'I', 'we', etc. It implies an emptiness that can only be contextualized by the referent. The term has been useful in film and photography theory. *White Shoes* exemplifies the duality of deixis. In the photographs, Faustine is detached from their original time and place, yet her works are pointedly *about* time and place. She, her body, is in dialogue between the real and the performative, past and

present. She represents, but is not the trauma. Her performance is a mediated simulacrum. Georges Didi-Huberman claims that photographs are not a deficient simulacrum but an actual trace of the event.[34] They bear witness to an incident by focusing on the necessity of remembering. And this is precisely what Faustine's *White Shoes* does.

Faustine's sites are heavy with history, even if that history is invisible. In *Like a Pregnant Corpse the Ship Expelled Her Into The Patriarchy*, Faustine lies on the Brooklyn shore on the Atlantic Ocean. She is the monument to the many captives who suffered through the Middle Passage – the 338,000 who arrived on the shores of the United States and those who died en route.[35] Faustine humanises the many women who were thrust into an unfamiliar landscape or who died in a foreign land. She presents only her breasts and legs to the viewers; her face is obscured, with only the bottom of her chin visible. Faustine thus suggests the vulnerability of the women before her through her faceless and exposed nude body and her parted legs.

Of My Body I Will Make Monuments in Your Honor was staged in a pre-Revolutionary Dutch cemetery in Brooklyn, where three enslaved persons were buried in unmarked graves. Three full-sized replicas of Faustine's nude body (from the front, back, and side) are placed amongst headstones engraved with the names of early Dutch residents of Brooklyn. The replicas are placed on wooden boxes – actual soapboxes perhaps referring to the symbolism of standing on a soapbox to give a speech – for visibility. They serve as a type of pedestal, raising the images of Faustine even higher than the white seventeenth-century tombstones. The figures are either missing heads or have holes in place of Faustine's face, like a photo stand-in, which are typically found at fairs and other tourist attractions for amusement. For the duration of the exhibition, visitors to the cemetery could place their own heads or faces where Faustine's had been removed adding their own histories to the burial site. Amongst the Dutch graves, *Of My Body* provides a narrative that

enslaved persons were either denied or were erased from the historical narrative of New York City.

In *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth*, Faustine stands atop a simple wooden box at 75 Wall Street (Figure 7). The box is a stand-in for the auction block that was at this site in the seventeenth century. Faustine's presence – her uncompromising *presentness* – at these sites of trauma restores agency to the Black body. Black women's forced reproduction became the foundation for generational wealth for white families in the United States – which the title of this work references.

Figure 7: Faustine, *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth,* 2012. Chromogenic photograph.

For example, in *Not Gone with the Wind*, Faustine stands in front of The Lefferts House, an historical site in Prospect Park that preserves the prominent role the Lefferts family played in Brooklyn history (Figure 8). She assumes the identity of Isabelle, one of the enslaved people who worked for Pieter Lefferts (1645-1704). In *Not Gone with the Wind*,

Faustine deconstructs the stereotype of the black, large-breasted house-slave wearing a kerchief to cover her nappy hair that was universalised through Hattie McDaniel's Mammy in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind. Gone with the Wind* pivots around the affirmational relationship between slave and owner. The mammy figure was a nineteenth-century construction by white southerners in response to the antislavery moment in the north.[36] In minstrel shows they were broadly painted as asexualized figures happy, contented, and devoted to their white family. The idea of a mammy sought to redeem the relationship of white men to enslaved Black women in which Black women were sexually exploited for commercial gain. As 'Isabelle,' Faustine addresses the romanticized and distorted history of Black women as caretakers and nurturers. The black cast-iron pan in her left hand identifies her as a house 'domestic,' but she gives her mammy autonomy and authority. She has a name and thus an identity. She holds a steady gaze with the viewer. She reveals and claims her 'nappy' hair. White baby shoes are attached to the front of the skirt – signs of babies born into captivity to the financial benefit of the Lefferts family. It was only recently that the Lefferts House began to incorporate the history of those enslaved by the family into their public-facing programs, the stark realities, as exemplified by Faustine, are still missing from the master narrative.

Figure 8: *Not Gone with the Wind*, Lefferts House, Brooklyn, 2012. Chromogenic photograph.

In both *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth* and *Not Gone with the Wind,* Faustine, with her steady gaze, personalises the history of slavery that is disembodied from the Black bodies that make up that history. Her public actions echo the performative nature of slave auctions. In *From Her Body…*, Faustine's gaze is active. She stands tall, her body juxtaposed against the steel and concrete, creating an image that represents and memorialises the many Black women who passed through the slave markets at the junction of Pearl and Water Streets in Lower Manhattan. As such, her body represents both power and powerlessness. This duality is also implied through her clasped hands that indicate serenity and in spite of the manacle that is attached to left wrist. As a woman, she remains bound to a history of objecthood defined through her productivity in populating the new nation.

After the Atlantic slave trade was abolished in New York in 1827,[37] owners required increased production of human bodies in order to maintain economic stability, thus increasing the value of Black female bodies. Read through this lens, Faustine in *From Her Body* is visible only as an object valued for her monetary worth – what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall calls 'racial capitalism' – as a coveted object for a potential buyer.[38] Her large breasts and wide hips demonstrate her child-bearing ability. Enslaved women also commanded high market value as forced concubines, such as the highly valued 'fancy girls'.[39] Faustine's high heels symbolise the endemic practice of female sexual slavery and control. Heels were originally worn by seventeenth-century aristocratic men in Europe as a way to indicate status through impractical clothing for those who did not work. In the 1630s, women, seeking to masculinize their clothing, adopted the heel. But in the nineteenth century, as the clothing of upper-class men became more practical, women's clothing became increasingly restrictive.[40] The heels that initially signified wealth, became increasingly associated with a gendered performance for the male gaze. High heels shape the calf, thrust and tilt the pelvis forwards,

and push the buttocks out. They limit movement. Within this context, Faustine presents herself as a sexual object, a person with no agency and restricted mobility. She is held captive by the white shoes. But, with her direct and forward gaze, there is no shame in her nudity. She reclaims the hypersexualisation of Black women that is rooted in misogyny and racism.[41]

Unlike in the majority of other images in the *White Shoes* series, in *From Her Body Sprang Their Greatest Wealth*, it is clear that an observer is present. The presence of the taxi reminds the viewer that in New York City, someone is always there. The mostly empty streets and a streetlamp on the left side of the image indicate that the photograph was taken in the early morning hours. In an area typically filled with pedestrians and traffic, only the lone taxi can be seen in the background. The vacant street allows Faustine to stand in the centre of the intersection. The image is almost a representation of Renaissance space: the buildings on either side of Faustine provide the orthogonal lines that draw the eye to her and beyond, farther down into Lower Manhattan and the Financial District.

What does it mean for her Black body to claim space in such a public manner? Her Black, heavy, nude body stands in direct contrast to the tradition of allegorical statues, serving to widen the distance between the Black body and what are commonly assumed to be classical notions of beauty. This construction of racial othering became integral for German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768), who argued that the physical beauty of the Greeks was far superior to that of the Egyptians and Africans, 'who had been handicapped by their own physical appearance'.[42] The classical standard for many post–Civil War statues was Hiram Powers's *Greek Slave* (discussed above). Her marble body, devoid of the polychromy employed by the Greeks and Romans, shone as the white standard of a noble Greek ideal. There was no place for the Black body historically or visually in the post-war construction of memory and history. The ahistorical narrative of white Greek sculpture

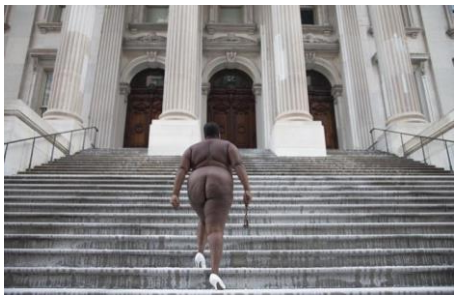
continues to inform white nationalist movements and modern white-identity groups. The connection to a Graeco-Roman classical past legitimises white nationalist goals. Ethno-classicism, particularly in statues raised to the former Confederacy, called for a return to what were perceived as authentic classical ideas in order to represent national regeneration. The precedent lay in the emphasis on classical rhetoric in the United States during the colonial and early national periods.[43] In using her own body to replace the classical statues that memorialise the Confederacy, Faustine subverts that figural tradition.

Faustine's work is reminiscent of the photographs of Saartjie (the diminutive of Sarah) Baartman, a Khoekhoe woman exhibited throughout the nineteenth century. Her work also owes a debt to artist Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953), whose series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-1996) uses thirty-three archival photographs that present Black people as an exotic Other. A front-facing portrait of an older Black woman becomes *Some Said You Were the Spitting Image of the Evil*; *And Their Daughter* presents a Black woman holding a white baby; a torso of a Black man is labelled *Anything But What You Were-Ha.* The titles, which are placed directly across the image of each person, underscore the white lens under which they are scrutinised. A photograph of a Congolese man named Renty, the subject of *Anything But What You Were-Ha*, is a replica of daguerreotype from 1850 collected by Louis Agassiz, part of a series of fifteen daguerreotype plates of seven enslaved people. Consisting of standing subjects who are fully nude, presented from the side, front, and rear, the images are studies of difference. Because of the indexical properties of photographs – the trace of an actual existence – photography appears to be entirely objective. Faustine, however, by placing herself at the historical sites of the slave trade, moves beyond the white gaze of Agassiz and becomes both object and subject. *White Shoes* thus has 'double indexicality' because Faustine is both the referent and the photographer.

In *Over My Dead Body*, Faustine first climbs the steps of New York City Hall (Figure 9). Her dark figure, dwarfed by the Ionic columns, contrasts starkly with the white classical facade. In another image, she stands at the top of the stairs, looking south towards Lower Manhattan. City Hall is located in one of the oldest settled portions of New York City in what was formerly a public commons. Faustine's choice of this particular site is multi-layered. City Hall is located on a small triangular parcel of land bordered by Chambers Street to the north, and Broadway and Park Row to the west and east, respectively. Just north of Chambers Street is a seventeenth- and eighteenth-century burial ground for Black Americans. A 1901 map notes that 'paupers, criminals, and American Patriots under British rule' were also buried there.[44] In 2007, a memorial was dedicated to the Black Americans who were integral to the history of New York City. American cities, from Atlanta to New York City, still use buildings, roads, and ports that were built by enslaved people. And these centuries-old relics of slavery still support the economy of the United States.[45] Black Americans, since Reconstruction, have been conscious of the ways the material landscape has been shaped by Black labour while, simultaneously, they were systematically erased from these landscapes. The African Burial Museum, part of the African Burial Ground National Monument that was created to acknowledge the labour of Black residents, estimates that roughly 15,000 enslaved and free Black people were buried at this site.[46] In 1741, New York City had the second largest population of enslaved persons outside of Charleston, South Carolina. The memorial, located between City Hall and the New York City federal courts, highlights the symbolic role of these two institutions in shaping a one-sided history of New York.

Over My Dead Body challenges the prevailing cultural history of City Hall. Until 2021, a thirty-metre statue of Thomas Jefferson was located in the chamber of the New York City Council.[47] Because of Jefferson's role as an owner of enslaved persons, the Black, Latino, and Asian Caucus agitated

for the statue's removal and relocation to the New-York Historical Society. In *They Tagged the Land with Institutions and Trophies from Their Conquests and Rapes*, Faustine tries to destabilise a white hegemonic history by attempting to topple one of the columns at the entrance. The composition centres the old wooden doors that mark the entrance to City Hall between two of the white stone pillars (Figure 10). She uses her body to counterbalance the symmetry of the photograph. With her high-heel-clad feet placed on different steps, she leans in and pushes against the column on the right, seeming to strain against the futility of her efforts.



(L) **Figure 9:** Faustine, *Over My Dead Body,* 2012. Chromogenic photograph.

(R) **Figure 10:** Faustine, *They Tagged the Land with Institutions and Trophies from Their Conquests and Rapes,* 2012. Chromogenic photograph.

In another photograph, titled '*… a thirst for compleat freedom … had been her only motive for absconding*', taken at 26 Wall Street in Lower Manhattan, Faustine calls attention to the important role George Washington played in the public life of New York City (Figure 11). A statue of Washington is located at Federal Hall, elevated on a stone plinth and erected in honour of his 1789 inauguration as the first president of the United States.[48] A self-guided tour, offered by GPSmyCity, provides the history of this location and others connected to 'Washington's greatest military trials and political triumphs'.[49] Numerous tours, both

private and public, trace his impact on the city. Faustine, however, reminds us that Washington was an owner of enslaved people. During his journey to New York from Mount Vernon, Virginia, for the inauguration, he was accompanied by seven enslaved persons. For this piece, Faustine faces the bronze statue of Washington, her back to the viewer. Wearing a long white skirt, she becomes a proxy for Ona Judge, the enslaved woman who served as Martha Washington's maid. The title of this photograph quotes the words Judge reportedly used to describe her motivation for escaping in 1796: 'a thirst for compleat [sic] freedom'.[50]

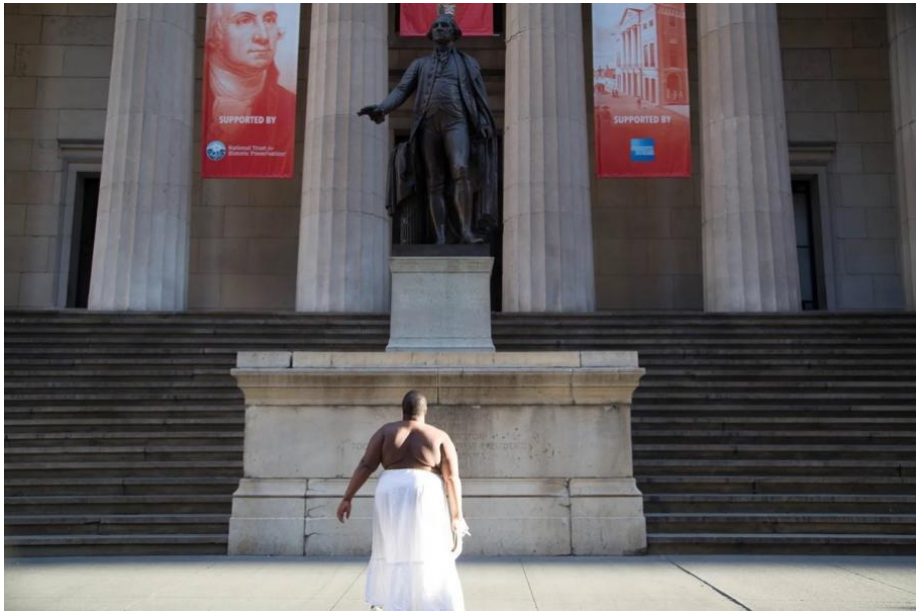


Figure 11: Faustine, *'... a thirst for compleat freedom ... had been her only motive for absconding',* 2012. Chromogenic photograph.

Conclusion

Through a comparison between the bodies of those freed Black people as they have been depicted in monuments after the Civil War and Faustine's body, we can explore the links between colonialism, racism, and capitalism. Her work calls attention to how the financial gains attained through the exploitation of the Black body remain visible in the landscape of the United States. The body is laden with meaning; it is always in view and on view. By inscribing her own body into New York City – whether historic landmarks, institutions, or sites of hidden history – Faustine confronts dominant, predominantly white national narratives, highlighting the absence of Black bodies and Black history in those narratives. Faustine resurrects the people who were subjected to physical and structural violence. She demonstrates the violence of being denied humanity and the violence of historical erasure by turning her body into its own kind of monument, however impermanent – made of flesh, not marble.

Faustine's *White Shoes* series offers a means of challenging national narratives and intervening in the commemorative practices that support them. Wilson's unrealised *E Pluribus Unum* offers another, through its subversive engagement with a 1902 national – or at least state-inspired patriotic – monument. His replication of the figure of the emancipated Black man depicted in the monument, however, disturbed those who advocate the outright removal of racial tropes from public space. Such calls are part of a broader movement for racial justice and reckoning, which includes efforts to raze problematic monuments, such as those to the Confederacy. Both Wilson and Faustine suggest a different approach to addressing the racist history of the United States, one that involves confronting, adding to, re-appropriating, or recontextualising the built environment.

As if in answer to bell hooks' call for a new visualisation of a Black body politic, Faustine's work challenges white patriarchal dominance through mediated images of Black bodies by creating presence where there is absence. Monument-building is a living process, in some sense always unfinished; no matter how much a monument may appear to be eternal and unchanging, its meaning is always evolving as its viewers bring new concerns and understandings to it. James Young emphasises that 'memory-work' is a way of 'working-through', which includes a sense of our changing relationship to particular memories.[51] Faustine's *White Shoes* series, in particular, is a powerful example of how one might 'work through' the fraught historical realities of the United States.

Endnotes

[1] R. Ray and A.M. Perry provide a summary of the case for reparations in 'Why we need reparations for Black Americans' <https://www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/why-we-need-reparations-for-black-americans/> [accessed 1/21/22]. See also T.-N. Coates, 'The case for reparations', in: *The Atlantic* (June 2014) <

https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/ > [accessed 2/2 2022].

[2] See R. Robinson, *The debt: What America owes to Blacks* (New York, 2000), and M. Martin & M. Yaquinto (eds.), *Redress for historical injustices in the United States: On reparations for slavery, Jim Crow, and their legacies* (Durham, 2007).

[3] bell hooks, *Black looks: Race and repression* (Boston, 1992).

[4] K. Savage, *Standing soldiers, kneeling slaves* (Princeton, 1997).

[5] Savage, *Standing soldiers, kneeling slaves*.

[6] J. Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public memory, commemoration, and patriotism in the twentieth century* (Princeton, 1992).

[7] J. Young, *Textures of memory* (New Haven, 1994), 15.

[8] K. Cox, *No common ground: Confederate monuments as the ongoing fight for racial justice* (Chapel Hill, 2021), 5.

[9] *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was preceded by five attempts to address state-sponsored segregation in the public-school system. The Brown case was the name given to five separate cases that were consolidated before being heard by the US Supreme Court. Brown was a cornerstone of the Civil Rights Movement when it established that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional.

[10] Cox, *No common ground*, 6.

[11] F. Murray, *Emancipation and the freed in American sculpture: A study in interpretation* (1916), 2-3. Smithsonian books online. https://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/emancipationfree00murr [accessed 4/9/21].

[12] Examples are compiled on the blog *Uncle Tom's Cabin & American Culture*, established by Stephen Railton and the University of Virginia, on the page 'The Greek Slave', <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/sentimnt/grslvhp.html> [accessed 4/11/2021].

[13] J. Jarves *The Art Idea* (1864), 281, quoted in Murray, *Emancipation and the freed in American sculpture*, 14.

[14] C. Caffin, *American Masters of Sculpture* (1903), 44 quoted in Murray, *Emancipation and the freed in American sculpture*, 14.

[15] Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists* (1882), 581 quoted in Murray, *Emancipation and the freed in American sculpture*, 15.

[16] C. Eliot, 'The Lincoln emancipation statue', in: *The Journal of negro history* 29/4 (October 1944), 473.

[17] Quoted in J. White & S. Sandage, 'What Frederick Douglass had to say about monuments', in: *Smithsonian Magazine* (30 June 2020),

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-frederick-douglass-had-say-about-monuments-180975225/> [accessed 14/1/22].

[18] T. Bullock, 'Remove Emancipation Memorial/Freedom Statue', n.d. <https://www.ipetitions.com/petition/remove-the-emancipation-statue?fbclid=IwAR3nrgQtPNvMmsD20XHbvHxykWyqwQhI4lSPsE7rVzK_zKgrt1NtFWSvpZ4 > [accessed 12/12/2020].

[19] Bullock, 'Remove Emancipation Memorial/Freedom Statue'.

[20] A. Kavi, 'Activists push for removal of statue of freed slave kneeling before Lincoln', in: *New York Times*, (27 June 2020 (updated 29 December 2020)), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/27/us/politics/lincoln-slave-statue-emancipation.html> [accessed 12/12/20].

[21] C. Guerra, 'Boston Art Commission votes to remove Emancipation Memorial from Park Square', in: *WBUR* (20 June 2020), <https://www.wbur.org/news/2020/06/30/boston-art-commission-lincoln-emancipation-memorial> [accessed 12/12/2020].

[22] J. Elsner, 'Iconoclasm and the preservation of memory', in: R.S. Nelson and M.R. Olin (eds.), *Monuments and memory, made and unmade* (Chicago, 2003), 209-232.

[23] The memorial was designed by Ed Dwight (b. 1933)

[24] D. Upton, *What can and can't be said* (New Haven, 2015), 15.

[25] Designed by Rudolf Schwartz (1866 Vienna–1912 Indianapolis, Indiana).

[26] K. Savage, 'E Pluribus Unum,' (Published 25 April 2011) < http://www.kirksavage.pitt.edu/?p=180> [accessed 14/12/21].

[27] For a summary of all of the criticism Wilson faced, see M. Labode, 'Unsafe ideas, public art, and *E Pluribus Unum*: An interview with Fred Wilson', in: *Indiana Magazine of History* 108/4 (2012), 386.

[28] L. Robinson, 'Sculpture is appalling' (part 2), *Indianapolis Recorder* (24 September 2010), <https://indianapolisrecorder.com/d22cf9f9-c01d-5e6d-a787-96fc64a1f952/>[accessed 12/12/21].

[29] Robinson, 'Sculpture' [accessed 12/12/21].

[30] Dunlap, 'Evidence of a burial ground is discovered in East Harlem', in: *New York Times*, (21 January 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/nyregion/remains-discovered-at-an-east-harlem-site-thought-to-be-an-african-burial-ground.html> [accessed 4/2/22]. In 2010, New York's State Historic Preservation Office recommended that the Elmendorf Reformed Church be placed on the state and national registers of historic places to document Harlem's colonial past.

[31] Savage, *Standing soldiers, kneeling slaves*, 210.

[32] Fluxus was an international community of artists that emphasized process over the finished product. The origins lie in the experimental music of John Cage (1912-1992).

[33] See S. Levinson, 'Deixis', in: L. Horn (ed.), *The handbook of pragmatics* (Malden, 2004). Levinson considers deixis as co-extensive with indexicality.

[34] G. Didi-Huberman, *Images malgré tout* (Paris, 2003).

[35] Twelve and a half million Africans were forcibly transported to the New World; only 10.7 survived. The majority of those captured were sent to the Caribbean and South America. See H.L. Gates, Jr, for America's Black Holocaust Museum, a historical and memorial museum located in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, <https://www.abhmuseum.org/how-many-africans-were-really-taken-to-the-u-s-during-the-slave-trade/> [accessed 12/1/22].

[36] P.A. Turner, *Ceramic uncles & celluloid mammies: Black images and their influence on culture* (New York, 1994).

[37] Slavery was officially abolished in stages in the northern states between 1783 (Massachusetts) and 1858 (New Hampshire).

[38] J. D. Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past', in: *The Journal of American History*, 91/4 (2005), 1243.

[39] B. Stevenson, 'Introduction: Women, slavery, and historical research', in: *The Journal of African Historical Research*, 92/1 (2007), 3.

[40] E. Semmelhack, *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe* (Reading, 2008).

[41] A.F. Benard, 'Colonizing Black female bodies within patriarchal capitalism: Feminist and human rights perspectives', in: *Sexualization, Media, & Society* 2/4 (2016), 3.

[42] Winckelmann, paraphrased in H. Honour, 'Studies', in: D. Bindman & H.L. Gates, Jr, (eds.), *The image of the Black in Western art*, vol. 4: *From the American Revolution to World War I*, pt. 2: *Black models and white Myths* (Cambridge, 2012), 14.

[43] See J. Farrell, 'Above all Greek, above all Roman fame', in: *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18/3 (2011), 415-436.

[44] E.H. Hall, 'A Landmark Map of City Hall Park, New York', in: *An appeal for the preservation of City Hall Park New York with a brief history of the park* (New York, 1910), 20-21.

[45] J. Inwood & A. Brand, 'Slave-built infrastructure still creates wealth in the US, suggesting reparations should cover past harms and current value of slavery,' in: *The Conversation* (5 May 2021), <https://theconversation.com/slave-built-infrastructure-still-creates-wealth-in-us-suggesting-reparations-should-cover-past-harms-and-current-value-of-slavery-153969> [accessed 1/25/22].

[46] https://www.nps.gov/afbg/index.htm [accessed 14/1/22].

[47] The statue is a replica of a bronze statue of Jefferson by Pierre-Jean David D'Anger. It was commissioned for the United States Capitol Rotunda in Washington, DC, in 1933, by Uriah Levy, the first Jewish commodore of the US Navy. Levy wanted to commemorate Jefferson's advocacy of religious freedom in the armed forces. According to Louise Mirrer, president of the New-York Historical Society, the museum intends to place the statue on the ground floor to illustrate 'the principal contradiction of our founding ideals'. J. Mays & S. Small, 'Jefferson Statue Will Be Removed from N.Y.C. Council Chambers', in: *The New York Times* (18 October 2021) <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/18/nyregion/thomas-jefferson-statue-ny-city-council.html> [accessed 2 February 2022].

[48] John Quincy Adams Ward, George Washington, 1883, bronze.

[49] https://www.gpsmycity.com/tours/george-washingtons-new-york-6608.html [accessed 7/1/22].

[50] This phrase was taken from a correspondence between George Washington and Joseph Whipple, the customs collector of Portsmouth, New Hampshire. 'Letter from George Washington and Joseph Whipple, 29 November 1796, transcribed, "From George Washington to Joseph Whipple, 28 November 1796," *Founders Online,* National Archives, last modified February 21, 2017, http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/99–01–02–00037. [accessed 17/11/21].

[51] J. Geddes and J. Young, 'Interview with James E. Young. "Memorials seem to remember just about everything except their own coming into being"', in: *The Hedgehog Review Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture,* The Institute for Advanced Studies in Culture (2007) https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-uses-of-the-past/articles/interview-with-james-e-young [accessed 7 July 2021].