

PERVERSE FASCINATION: MEDIUM, IDENTITY, AND PERFORMATIVITY IN  
THE ART OF KARA WALKER

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: *Perverse Fascination: Medium, Identity, and Performativity in the Art of Kara Walker*

Kara Walker is one of the most successful and widely known contemporary African-American artists today—remarkable for her radical engagement with issues of race, gender, and sexuality. Walker is best known for her provocative installations, composed of cut-paper silhouettes depicting fantastic and grotesque scenes of the antebellum South. This thesis examines Walker's work in silhouettes, text, and video in order to establish the unifying logic that unites her media. Walker's use of racist stereotypes has incited vehement criticism, and the debate over the political meaning of her work has been worked and reworked in the voluminous literature on her artistic practice. This thesis focuses on how Walker's defense and explanation of her own work functions as a performative and political component of the art itself. Walker's construction and performance of an artistic identity is an integral and intentional part of her overall practice and a key component to the interpretation of her work.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Kara Walker's first major silhouette installation, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, exhibited at the Drawing Center in 1994, appears to have a linear, left-to-right narrative (fig. 1). Bold black cutout figures enact an antebellum style drama that stretches thirteen feet high and fifty long across the white gallery wall. The figures interact in an episodic fashion, engaging in increasingly perverse couplings that invest the sentimental world of *Gone with the Wind* with sinister undercurrents of sexual domination, violence, and child abuse. The installation is spectacular and overwhelming in scale, but its clear contours and layout suggest a legible narrative. Closer inspection reveals mere fragmented snapshots, as Walker frustrates our desire for a coherent plot.

As Walker's career progressed, she continued to develop her distinctive medium along similar lines. In subsequent silhouette installations, such as *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* of 1995, she continued to reference literature (in this case Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1851 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), while abstracting from the narrative to create a grotesque carnival of familiar imagery (fig. 2). Her visual lexicon includes references to a variety of literary sources, films, minstrel shows, cartoons, the racist kitsch material termed black memorabilia, history painting, and advertising.<sup>1</sup>

The installations grew more ambitious as her career progressed, evoking the traveling spectacular entertainments of the nineteenth century. One example is the epic

*Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery, or, "Life at Ol' Virginny's Hole (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause,* installed at the Walker Art Center in 1997 (fig. 3). *Slavery! Slavery!* was executed in the round, alluding to nineteenth century cycloramas, in which history, art, and spectacle came together. In *Slavery! Slavery!* the viewer is completely surrounded by the flow of images, creating an overwhelming physical experience.

In 1997 Walker became the youngest artist ever to receive a prestigious MacArthur genius grant, attracting new levels of publicity and notoriety.<sup>2</sup> In response, feminist artist Betye Saar, best known for her own recycling of racial stereotypes in her assemblage piece *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, initiated a letter writing campaign to curators, museums, and other art institutions to protest the exhibition of Walker's work. Saar emphasized the insidious danger of Walker's images, warning that if something wasn't done "these images may be in your city next."<sup>3</sup> Quickly, what scholar David Wall calls a "mini-industry" of scholarship emerged in defense of Walker's artistic practice, and the artist has only grown more successful, showing regularly in museums and galleries around the world.<sup>4</sup>

While Walker responded to the criticism of her work in several public forums, her most powerful response was a series of seventy small water color drawings entitled *Do You like Crème in your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* In this series of diaristic images teeming with text, Walker contemplates and ridicules the concept of positive black images, boldly failing to present a single one. Some of the drawings appear to be

frontispieces for books Walker will clearly never write (fig 4). Others revel in scatological obscenity (fig 5). As a whole, the series demonstrates an adamant rejection of the principles expressed by Walker's critics, which will be discussed in more depth in the Chapter II.

Walker started incorporating color into her silhouette installations at the beginning of the new millennium, with her *Mistress Demanded a Swift and Dramatic Empathetic Reaction, Which We Obliged Her* (fig 6). This piece was a technical departure from her previous work; the only silhouette figures attached to the wall were tiny, about two to three inches high. The background and large figures were produced with colorful shapes projected in multiple layers from an overhead projector positioned across the gallery. Eloquently describing the impact of the technique, Darby English writes:

The effect of these elements coming together is the demarcation of a three-dimensional rhomboidal space that first engorges unsuspecting viewers and then draws them towards the wall. Because of its length, and because Walker embeds minuscule silhouettes... within the multilayered, over life-size scenes, it is nearly impossible to view these works from a comfortable distance (always an option with the tableaux). Given this difficulty, when one advances to inspect the wall-bound portion of a piece, one is immediately sewn into the mix amidst all the other unlucky beneficiaries of Walker's attentions. Squirring, we take things in and shuffle aside. Then the feeling comes: 'Who saw that?'; 'I didn't *make* it'; 'What *is* it?'... That our shadow censors parts of this scene from us, depending on where we stand, seems an inescapable but somehow welcome compromise.<sup>5</sup>

English's description conveys the way Walker installations interact with the bodies of their viewers. The juxtaposition of large and small scale elements in *Mistress Demanded* both encompasses the viewer in its world and draws them in to look closely. Also significant is the role of the viewer's shadow, which inevitably engages with the shadowy figures Walker depicts.

Silhouettes are the main focus of most writing on Walker, but since the beginning of her career she has worked in many mediums simultaneously. In 2004 she began to experiment with film, creating a form of shadow puppet theatre that drew on early performance art and animation. Her films focus on themes that occur in the rest of her work, toying with fragmented narratives to destabilize our familiarity with antebellum history. For example, in her second film, *8 Possible Beginnings or: the Creation of African America, A Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker*, Walker presents a litany of creation myths that vacillate between the Middle Passage and the present, filled with an array of bizarre scenes of domination, violence, sex, and play. In all her films, she prominently features the mechanisms behind the magic, displaying the sticks and strings that move the puppets in order to emphasize their process of construction. Her hands frequently appear manipulating the puppets, which functions as an iteration of the frequent self-representation throughout her work.

This thesis explores Walker's work in a range of media, from the silhouette installations and drawings to the text based works and films. By doing so I hope to broaden the understanding of her work beyond the silhouettes. In addition I explore the unifying logic of her oeuvre in terms of performativity and materiality, and the dialectic she creates between these two fields.

In Chapter II, I focus on the materiality of Walker's different media and how her materials function conceptually. For this section, I take a theoretical approach, using medium and media theory to apply a critical terminology to Walker's different media that unifies her strategies across her body of work, tying materiality to her larger political message. Through her manipulations of obsolete media such as the silhouette, the

typewriter, and the shadow film Walker draws attention to the materially constructed nature of historical memory.

In the Chapter III, taking a historiographic approach, I reassess the controversy over Walker's work in terms of contested notions of blackness. While Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell criticize Walker for her negative images of blackness, I argue that Walker is part of a generation that discarded the Civil Rights Era concept of positive black images. Walker's work, like much of the black queer and feminist criticism of the 1980s and 90s, rejects the rhetoric of racial authenticity for its inevitable exclusion of members of the group.

In the Chapter IV, I analyze Walker's strategies of self-representation, and their relation to her public persona in the media. Exploring the auto-fictive character the Negress, it becomes clear that Walker's identification with this character is a performative strategy. I argue Walker's public persona is a part of her larger artistic practice and can be related to feminist strategies of political art-making as practiced in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this section, I draw on the theory of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in order to analyze Walker's self-representation as a feminist project. Smith and Watson emphasize that autobiographical art is *not* transparent with a "self-evident content to be 'read'", but is instead "a cultural practice whose limits, interests, and modes of presentation differ with the historical moment, and the medium or media employed."<sup>6</sup>

Smith and Watson also frame the practice of self-representation in women's art as a performative act. The discipline of performance theory has taken many forms across many fields; this dynamism allows notions of performativity to be useful in articulating the nuances of Walker's work. In his book, *Appropriating Blackness*, E. Patrick Johnson

explores the convergence of discourses on blackness and performance in order to examine what “constitutes the performance of ‘blackness’ ...in American culture.” The performance of blackness, or in Johnson’s terms the “appropriation” of blackness is key to understanding Walker’s approach to racial identity. Explaining his scholarship further, Johnson refuses “a fixed or stable meaning of ‘blackness’” in order to “demonstrate its variability inside and outside black culture” and engage a “dialogue about the politics of appropriation and black authenticity.” Johnson’s analysis of black performativity proposes that racial identity is constructed by a series of performative acts. This concept provides a framework for understanding Walker’s artistic manipulation of her persona. Walker’s work is not performance in the traditional sense, but engages performativity in order to destabilize conventional notions of racial and sexual identity.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kara Walker, “Chronology of Black Suffering: Images and Notes,” in *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 75-111.

<sup>2</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 114.

<sup>3</sup> Betye Saar quoted in [Juliette Bowles Harris], “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 4.

<sup>4</sup> David Wall, “Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker” *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 277.

<sup>5</sup> Darby English, “This is Not about the Past,” in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (New York: MIT Press, 2003), 164-5.

<sup>6</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 8.

**CHAPTER II**  
**“PATHOLOGIES FROM THE PAST”:**  
**ON KARA WALKER’S OBSOLETE MEDIA**

Kara Walker’s reputation is indelibly linked to the silhouette. Her innovative use of cut-paper silhouettes has dominated writing on her work, eclipsing her many other mediums. By applying the methodologies of Rosalind Krauss and Friedrich Kittler, two theorists with differing approaches to the concept of medium, this chapter of my thesis will develop an account of the way three of Walker’s major mediums operate, exploring her silhouettes, text-based work, and films. A close examination of the way Walker uses her media to make meaning reveals the unifying logic of her work.

In describing the project of her most recent book, *Under Blue Cup*, Rosalind Krauss declares a quixotic campaign for the courageous artists she calls the “knights of the medium.” Krauss writes: “What if medium were not a material support—oil on canvas, tempera on wooden panel, pigment on wet plaster—the materials worked by the guilds? What if it were the very foundation of representation, the way painting’s chessboard supports the actors on its stage? What if it were a logic rather than a form of matter?”<sup>1</sup> For Krauss, medium is more than the material substance of a work of art like oil paint or stone sculpture; it is the “foundation of representation.”

While it might seem paradoxical to use Krauss’s theory of a new medium specificity to analyze Kara Walker, an artist working in many media simultaneously, her concept of medium moves beyond specific material concerns, to create a more expanded definition of the concept “medium.” Likewise, Walker’s choices about medium are

deliberate and insistently conceptual. Krauss's theoretical framework is particularly useful for Walker's work because it focuses on the way material qualities function as artistic strategies for the creation of meaning.

My choice of Krauss for this interpretation also has a political dimension. In artist Adrian Piper's essay "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," she cites Rosalind Krauss as a prime example of the academic negligence in engaging with artists of color. To my knowledge, throughout her prolific writing career, Krauss has never written about the work of an African American artist. Piper claims that when questioned at an NEA conference in 1983 about this gap in her scholarship, Krauss explained to her fellow symposiasts that, "she doubts that there is any unrecognized African American art of quality because, if it doesn't bring itself to her attention, it probably doesn't exist."<sup>2</sup> This section will examine Walker's silhouette installations, text works and films, in order to explore how she manipulates those mediums to establish a consistent internal logic throughout her oeuvre. Therefore, I argue that Walker's multiple mediums together constitute a Kraussian "invented medium." By employing Krauss's theory to examine Walker's use of medium, I hope to clarify that Krauss's omission is one of cultural ignorance.

Before discussing Walker's work directly, I will clarify the parts of Krauss's writing that are most relevant in this context. For Krauss, an escape from the void of aesthetic meaninglessness is found in certain artists' ability to "invent" new mediums. Krauss writes: "Inventing a medium is like inventing a language, since it is the business of a medium not only to have something like a grammar, a syntax, a rhetoric, but a way

of deciding what counts as competence in its use.”<sup>3</sup> By comparing medium to a language, Krauss defines medium as a vehicle for communication.

In addition, this passage implies that a medium constitutes a system of rules, and an internal logic. She clarifies this idea of medium as a system of rules by distinguishing her concept of medium from the dominant proponent of medium-specificity, the Modernist critic Clement Greenberg. For Greenberg, medium referred exclusively to the physical substance used in the production of a work of art, e.g. its paint and its canvas. In contrast, Krauss relates her own concept of medium to “the rules of the guilds.”<sup>4</sup> By relating medium to the history of artists’ guilds, Krauss loads the term with art-historical memory. This theoretical move is archaeological, because it constructs mediums as discursive systems rather than mere physical substances.<sup>5</sup> For example, painting as a discursive system encompasses everything from medieval guild’s strictures about the proper method of panel preparation, to the Renaissance’s imposition of mathematical linear perspective, to Greenberg’s pronouncements about “flatness” and “purity.” Framing medium as a discursive system allows the artist or art historian to effectively engage contemporary art with art history. In this manner, the medium of a work of art is both the memory of its discursive field and the ideological support for its present state.

Krauss’s marriage of medium with the idea of memory is a central theme of *Under Blue Cup* and is one of the most useful aspects of her theory to apply to Walker’s work. Krauss makes memory’s importance clear, and personal, by beginning the book with a description of her experience of profound loss when a brain aneurysm flushed her mind of a good deal of memory. The phrase “Under Blue Cup” is appropriated from one of the mnemonic flash cards she used as tool for reconstructing her memory during

rehabilitation. The strategy of these flash cards was to establish linked structures between arbitrary images and phrases (like “Under Blue Cup”) with personal memory as a sort of “associative scaffold” from which to rebuild her capacity for short-term memory. As Krauss explains: “The first rule of mnemonic therapy: if you can remember ‘who’ you are... you have the necessary associative scaffold to teach yourself to remember anything.”<sup>6</sup>

As *Under Blue Cup* progresses, Krauss’s story of cerebral trauma is transformed into a complex metaphor for what she sees as the major dilemma of the “post-medium age.” She writes: “*Under Blue Cup* is an act of remembering, an insistent ‘who you are’... a shrug of the shoulders at deconstruction’s dismissal of the ‘self.’ Its concern is those very few artists who have had the courage to resist the aneurystic purge of the visual, a purge meant to bury the practice of specific mediums under the opprobrium of a mindless moralizing against the grounds of art itself: the aesthetic object which it abjures as mere commodity, and the specificity of the medium which it shuns as inadequately philosophical.”<sup>7</sup>

Krauss’s project is clearly an art-critical one; she is laying out a conceptual framework for determining art’s value. Implicit in this argument is a rejection of artwork that discards material and aesthetic conditions for a state of complete “dematerialization.”<sup>8</sup> Within this framework, Krauss declares her allegiance to the aesthetic object as something still essential to her definition of art, and still valuable in and of itself. There is thus something of a paradox in Krauss’s theory, which clings to the discourse of medium, rejects the dematerialization of art, and yet attempts to reinvent medium as a concept.

In Krauss's theoretical framework, close attention to the medium of an artist is made possible by an analysis of the "technical support" of their work. Krauss uses the term "technical support," to encompass the aspects of medium discussed above, the internal logic, system of rules, and historical memory of a given medium. The phrase "technical support" is misleading in Krauss's work, because her theory of medium is conceptual, the "invented medium" of a work is ultimately an intellectual concept rather than a physical or technological one.<sup>9</sup> The medium is the "foundation of representation" in a work of art. Still, Krauss compares "technical support" to the canvas, which served as the support for painting for so long. Krauss's dialectic between material and immaterial concepts is intentionally slippery, because she is trying to problematize the strict separation of ideas and materials established by Conceptual artists like Joseph Kosuth in the 1960s.<sup>10</sup>

For Krauss, good art by definition should be *both* an aesthetic object and a conceptual object, with its conceptual framework arising from its materiality. Krauss often uses the Heideggerian term "figuring forth," to express this process of immaterial meaning emerging from material conditions.<sup>11</sup> It is Krauss's complex theoretical handling of the interweaving between conceptuality and materiality that makes her theory of medium useful to an understanding of Walker's work. However, it must be acknowledged that Krauss's theoretical approach has most likely never been used to analyze the art of Walker before because of her academic distance from discourses on the politics of identity in art. Even while writing about artists whose work engages identity politics, such as Cindy Sherman or William Kentridge, Krauss avoids any discussion of

the political implications of their work.<sup>12</sup> Rather, her analysis focuses on *how* the formal qualities of these artworks “figure forth” their conceptual meaning.

By exploring the conceptual framework that arises from the “technical support” of each of Walker’s media, I will delineate the invented medium of her work. However, my method for beginning this analysis owes more to Foucault, and to the “Media Archaeology” approach of German media theorist Friedrich Kittler than to Krauss. In other words, by carefully excavating the history of Kara Walker’s media, I will clarify how Walker’s materials figure-forth the conceptual impact of her art.

Kittler’s theory provides a useful supplement to Krauss, in that he is strictly interested in technological media rather than conceptual mediums. However, Kittler fuses his close focus on the technical characteristics of media with concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis.<sup>13</sup> In *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, he argues that the contemporary age has fused multiple media through digital technology and optical fiber networks, compressing audio, visual, and textual information into a single standardized medium of communication. Despite this compression or homogenization of data, Kittler asserts that these different types of data— optical, acoustic, and written— have been stored in technologically different ways, which mediate our perception of the world. Kittler uses Lacan’s model of the “real,” the “imaginary,” and the “symbolic,” to separate his three media of interest.<sup>14</sup> Film has the unique ability to conjure up the experience of the imaginary, while the sound recording ability of the gramophone can “simulate the real.” The typewriter, on the other hand, cannot access sensory perception directly, but must represent it through the filter of the “symbolic grid” of language.<sup>15</sup> While it is tempting to apply this tri-partite division to the three central media I will discuss in

Walker's work, her silhouettes, her texts, and her films, Walker's media are more hybridized, drawing on elements from all three categories. However, exploring Walker's techniques through Kittler's media-archaeological lens draws out foundational concepts about the way Walker's media interrelate.

While Kittler shares Foucault's concern with discursive formations as a strategy for reading history, he critiques Foucault's silence about the technology of media, and the way they have altered systems of knowledge. For Foucault, all knowledge is filtered through discourse, and language reigns supreme as the ultimate mediator of reality. For Kittler, language is only one form of mediation, and the other technologically stored forms of sensory data affect us in distinct ways. Kittler's media archaeology is not only interested in examining the particular histories of different technological mediums, but analyzes the way they affect and construct our perception of reality. By combining Kittler's methodological focus on the effects of different media with Krauss's interest in the discursive memory of mediums, I will explore the range of effects produced by Kara Walker's multiple media. Out of this discursively loaded understanding of Walker's media, we can examine how her conceptual strategies operate.

Silhouette installations are Walker's signature medium, and are the subject of the bulk of the critical writing on Walker's work. The silhouettes are rich in associative qualities that contribute to the production of meaning in Walker's installations. Many scholars have pointed to the way the silhouette seems to perfectly encapsulate many of the artist's major conceptual concerns. In Walker's first large silhouette installation, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, she set out many of the originating ideas that are

continually explored in her work, and established some of the primary archetypal characters who populate the artist's images (fig. 1). The scene visually references Margaret Mitchell's Southern epic, *Gone with the Wind*, and the dainty antiquated form of the silhouette suits our romantic expectations perfectly. Yet a closer inspection reveals Walker's reinvention of the traditional silhouette and her disruption of narrative.

Walker's use of the silhouette as a medium serves initially to draw us to the late eighteenth century, when cut-paper silhouette portraits became a popular craft. The silhouette's name comes from the Marquis Etienne de Silhouette, a French Minister of finance notorious for enforcing frugality on Paris in a period of financial instability. The word silhouette became a derisive slang term for anything cheap. During this period, black cut-paper silhouette portraits became immensely popular all over France as an inexpensive alternative to painted miniature portraits. The term silhouette was applied to this type of portrait so frequently that it was eventually accepted into the French dictionary, and became the official moniker of the medium.<sup>16</sup>

Most of the examples of silhouettes dating to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are by anonymous artists, demonstrating that it was considered an artisanal craft rather than a fine art. Also significant is that by the end of the nineteenth century, some silhouette cutters were African-American, a fact that Walker, well steeped in American art history, is certainly aware of. Walker included an image of Moses Williams, a former slave and silhouette cutter, in an exhibition she curated at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, demonstrating her engagement with the African-American heritage of the medium (fig. 7).<sup>17</sup>

In some ways the method of silhouette cutting can be likened to photography, as both function as techniques for the mechanical reproduction of human likenesses. Silhouettes were often produced with a machine called the “physiognotrace” (fig. 8 & 9). In her book *Shadow Theaters and Shadow Films*, German animator Lotte Reiniger described this antiquated machine:

The silhouette-portraits of this period were the result not merely of the observation and talent of the artist; they were executed with the utmost care so as to obtain a true and unquestionable likeness of the sitter. The subject was seated on a special constructed chair, with a support for his head, as in the early days of photography. Incorporated in this chair was a frame with a glass plate in a fixed position. This frame was covered with oiled paper and a candle [which] so threw its light that the shadow fell onto the screen without distortion. Then the outline was drawn on the paper with the utmost correctness. The inner space was filled in with black ink, so that a life-size portrait of the sitter was obtained with complete accuracy. Later this portrait was reduced to a smaller size by the use of a pantograph, a mechanical scaling device.<sup>18</sup>

These portraits, like photographic portraits, were executed with the technical assistance of a machine, which projected the outline of a person’s face onto a screen from which it was traced. In this way, there was an implied element of physiological truth to the portraits, because they were meant to replicate the actual shadow of the sitter.

While describing photography, Kittler quotes art and film theorist Rudolph Arnheim on the nature of reproductions: “They are not only supposed to resemble the object, but are also supposed to guarantee this resemblance by being the product of this object itself, i.e. by being mechanically produced by it—in the same way as the illuminated objects in reality mechanically imprint their image onto the photographic layer.”<sup>19</sup> Likewise Kittler described photography as a “reproduction authenticated by the object itself” which refers to the “real of bodies which necessarily slips through all symbolic grids.”<sup>20</sup> In its traditional form, the silhouette as medium was seen as

mechanically reproducing a real image of a physically present body. This perception of the medium's realistic reproductive ability allowed the medium to be taken up by certain circles as a scientific tool.

In the nineteenth century, the rapid paper portraits were associated with the frivolity of the middle class, yet also had more sinister implications relevant to Walker's appropriation of the technique. One of the major champions of the silhouette was a Swiss Pastor named Johann Caspar Lavater, the father of the now-discredited science physiognomy, which sought to assert a correspondence between a person's physical characteristics and their personality, intelligence, and moral character. In the 1794 English edition of *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater illustrated a range of profiles in silhouette, elucidating such qualities as aristocratic high foreheads, brutish thick lips, and determined jaws and explaining their interpretive use for analyzing people (fig 10). In Chapter XLII of *Essays on Physiognomy*, "On Shades," Lavater wrote:

Though shades are the weakest and most vapid, yet when the light is at a proper distance, and falls properly on the countenance to take the profile accurately, the truest representation that can be given of man... The truest, because it is the immediate expression of nature, such as not the ablest painter is capable of drawing by hand.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Lavater presented the silhouette portrait as an effective scientific tool for discovering connections between a person's physical appearance, often dependent on racial characteristics, and their levels of intelligence or morality.<sup>22</sup>

As an historical medium, the silhouette contained three major poles of discursive meaning. First, it was a bourgeois medium; popular and affordable and not considered a

fine art. In this regard, it was often deemed a “ladies art,” or an art of unskilled craftsmen.<sup>23</sup> As the practice moved from Europe to the American south, it was widely performed by African-American craftsmen. Second, it incorporated elements of mechanical reproduction, so that it implied the indexical presence of its human subjects. Finally, it was adopted as a tool of physiognomists, interested in establishing a “scientific” relationship between physical—and often racial characteristics—and intelligence or morality. Walker’s use of the medium references these qualities, yet through the specificity of her process, she reinvents the nature of the silhouette’s communicative abilities.

While Walker’s silhouettes stylistically resemble those of the nineteenth century, her process is differentiated in strategic ways that can be seen as a Kraussian reinvention of the medium. Walker creates her silhouettes by drawing on the reverse side of black paper in chalk, carefully cutting out her figures, and then burnishing them to the wall with melted wax (fig 11).<sup>24</sup> This constitutes a purposeful deviation from the traditional process of the medium, because there is no model, no machine, and thus no reproduction of reality. Furthermore, what was formerly a negative space in silhouettes (the silhouette was cut out of white paper and filled with black ink, or placed over a black paper background), becomes a positive space in Walker’s work. This reversal emphasizes that the characters populating Walker’s work are constructions. Walker’s silhouettes are shadows of the figures of her imagination, rather than external figures. By severing the silhouette’s relationship to reality, Walker severs her medium’s allegiance to any notions of empirical truth and, in particular, historical truth.

This refusal to reproduce images of historical truth is further emphasized by the deliberate ambiguity of Walker's silhouettes. Walker's skill with a knife is evident in the sinuous complexity of these forms, and displaces the viewer from the darkness of their content. Most scholars of Walker's work point to the shock of dissonance created between the seductively stylized imagery and the disturbing, ugly content depicted. For example, in *Untitled*, one is so caught up in the beauty and minute detail with which the mandala-like pattern is rendered, that it takes a few moments of concentrated looking for the dismembered body-parts to appear, subtle hands and feet and the disconcertingly wiggly-looking braids of the border (fig. 12). Another noteworthy example of the sense of dissonance is *Cut*, where what appears at first to be a woman jumping for joy is on closer inspection an image of violent suicide. This image is also a visual pun on the medium, by incorporating the blade with which the figure is created as the simultaneous tool of her destruction (fig. 13). Discussing her experience in graduate school, Walker stated, "In a way making Silhouettes kind of saved me. Simplified the frenzy I was working myself into. Created the outward appearance of calm."<sup>25</sup> Through the polished medium of silhouettes, Walker is able to confront her grotesque and horrifying subject matter with elegance, seducing the viewer into engaging with these difficult scenes.

The key element of Walker's silhouettes that I have neglected so far is the spatial quality of their installation. While formally connected to cut-paper silhouette portraits, in scale Walker's silhouette installations are a far cry from those intimate depictions. Walker's silhouette installations are large; *Gone* stretches roughly fifty feet long and thirteen feet high making the figures in her scenes slightly larger than life size. While *Gone* was originally part of a group show, with Walker given only one wall, her later

installations were installed on all four walls of a gallery, so that the viewer would be completely surrounded and incorporated into the scene. Other exhibitions have been installed completely in the round, such as *Slavery! Slavery!* (fig 3). Anne Wagner writes of her experience: “Standing in a Walker installation, physically elided with it, we become part of the play.”<sup>26</sup> As the scene surrounds the viewer, his or her shadow is projected onto the wall, joining in the narrative of the installation. The physical experience of a Walker installation is one of overwhelming disorientation.

The long and unwieldy titles of Walker’s installations and exhibitions also allude to nineteenth century forms of spectacular entertainment. In an interview with curator Thelma Golden, Walker explained, “I love historical paintings, and I also love cyclorama and these other kinds of touring versions of art or non-art entertainment, and I love the language that goes with them. It’s a little bit overblown, a little bit pompous, and I’ve been trying to acquire that sense of confidence.”<sup>27</sup> The history of the Civil War cycloramas clarifies Walker’s words and the nature of the cyclorama’s influence on her work.

In Harold Holzer’s book *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art*, Holzer calls cycloramas “the grandest projects of Civil War painting,” and argues that the cycloramas were a necessary technological development for artists to express the overwhelming *scale* of the civil war, without losing the capacity to display individual human drama.<sup>28</sup> In depicting the unspeakably traumatic history of African American experience, Walker likewise requires a massive scale to make her art *work*. Holzer distinguishes “cycloramas” from “panoramas,” because of their unique display structures.<sup>29</sup> Cycloramas are massive panoramic paintings, executed in the round and

housed in specially constructed cylindrical buildings. A viewing platform in the center of the building allowed the spectator to be completely surrounded by the painting; a glass covered slit hidden by a false ceiling lit the interior from above to prevent the viewers from casting their shadows on the painting. Visitors to the cyclorama would be led down a darkened corridor and up a spiral staircase to the platform, so that their first sight of the painting would be one of sublime brightness and awe.<sup>30</sup> One critic writing for the *Boston Daily Transcript* in 1884 emphasized the sublime quality of this experience:

It is as though the laws of this world were suspended... Some portions of the foreground appear to change their positions as the spectator changes his... In short, one feels quite helpless and wondering in the midst of this new and extraordinary nature. It would seem as though all these queer impressions might be at once met and settled by the simple consideration of the fact that it was only a picture. But that is just it; it is impossible to accept the thing as a picture. Not because it is absolutely natural, but because there is nothing by which to gauge the thing, one has no idea whether the canvas is ten feet distant or a thousand. And so, all means of rational judgment being removed, the spectator must remain, dazed and helpless, feeling much like the little girl in 'Alice in Wonderland,' when told that she was but a thing in the dream of the sleeping king.<sup>31</sup>

This article refers to one of the most successful cycloramas, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, painted by the French artist Paul Philippoteaux (fig 14). Philippoteaux traveled to the U.S. to research the painting, making sketches of Gettysburg, as well as hiring a panoramic photographer to make photographic studies of the landscape from a tall wooden tower. Philippoteaux also corresponded with several generals involved in the battle to create a historically accurate sequence of events.<sup>32</sup> The painting was executed in Paris, and then shipped to Chicago, where it first opened to the public in 1883.

The cycloramas were spectacular popular entertainment and were built so they could be broken down and reassembled across the country. Philippoteaux executed three separate versions of his *Battle of Gettysburg*, all of which traveled widely.<sup>33</sup> While not

all cycloramas were related to the Civil War, in the 1880s these paintings were part of a general revival of interest in the war following the Reconstruction Era.<sup>34</sup> Examining two of the major traveling Civil War cycloramas, Holzer argues that these works were “ultimately monuments to sectional reconciliation. Their careers as public attractions prove it, for both got their start in the North but were traveled southward without resistance.”<sup>35</sup> By eliding the tumultuous racial history of the Reconstruction Era, and its terrible implications for African Americans, the Civil War cyclorama constitutes prime material for Walker’s satire and reinvention.

While their guidebooks emphasized the precision of historical accuracy displayed in cycloramas, these spectacles clearly had a rhetorical purpose. Another essay in the *Boston Daily Transcript* commented that the cyclorama was:

In really good taste, and therefore the expectation of possible horror and disgust with which many enter the building is quickly changed to a grave consideration of the nobler characteristics of a great battle. Had the painter been absolutely literal in his execution of the subject, painting all the ghastly and sickening details of the fight—details which of course were, and which would have been received and gloated over by a most lamentably large number of the people of any city—had he done this, painting all the carnage and horror that he could have done with perfect truthfulness, then would the work have been without higher value than police news. But with a moderation worthy of all praise, he has avoided absolutely all this sort of thing, with the result that this painting is truly valuable, not only as a means of amusement, but as a most instructive lesson with regard to the great battle.<sup>36</sup>

This commentator makes it clear that decorum and restraint are more important qualities for the cyclorama than “perfect truthfulness,” yet the cycloramas were also praised for being instructive. Cyclorama painters conducted historical research and interviewed war Generals; guidebooks accompanying cycloramas even contained precisely articulated narratives of events in the battle being sequentially depicted.<sup>37</sup> In one guidebook, from the *Battle of Gettysburg* installation in Portland, Oregon, the authors include a map of the

battlefield in Gettysburg, indicating precisely where the viewer of the cyclorama would be standing.<sup>38</sup> As the silhouette portraits were meant to convey the reality of a person's physiognomic essence, the cycloramas were meant to convey real experience by artfully distilling history into an overwhelming visual experience of the War's most noble and glorifying form. In other words, both media presented themselves as vehicles of truth, while sweeping certain details of their subjects into the shadows. By restaging these media through her invented medium of the silhouette installation (maybe it could be called a silhouetterama), Walker satirizes these forms by constructing her own form of history, in which the shadows of the antebellum era have taken over the narrative.

As a media-archaeological analysis illuminated elements of Walker's silhouette installations, likewise it sheds light on Walker's text works. While text often operates in direct conjunction with images, as in some of her watercolor drawings and in her titles, Walker also has a body of work that is exclusively text, though it is still presented on gallery walls as visual art, rather than published as poetry or prose. One of the most exhibited of these works is *Letter from a Black Girl*, created in 1998 (fig. 15). This piece consists of letters applied directly to the wall in a typewriter font, creating a visual experience of black on white that recalls the silhouette installations. *Letter from a Black Girl* reads:

Dear you hypocritical fucking Twerp,

Id just like to thank you for taking hold of the last four years of my life and raising my hopes for the future. Id like to thank you for giving me clothes when I needed them and food when I needed it and for fucking my brains out when my brains needed fucking. I hope that the time we spent in the Quarters with my family sleeping nearby quietly ignoring what you proceeded to do to me - what, rather I proceeded to do to you - was worthwhile for you, that you got the

stimulation you so needed, Because now That Im Free of that poison you call Life, that stringy, sour, white strand you called sacred and me savior, that peculiar institution we engaged in because there was no other foreseeable alternative, I am LOST.

Before, when there was a before, an upon a time I was a black space defined in contrast to your POSITIVE, concrete avowal. now, a black space in the void and I have to thank you for forgetting to stick your neck out for me after I craned my neck so often in your arms.

Dear you duplicitous, idiot, Worm,

NOw that youve forgotten how you like your coffee and why you raised your pious fist to the sky, and the reason for your stunning African Art collection, and the war we fought together, and the promises you made and the laws we rewrote, I am left here alone to recreate my WHOLE HISTORY without benefit of you, my compliment, my enemy, my oppressor, my Love

Should i never be heard from again, follow the Route of my forebears and quietly, GO, or shall I seek to kill you, burning the last of the fuel you gave me and expected of me?

Walker sees her text-works as a mode for experimenting more directly with her “voice,” as both author and participant in the scenes she represents visually.<sup>39</sup> The text seems to serve as a foil to the fundamental silence of the silhouettes, yet like the silhouettes, it frustrates our longing for a coherent narrative or stable subject. The text pieces are primarily written in the first person, and so begin to blur the lines between Walker as artist and Walker as the subject of the work. However, Walker always strategically confuses any easy identification of the narrator or speaking subject. The formal qualities of *Letter from a Black Girl* are specific and purposeful, and a key component in conveying the meaning of the work. Like the silhouette installations, *Letter from a Black Girl* is composed of black forms on a white wall. The font of this piece, as well as most of her other text-based works suggest her use of a typewriter.

Kittler's analysis of the typewriter draws on its material history, as well as insights from psychoanalysis and the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Kittler emphasizes both the automatism, and the gender dynamics of the technology, asserting the typewriter's role in "inverting the gender" of writing. Citing statistics drawn from the U.S. Bureau of the Census from 1870-1930, Kittler demonstrates that after its invention, there was an exponential explosion of the number of female typists until 1930, when women constituted 95.6% of the total number of typists and stenographers.<sup>40</sup> Kittler explained that the privilege of acknowledged authorship was widely denied to women in this period, leading to "an omnipresent metaphor [that] equated women with the white sheet of nature or virginity onto which a very male stylus could then inscribe the glory of its authorship."<sup>41</sup>

His narrative then moves toward integrating Heidegger's description of the typewriter, from 1942, which he quotes at length. Heidegger explained the typewriter as a sort of intermediary between the "hand" and the "word," separating the modern man's physical body for the constructive system of language. In Heidegger's words "The typewriter tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word. The word itself turns into something 'typed.'" For women moving into the bureaucratic professional sphere, the machine thus served to make their bodies irrelevant to the writing. Heidegger says: "Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides this 'advantage,' that it conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same..."<sup>42</sup>

While the use of a typewriter in 1998 clearly has a different meaning for Walker than it did for Heidegger in 1942, the issue of type masking character becomes interesting in relation to *Letter from a Black Girl*. It would appear that the title of the piece automatically answers the question of authorship, yet the piece ruptures the stability of a singular, authorial subject. Who is this black girl and who is her letter addressed to? In an essay in the Walker Art Center's 2007 catalogue, Kevin Young notes the letter's superficial resemblance to the trope of a "letter from freedom," as exemplified by those included in Harriet Jacobs's 1861 memoir, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.<sup>43</sup> With references like the "Quarters," Walker seems to be identifying the author of the letter as a former slave, the addressee as her former male master, and locating the letter in the nineteenth century. Likewise, the strategic omission of certain punctuation marks and the misspelling of certain words seem designed to position the author as uneducated, or to evoke a sense of the emotion and speed with which the letter is typed.

However, before the first paragraph of the letter ends, Walker destabilizes the temporal position and identity of the author with the lines: "Because now That Im free of that poison you called Life, that stringy, sour, white strand you called sacred and me savior, that peculiar institution we engaged in because there was no other foreseeable alternative, I am LOST." This grotesque and perplexing fragment performs a number of disruptive actions in the narrative of the letter. It suggests the possibility that the author is dead and writing to her former master, lover, and tormentor from the afterlife. It could also suggest that she is still alive, but merely free of "Life," as the recipient of the letter saw it, embodied in his own "sacred" bodily fluid. Her ironic use of the euphemism "peculiar institution" to refer to their relationship ties it back to slavery, and yet displaces

any attempt at creating an authentic nineteenth century slave's voice. "Peculiar institution" was a phrase widely used by Southern legislators in defense of the institution of slavery; in this context the word *peculiar* meant pertaining to a specific culture and place, as in the possessive "our peculiar institution," rather than peculiar meaning something strange.<sup>44</sup> As the letter continues, the author becomes less specific, and more amorphous. In the next paragraph, she writes "Before, when there was a before, an upon a time I was a black space defined in contrast to your POSITIVE, concrete avowal. now, a black space in the void and I have to thank you for forgetting to stick your neck out for me after I craned my neck so often in your arms." In this passage, the author seems to become an abstracted concept of blackness rather than a specific person, and is referring to the nationwide construction of African-American identity.

What had seemed at first to be a highly personal letter about an individual sexual relationship becomes a meditation on the post-slavery transformation of black subjecthood. The letter, in a poetic fashion, elaborates on the black-white dichotomy in way that echoes the effects of black and white previously discussed in relationship to the silhouettes. While the visual simplicity and clarity make the work seem highly legible, upon meditation any certainty of attributing identity or narrative is dissolved by the representational system which reduces everything to black and white. The mechanical character of the type, as Heidegger says, "veils the essence of writing." He continues "The typewriter is a signless cloud, i.e., a withdrawing concealment in the midst of its very obtrusiveness, and through it the relation of Being to man is transformed."<sup>45</sup> Walker's use of the typewriter as a technical support, like her use of the silhouettes as technical support, complements the fractured narrative by clouding the viewer's ability to

find a singular essence, identity, or narrative within her work. By turning the words into standard symbolic form, the typewriter creates an apparent distance between the real body of the writer and the language she produces.

In the final two paragraphs of the letter, the addressee seems to change once again, from the white race as a whole, to the white dominated institution of the art world. Or perhaps, as is suggested by its location on the gallery or museum wall, the text is addressed directly to its viewer. In this case, Walker implicates the privileged contemporary collector of African Art, or perhaps appreciator of African American artists, in the author's oppression. The text, which Walker scales to fill the gallery wall, overwhelms the viewer with its simultaneous rage and tenderness, which is both accusatory and seductive.

Typewritten text is both composed and printed simultaneously, lending it an automatic authority. By subverting the literary trope of historical slave narratives, Walker problematizes the memory of the medium of African-American literary production. Walker is also drawing on the authority imparted by the museum wall, where text usually contains carefully edited art history. Yet her text also compares the acquisition of African Art to the sexual domination of female slaves. As with the silhouettes, *Letter from a Black Girl* performs a Kraussian reinvention of its medium by reproducing and undermining its traditional form.

Kara Walker's films, as third form of technical support, make use of their medium in a rather different way than the silhouettes or text. Walker began to experiment with moving images in 2001, turning her signature silhouette figures into puppets with hinged

joints. Creating hand-built theatrical sets and using Super 8 film, she produced her first film, *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, which was silent and black and white, in 2004. Shortly after, she expanded her efforts to include sound with the 2005 film, *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, A Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker* (fig. 16). While this piece incorporates sound in the form of appropriated music and spoken word, the dialogue and narration is presented as text (in a typewriter font) in the form of inter-titles, like in silent film. Walker's films integrate her silhouettes and her texts, creating a rich interweaving of her previous medial strategies. The film consists of eight chapters that narrate a perverse origin story for African Americans.

In the first chapter, titled "Along a Watery Road," eight black nude figures with the words "Authentic, Black, African, Negroes, Some Fakers, One Wannabe," cut out of their bodies, appear floating in a womb-like shape (fig. 17). The figures are thrown overboard from a ship, into moving water that appears to be made from the magnetic ribbon of a cassette-tape. An intertitle reads "Cap'n Say: Toss dem Uppity Niggers!" and images of the black figures are interspersed with a 19<sup>th</sup> century etching of a slaver tossing his slaves overboard. In the next chapter, "Motherland," the Middle Passage is allegorized through an image of cannibalistic digestion. An island topped with a palm tree grows up and out of the water, revealing itself to be a monstrously large black woman's head with her mouth slowly opening (fig. 18). The giantess swallows the figures from the previous chapter, accompanied by the grotesque sounds of lips smacking and teeth crunching.

As the film continues, the narrative is interrupted by a scene titled “Interlude,” where the film switches from puppets to live action, showing a young black woman dressed in 19<sup>th</sup> century servant’s garb, with a head scarf tied around her head (fig. 19). The first intertitle reads: “We find Bess, A Comely Negress, Taking her Master’s Likeness.” The man whose portrait she is rendering appears only as a shadow in the foreground of the image. The camera zooms in on the paper silhouette the woman is cutting, which appears to be a white man in a hat. As the camera gets closer, it appears that the cut-out has two faces back-to-back like images of the Roman god Janus. Inside the cut-out’s head is a white circle with the text “Good Job, Bess!” inside, and camera zooms in until the text fills the screen and the silhouette is no longer visible.

In this scene and throughout the film, the viewer’s attention is continually focused on the craft of making the film. While the woman playing Bess is not Walker, (she is one of Walker’s studio assistants,) glimpses of Walker’s hands and face appear continually throughout the film manipulating the puppets and moving her mouth as if she were speaking their dialogue. In one scene, the camera actually zooms out to reveal the entire mechanism of the production, a small stage with a screen behind which Walker and several assistants handle sticks that move the puppets (fig. 20).

The resemblance of Walker’s theatrical apparatus to puppet animation and traditional shadow theatre set-ups is striking. Lotte Reiniger, the German animator quoted earlier in this essay, narrates a concise and lyrical history of this medium in her book *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films*. Reiniger’s book was published in 1970, following a long and successful career experimenting with the medium of silhouette animation. Reiniger is renowned for creating the earliest extant feature-length animated

film, *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, with cut-paper silhouette puppets. Reiniger's films were usually drawn from fairy tales, and unlike Lavater, she emphasizes the silhouette's distinct presence as separate from real bodies. She explains "I insisted on calling my films 'Silhouette Films' and not 'Shadow Films'... The essential difference between a shadow and a silhouette is that the latter cannot be distorted. A silhouette can cast a shadow... The silhouette exists in its own right."<sup>46</sup>

Reiniger recounts the various origin legends for shadow-theater, as well as giving a detailed set of instructions for how to create your own shadow plays and films. The scene in *8 Possible Beginnings* in which the camera zooms out from the puppets to reveal the apparatus of the film shows that Walker's process is more like a filmed shadow play than an animated Shadow film (fig 21 & 22). While Reiniger performed shadow plays as well, her shadow films are created with a process of stop-motion animation, so that figures appear to move on their own rather than being manipulated by a performer. This contrast demonstrates the way Walker's film emphasizes the artist's role as a performative player and manipulator of the narrative. Reiniger's filmmaking process allows the viewer to become immersed in the story through its illusionism, which makes her silhouettes seem to be moving of their own accord. Walker's process, and her strategic revelation of that process, ruptures the filmic "suture" to make the viewer aware of the constructed and projected nature of the fantastical history they are watching.<sup>47</sup> Walker's hands repeatedly appear in the videos as they manipulate the puppets into performing grotesque actions, creating a sense of perverse and sadistic play that is both humorous and haunting. The films make clear what is subtler in Walker's other media,

that the narratives she presents are not authentic histories, are not to be believed, but instead are the projections of the artist's imagination.

In *Under Blue Cup*, Rosalind Krauss transforms Marshall McLuhan's classic aphorism "The Medium is Message," into "The Medium is the Memory."<sup>48</sup> This succinct phrase provides insight into the way Walker's material media become conceptual. By engaging with the discursive memory of her obsolete media, Walker's art materially evokes the past. Her subversion of the conventions of these past media highlights the constructed nature of historical memory. Furthermore, her focus on the way the material qualities of these media alter our perception of the content expressed allows her to reinvent these mediums.

By continually foregrounding her artistic persona as a contemporary figure manipulating and reconstructing the material past, the artist demonstrates the constructive nature of memory. In the wall-text for one of her exhibitions Walker wrote: "One theme in my artwork is the idea that a Black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past and is continually growing and feeding off those maladies... [M]urky, toxic waters become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth, flushing out of a coherent and stubborn body long-held fears and suspicions."<sup>49</sup> With this statement, Walker makes it clear that her work is not really about the past, but about the way images of the past form contemporary subjects.

Returning to Kittler's Lacanian media categories of the real gramophone, the symbolic typewriter, and the imaginary film, Walker's media likewise modify the nature of the messages her works convey. Kittler chooses these three media for his

archaeological investigation because he understands them as the three original “storage media” for acoustic, optical, and written data.<sup>50</sup> For Kittler, the gramophone and film constituted an important new media development because they shattered written language’s hegemony on knowledge with their unique ability to store time. Through this storage capacity, these media eliminate the need for human memory of dynamic events by replacing it with a technological surrogate.<sup>51</sup> Kittler’s analysis of the storage capacity of media dovetails with Krauss’s discussion of the memory of mediums. Kittler, Krauss, and Walker are all interested in the material specificity of particular media or mediums, because of the unique way this materiality stores its own history, and modifies its present content through its history.

Walker’s silhouettes, texts, and film, as the artistic product of this “new and difficult birth,” relate to the complicated process of engaging with a traumatic history. In this manner, they present an excellent example of postmemory. Postmemory is a term created by cultural theorist and art historian Marianne Hirsch as a tool for discussing contemporary art about the Holocaust. Hirsch uses the term

To describe the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experience of their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the stories and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right.... Postmemory is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those...whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither understand nor re-create.<sup>52</sup>

Literary scholar Arlene Keizer has examined Walker’s works as a case study in African American postmemory. Keizer points to the post-Civil Rights resurgence of American slavery as a theme in cultural production. Keizer asserts that in Walker’s

work, slavery is not the real subject in question, but is a “placeholder for a less stark, more complex set of relations of domination for which we do not yet have a literary or visual language.”<sup>53</sup> Walker has always been explicit about the fact that her point of inquiry is the history of images or representations; her work deals with the cultural imaginary more than actual events.

The idea of postmemory helps to clarify Walker’s temporal/cognitive distance from the subject of slavery. In the exhibition catalogue *Pictures from Another Time*, Robert Reid-Pharr writes: “What passes as memory is... the interpretation of artifacts, an interpretation that is always filtered through contemporary concerns and prejudices.”<sup>54</sup> This concept is supported by Kittler and Krauss’s focus on the historical memory of media or mediums. Walker’s strategic choices with historically loaded media, like the silhouettes, the typewritten texts, and the films draw attention to artifacts’ ability to construct history. Through Walker’s re-working of American literature and visual culture, she makes the mediation of memory explicit, problematizing the objectivity or authenticity of historical memory.

Through her strategic invocation of dissonance and the uncanny, Walker denaturalizes our conception of the antebellum period. As Keizer puts it, she has “radically defamiliarized the history of slavery.”<sup>55</sup> Through this defamiliarization, Walker develops formal strategies for examining the subjectivities of female slaves that had previously been repressed by historical representation incapable of accepting any form of complicity or mutual pleasure in master-slave relationships. As a postmemorial artist Walker is able to use projection, investment, and creativity to develop a “visual language for the legacy of extended relationships of sexual domination” that creates a

link between antebellum African American women and their contemporary counterparts.<sup>56</sup> Walker interrogates the representation of nineteenth century history in search of its implications for contemporary interracial relationships, black female subjects, and the interaction of power and sexuality.

In all of Walker's media, the sense of dissonance she creates between the artwork's material forms and their narrative content disturbs any possibility of easy reading or pleasure in comprehension. Walker makes the viewer aware of the difficulty inherent in explaining racial history or contemporary racial identity in any satisfactory or simple way. For Walker, the concept of race becomes a black hole, encompassing all of the contradictory and complex notions that have been part of its discursive formation, throughout American history.<sup>57</sup> By engaging the history of her media, and then conceptually undermining, morphing and manipulating those media, Walker reinvents them as objects whose aesthetic is conceptual.

In 1984, the African-American feminist writer Audre Lorde famously said: "The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house."<sup>58</sup> This often quoted aphorism was a critique of a feminist conference at NYU, in which Lorde felt the feminist movement had internalized patriarchal standards by ignoring its more marginalized members, specifically lesbians and women of color. Though it might be egregious to both Lorde and Krauss, I bring up Lorde's statement in order to politicize Krauss's concept of the "reinvention of the medium."

Kara Walker began her artistic education as a painter, and often speaks nostalgically of her "naïve" longing to embody that "high art" position. Yet in a manner

similar to Krauss, she asserts the “impossibility of painting” in our contemporary art world. For Walker, this is partially about the postwar exhaustion of the medium by Conceptual Art, and partially about the political associations of painting. Countless revisionist art historians have termed painting the quintessential “Master’s tool,” a medium established as the exclusionary marker of fine art since the time of the Renaissance.<sup>59</sup> Walker’s reinvention of silhouette is not only about the medium’s novel ability to express ideas about the flatness of historical truth, but about the political position of visual artists. By taking up the obsolete medium of silhouette, Walker draws attention to those forgotten craftsmen who have evaporated from the canon of art history. By using text, she alludes to the complexity and fallibility of historical literary depictions of the slave’s experience. In her films, she clarifies that her engagement with African American history seeks the construction of perverse and playful fantasies rather than proposing a historical truth. Taken together, all Walker’s media constitute a reinvention of the medium of historical narrative. This reinvented form of narrative addresses contemporary issues around the visual production of meaning, such as an image’s ability to produce an illusory history, the flatness of racial constructions, and the image’s seductive, violent power.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 16-17.

<sup>2</sup> Adrian Piper, “The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003) 240.

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away? An Essay on James Coleman” *October* 81, no. 5 (1997): 6.

<sup>4</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 16-17.

<sup>5</sup> By archaeological, I mean relating to Michel Foucault's historical methodology, as elaborated in his book *Archaeology of Knowledge*, (New York, Pantheon Books: 1972). Both Krauss and Kittler frequently cite Foucault's theory and methodology as influential in their work.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>8</sup> The "dematerialization" of Conceptual Art was first theorized in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Sjoukje van der Meulen, "The Problem of Media in Contemporary Art Theory." (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009) UMI 3395147, 264-66.

<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 20 and 31.

<sup>11</sup> "The Status of Contemporary Art Criticism: A Conversation with Rosalind Krauss," by Sjoukje van der Meulen, *Metropolis M*, April/May 2009, <<http://metropolism.com/magazine/2008-no2/de-staat-van-de-hedendaagse-kuns/english>>

<sup>12</sup> Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray suggest that this avoidance of political issues in the writing of art historians like Krauss has something to do with a formalist desire to maintain disciplinary purity. They also emphasize the canonical art theorists' interest in maintaining "high art" as the legitimate field of inquiry, writing: "In recent years, art history has created stringent criteria by which to determine quality, which—in combination with a rarefied language—has made it impossible for many to have access to the discourse... Our project is, conversely, about making a direct effort to promote critical practices that consider identity and subjectivity within dominant discourses—while at the same time moving beyond outmoded binaries of high and low culture." Derek Conrad Murray and Soraya Murray, "Uneasy Bedfellows: Canonical Art Theory and the Politics of Identity," *Art Journal* 65, no. 1 (April 2006), 24.

<sup>13</sup> Sjoukje van der Meulen, "The Problem of Media in Contemporary Art Theory." (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009) UMI 3395147, 275. I received the idea to combine Kittler and Krauss's theories from Dr. van der Meulen, whose dissertation negotiates the divide between the Media theory of Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler with the art historical Medium theory of Clement Greenberg and Rosalind Krauss. Van der Meulen asserts that despite their disciplinary distance, Kittler and Krauss's theories of media/medium have many overlapping insights.

<sup>14</sup> Sjoukje van der Meulen, "The Problem of Media in Contemporary Art Theory." (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2009) UMI 3395147, 275.

<sup>15</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 14-16.

<sup>16</sup> Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films* (London: Watson-Guption Publications, 1970), 11-12.

<sup>17</sup> Philippe Vergne, "The Black Saint is the Sinner Lady," in *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films* (London: Watson-Guption Publications, 1970), 13.

<sup>19</sup> Rudolph Arnheim, "Systematik der frühen kinematographischen Erfindungen" in *Kritiken und Aufsätze zum Film*, ed. Helmut H. Dieterichs (Munich, 1977), 27. Quoted in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 12.

<sup>21</sup> Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on physiognomy; for the promotion of the knowledge and the love of mankind; written in the German language by J. C. Lavatar, abridged from Mr. Holcrofts translation*, (Boston: Printed for William Spotswood, & David West, 1794), 218, Eighteenth Century Collections Online.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Corris and Robert Hobbs, "Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker" *Art History* 26, no. 3 (June 2003): 438. See Ellis Shookman ed., *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater*, (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993) for a variety of analyses on the impact of Lavater's working, including its impact on race relations, the development of caricature, and its controversial reception.

<sup>23</sup> "Thelma Golden/Kara Walker: A Dialogue" in *Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 46-47.

<sup>24</sup> "Thelma Golden/Kara Walker: A Dialogue" in *Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 46-47. As a result of this process, the installations are site-specific, and the paper silhouettes are inevitably destroyed when the exhibition is over. In this interview, Walker says that site-specificity and ephemerality are part of her conceptual intentions for the installations. However, specific installations have traveled to multiple venues, notably in the 2007 retrospective exhibition *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love...* which traveled from the Walker Art

Center in Minneapolis to the Whitney Museum in New York and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, all of which showed *Gone*, which was first shown in 1994 at the Drawing Center in New York. When making the installations, she creates a template of the silhouettes, and a measured plan for installation that instructs museums how to install the work later.

<sup>25</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>26</sup> Anne Wagner, "The Black-White Relation," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (New York: MIT Press, 2003), 101.

<sup>27</sup> "Thelma Golden/Kara Walker: A Dialogue" in *Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 46-47.

<sup>28</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 172.

<sup>29</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 183.

<sup>30</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 174-5. When I say sublime, I am referring to the term as used in relation to Romantic art, first theorized by Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

<sup>31</sup> Anonymous, *Boston Daily Transcript* (Dec. 30, 1884), quoted in Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 179.

<sup>32</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 178.

<sup>33</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 181.

<sup>34</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 173.

<sup>35</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 177.

<sup>36</sup> Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993), 180.

- <sup>37</sup> Portland Cyclorama Co., *Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg*. (Portland, OR: 1888).
- <sup>38</sup> Portland Cyclorama Co., *Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg*. (Portland, OR: 1888), 62.
- <sup>39</sup> “Thelma Golden/Kara Walker: A Dialogue” in *Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 48-49.
- <sup>40</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 183-4.
- <sup>41</sup> Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 186.
- <sup>42</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Martin Heidegger on the Hand and the Typewriter,” 1942 lecture published in *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 80-81, quoted in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 198.
- <sup>43</sup> Kevin Young, “Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarking, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker” in *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 49.
- <sup>44</sup> See Kenneth M. Stamp, *The Peculiar Institution: Slavery in the Ante-Bellum South*. (New York: Knopf, 1956).
- <sup>45</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Martin Heidegger on the Hand and the Typewriter,” 1942 lecture published in *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1992), 80-81, quoted in Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 198-200.
- <sup>46</sup> Lotte Reiniger, *Shadow Theatres and Shadow Films* (London: Watson-Guption Publications, 1970), 11-13.
- <sup>47</sup> Krauss discusses the concept of filmic suture in her essay on James Coleman, writing, “In film, the binding of the viewer into the web of the narrative space is itself a function of cross-cutting, since it is as the camera no longer looks head-on at an object but turns away to look at something else that we as viewers leave our externalized positions outside the image to identify with the turning camera, thereby being visually and psychologically woven-or sutured-into the fabric of the film.” Rosalind Krauss, “...And Then Turn Away? An Essay on James Coleman” *October* 81, no. 5 (1997): 22.
- <sup>48</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), 3 and 33.

<sup>49</sup> Kara Walker, quoted in Yasmil Raymond, “Maladies of Power” in *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 358. Quote taken from Walker’s introductory panel to her 2006 solo exhibition *Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<sup>50</sup> Friedrich Kittler, “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,” trans. Dorothea von Mücke, *October* 41, (Summer 1987), 111.

<sup>51</sup> Friedrich Kittler, “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,” trans. Dorothea von Mücke, *October* 41, (Summer 1987), 110.

<sup>52</sup> Marianne Hirsch, “Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer. (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1999), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Arlene Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *PMLA* 123, no.5 (October 2009): 1650.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Reid Pharr, “Black Girl Lost,” in *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 37.

<sup>55</sup> Arlene Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *PMLA* 123, no.5 (October 2009):1669.

<sup>56</sup> Arlene Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *PMLA* 123, no.5 (October 2009): 1656-66.

<sup>57</sup> Walker once described the Negress, a character in her work that is symbol of Black womanhood as “young pretty black girl whose function is to be a receptacle: she’s a black hole, a space defined by things sucked into her, a ‘nigger cunt,’ a scent, an ass, a complication.” Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>58</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansberg NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 110-113.

<sup>59</sup> A classic example is Griselda Pollock, “Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: an Introduction,” in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 1-17.

## CHAPTER III

### REDEFINING NOTIONS OF BLACKNESS

Color, for anyone who uses it, or is used by it, is a most complex, calculated, and dangerous phenomenon.

-James Baldwin

1997 was a life-changing year for Kara Walker. After becoming the youngest artist ever awarded a MacArthur “genius” grant and giving birth to her daughter, she became the focus of an ideological attack by a community that curator Thelma Golden has referred to as the “black thought police.”<sup>1</sup> Artist Betye Saar, whose work also deals with the images of racist stereotypes, initiated a letter writing campaign that circulated her arguments against Walker to over two hundred artists, politicians, and the MacArthur Foundation. Saar’s remarks were re-printed in the *International Review of African American Arts*, along with an anonymous author’s commentary in support of Saar’s sentiment.<sup>2</sup> The criticism of Walker continued in 1999, at the Detroit Institute of the Arts, when the museum’s advisory group, the Friends of African and African American Art, removed one of her works from an exhibition. Artist Howardena Pindell has been another of Walker’s most outspoken critics, publishing two volumes of essays condemning Walker’s work for being regressive and racist.<sup>3</sup>

While much of the furor of the debate has died down since the turn of the millennium, the controversy has become the standard opening for essays on Walker. At its core, the criticism of Walker’s work is about images of blackness, and ways of representing black people. In the last section, I explored how Walker’s distinctive use of obsolete mediums serves to undermine the value of historical truth or memory. This rejection of historical truth shapes the way Walker approaches issues of black identity

and culture. Because the political controversy over Walker's has been written about extensively, this section takes a historiographic approach, examining the way Walker's work relates to contested notions of blackness and identity that were elaborated in African American critical writing in the 1980s and nineties. Beginning with a close reading of Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell's arguments against Walker, I probe the reasons for their rejection of Walker's artwork. Next, I examine the rejection of a positive, unified concept of blackness or black culture by authors such as Trey Ellis and Kendall Thomas and the relevance of this development in Walker's artwork. The writing of scholars such as Robert Hobbs, Thelma Golden, and Robert-Reid Pharr provides a range of critical approaches to understanding Walker's art historical significance.

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Following her letter writing campaign, the specifics of Betye Saar's argument against Walker became more widely accessible through their publication in an article in the *International Review of African American Arts* titled "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes."<sup>4</sup> Saar emphasized the injustice of Walker's early success:

How do young persons just a few years out of school get a show at a major museum? The whole arts establishment picked their work up and put it at the head of the class. This is the danger, not the artists themselves. This is like closet racism. It relieves them of the responsibility to show other artists. Here we are at the end of the millennium seeing work that is derogatory and racist.<sup>5</sup>

For Saar, Walker and her peers function as token black artists, whose statements about race are selected by the white establishment to represent the entirety of contemporary black art. Saar is suggesting that the problem is not so much with Walker as with a contemporary art world that primarily promotes work focusing on racist stereotypes and negative imagery. Lumping Walker in with what she sees as a larger

problem in African American culture, she writes “The trend today is to be as nasty as you want to be: TV, Rodman, rap. The goal is to be rich and famous. There is no personal integrity.”<sup>6</sup> Suggesting that this type of work is apolitical, Saar implies that these young black artists seek only shock value, and the “danger” arises when the art establishment validates their work as meaningful.

Saar distinguishes her own uses of racist stereotypes, the Mammy stereotype in particular, as transforming a negative black image into a positive one (fig. 23). In her famous 1972 assemblage piece, “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima,” she sought to empower the stereotype by depicting “the domestic worker as both a caregiver and a warrior.”<sup>7</sup> Arming Aunt Jemima with a rifle reclaimed the figure through the visual iconography of the Black Power movement, which utilized militancy as a tool for social empowerment, protection, and self-defense. For Saar, a negative black image was transformed into a positive one by imbuing it with strength and rebelliousness.

Howardena Pindell, another artist of Saar’s generation, has also been an outspoken critic of Walker’s work. Pindell is best known for her 1980 video piece *Free, White, and 21*, in which she calmly relates personal stories of the enforced silence and invisibility of being a black woman (fig. 24). The scenes are interspersed with images of Pindell in white makeup and a blonde wig, hurling insults at herself for being ungrateful, churlish, and too willing to hold on to old grudges. Like Saar, Pindell’s work contains a clear message about racial politics, and focuses on the importance of combatting white racism.

In 1997 Pindell delivered a talk at the Johannesburg Biennial called “Diaspora/Realities/Strategies,” in which she declared, “What is troubling and

complicates the matter is that Walker's words in published interviews mock African Americans and Africans... She has said things such as 'All black people in America want to be slaves a little bit.'... Walker consciously or unconsciously seems to be catering to the bestial fantasies about blacks created by white supremacy and racism."<sup>8</sup>

Pindell first published this paper in 2002 in the feminist journal *n.Paradoxa*, and then again in her 2009 book *Kara Walker—NO, Kara Walker—YES, Kara Walker—?*<sup>9</sup> By taking Walker's quote out of context, Pindell simplifies its effect to be shocking, insulting, and generalizing. Strangely, in the published version Pindell's citation for this quote directs us to an interview with art critic Jerry Saltz, in which Saltz cites the slave quote, and asks Walker if she actually said it.<sup>10</sup> Walker replies:

That sounds like Kara Walker. That didn't go over too well with a couple of people in Atlanta. I think the rest of that quote went something like, 'It gives people heaping teaspoons of dignity and pride.' I guess slavery is the ultimate oppression. To be a slave runs along the lines of being a better masochist and knowing how to put up with things. Its that strength that entitles you to brace yourself for—I don't know—finding that thing that helped your grandmother or great grandmother get through it all; made her such a strong person. Without that sense of oppression, ironically, it seems difficult to progress.<sup>11</sup>

In this statement Walker suggests that slavery is symbolic of a larger set of power relations in which black people are always positioned as victims. Pindell simplifies Walker's statements about slavery in order to emphasize the outright racism of Walker's art. For Walker, on the other hand, a continual focus on black oppression in African American art and culture has functioned dually as both a tool for progress and an ideological trap.

Walker's attention to the ignoble aspects of slavery makes her work especially challenging to a more conservative black audience. Scholar Robert Hobbs identifies Walker's ability to approach slavery without reverence as reflective of her "post-*Roots*"

generation.<sup>12</sup> Hobbs discusses the 1977 television mini-series *Roots* as a pivotal moment for the construction of contemporary Black identity and its relation to slavery. *Roots* was based on the 1976 novel by Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, and tells the story of Kunta Kinte, an eighteenth century African captured by slave traders and brought to the United States. The novel follows Kunta Kinte's life, tracing his lineage through his descendants to Haley. *Roots* was a cultural sensation, spending forty-six weeks on The New York Times Bestseller list.<sup>13</sup> *Roots* reached an even wider audience when it was made into an Emmy-award winning television mini-series.

For Hobbs, “post-Roots African Americans inadvertently began to idealize the legacy of resiliency and strength they believed themselves to have inherited from their enslaved forebears.” Hobbs asserts, “although this acceptance was a distinct gain, it had the unmistakable drawback of glorifying slavery as a sacred myth and essential rite of passage.”<sup>14</sup> Remembering her childhood response to *Roots*, Walker explains, “I don't remember much of the story, but I know it was very important, we all watched it. Everyone came into school—it was fourth grade—and started making fun of it. So it became just another joke.”<sup>15</sup>

Walker's work presents the antebellum era in manner that emphasizes its perversity and violence without recourse to sentimentality. For example, in her 1997 panoramic installation *Slavery! Slavery!*, the scene presented is a carnivalesque menagerie of cavorting slaves, whose senseless acts of violence and sex appear in the round like a grand ballet (fig. 3). The full title of the work: *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or “Life at ‘Ol’ Virginny’s Hole’ (sketches from Plantation Life)” See the Peculiar Institution as*

*never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her cause* likewise makes a mockery and a spectacle of the institution of slavery.

For Walker, romanticizing the struggle of African Americans' past elides the deeply problematic legacy slavery still holds for contemporary black identities. When she said, "All black people want to be slaves a little bit," Walker was not accusing all African Americans of masochism; she was critiquing the formulation of African American history that posits slavery as a noble past and source of strength. By discarding all inhibitions about the sanctioned meaning of slavery, Walker is able to mine the painful and emotional depths of a history we have not yet come to terms with.

Following the Civil Rights Movement, Walker was not the only artist breaking taboos with her depiction of slavery. Literary scholar Arlene Keizer points out that Walker's treatment of slavery has much in common with the work of numerous African American women whose writings began to appear in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Writers like Gayl Jones, Carolivia Herron, Alice Randall, and Octavia Butler have all engaged slavery as theme for exploring the subjectivity of the sexually subjugated African American Woman. While these writers have not received the mass exposure of Walker's work, their writing paved the way for Walker's expression of the "affective legacy of extended relationships of sexual domination."<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the full context of Walker's statements about "all black people wanting to be slaves," in the same passage Walker vaguely identifies the audiences most outraged by her attitude as "some people in Atlanta." Walker received her BFA at the

Atlanta College of Art, and in other interviews has expanded on her particular antipathy for the conservative black art community there. In 1998 she said:

You know, in Atlanta there's a strong middle-class black community that goes to art shows that feature work made mostly by black artists. But art in that community has a totally different function than what happens say in the Museum of Modern Art or the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. For this community in Atlanta, the exhibition event is very much a social event---one that has more of a political edge than you find with a New York exhibition... What I particularly dislike about it is that the art in [these shows] goes out of its way to preach to the converted. But that's what very conservative art audiences anticipate. They wouldn't want to see anything that might rile them up, or reveal some emotions or memories that are deeply buried in their unconscious.

Walker's assessment of the Atlanta art community alludes to her frustration with the stagnation of black art. The paradoxical premise of her argument is that the African American focus on politically progressive work has eliminated their ability to progress. Walker believes that the African American art community in Atlanta's approach to politically progressive work is too narrowly focused on the Civil Rights Era concept of racial uplift. Pindell and Saar's exhortations to ban Walker and her peers' use of negative black imagery is in line with the conservative attitude that African American art must be politically empowering.

The most compelling part of Pindell's argument is that racist structure of the art world privileges artists presenting negative images of blackness over those presenting positive ones. To support this claim, Pindell emphasizes that many of Walker's major collectors are white, as are many of her academic and curatorial supporters.<sup>17</sup> By presenting Walker as a pawn of the white art establishment, Pindell supports her larger argument about the unfair state of the art world for African American artists. In her essay on Walker, she follows the criticism of Walker with an array of disheartening statistics about the number of black artists featured in museums and galleries. Pindell is correct in

that the art world is still largely skewed towards white male artists. Yet Walker's success is more likely indicative of the fascinating and original content of her work, not its outright racism.

Pindell's image of Walker as a servant to the white elite establishment participates in its own brand of stereotyping. Walker becomes a scapegoat in Pindell's writing, and is used repeatedly as a symbol of the degradation of black culture. As Walker has commented: "Eventually, I understood that my attackers had turned me into a fiction; they were vilifying me for making caricatures of blackness by doing the same thing to me. They were, in effect, rewriting the narrative of my Negress character and turning her into a whore. That irony got lost in all the noise."<sup>18</sup>

The stagnation of black art in Atlanta that frustrated Walker had a similar effect on many other black artists. Before Walker's generation of 1990s artists, novelist Trey Ellis celebrated the new possibilities of black art in his influential 1989 essay "The New Black Aesthetic." Citing examples of creative black intellectuals including the filmmaker Spike Lee, the conceptual artist David Hammons, and the curator Kellie Jones, Ellis describes the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) as a group of "thriving hybrids."<sup>19</sup> He attributes this development to what he calls "cultural mulattoes," black artists with the ability to engage with and draw from both white and black culture.

Ellis attributes the freedom of the NBA to the possibilities opened by the Civil Rights Movement, as well as frustration with the limitations of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 70s. On a material level, the artistic boom of the NBA was made possible by a second generation of middle class blacks, a newly expanded population of

college graduates who were the children of college graduates. As Ellis explains, “We now feel secure enough to attend art school instead of medical school.”<sup>20</sup>

Citing critic Greg Tate’s term “post-liberated aesthetic,” Ellis explains that being raised on “black children’s books, *Roots* parties, *For Colored Girls*... theater excursions, and the nationalist Christmastide holiday of Kwanzaa” provided a foundational appreciation of black culture. This foundation freed the NBA artists from the need to present exclusively positive black images and allowed them to parody the Black Nationalist movement. While Ellis’s essay is optimistic and celebratory about this largely bourgeois movement, he emphasizes that the NBA artists are still political, but in a different way. This new form of politics reflects a different cultural reaction to racism, “the new black artists [are not] shocked by the persistence of racism as were those of the Harlem Renaissance, nor are we preoccupied with it as were those of the Black Arts Movement. For us, racism is a hard and little-changing constant that neither surprises nor enrages.”

Another more directly political reason for black artists and intellectuals to reject the rhetoric of the Black Nationalist and Black Power movements in the 1980s and 1990s has to do with the idea of cultural authenticity. Arguing against the African American impulse to establish “true blackness,” legal scholar Kendall Thomas asserts: “In the name of imagined unity, the politics of racial authenticity has... obscured the inflection of, and the antagonisms *within*, racial identity produced by differences of ethnicity, class, gender, religion, sexuality, and the like.”<sup>21</sup> In the 1980s and early 1990s, it became clear to Thomas and others that homophobia and sexism were central to the rhetoric of black liberation. For Thomas, this bigotry was naturalized by the “jargon of racial authenticity,”

passed down from the 1960s and 70s, that foregrounded strong black masculinity as the pathway to racial liberation. Citing numerous examples of the negligence of black leaders on the issue of homophobia throughout the 1980s and 90s, Thomas argues that the discourse of “authentic black identity” promoted for the sake of black liberation “has been increasingly accompanied by an authoritarian effort to impose its normative vision.”<sup>22</sup> While Thomas’s essay wasn’t published until 1996, most of the theoretical groundwork for this type of critique was laid in the eighties and early nineties, so that by the time Kara Walker was finishing graduate school in the mid-nineties, the concept of a unified or authentic black identity had lost much of its cultural currency.

Arguments like Betye Saar’s plea for positive black images operate on the premise that blackness is a definable entity to be celebrated. Yet in an era when the idea of black authenticity has been discredited, the question of a positive image of blackness becomes much more complex. In the text on one of her drawings Walker wrote:

The consistent use of the black body is to stand in for the (a) Unnamed, (Vulgar), illicit sexuality, low class, dirty humor, cannibalism, poverty, voodoo, insanity, death, envy: (b) Unnameable (Sublime), like pity, remorse, absolute oppressives and its we-shall-overcomeness, can-dance, can-do pride and all. Looks better in black, perceived as a contrast to (a).<sup>23</sup>

With this text, Walker sets up an opposition between negative black images (a) and positive black images (b), and then equalizes them. In Walker’s work, no matter the positive or negative connotations of images, they are equally divorced from the reality of black subjects, and thus equally suspect. Her project is not to address what blackness is, but to point to the impossibility of defining blackness outside the images our culture produces.

In Walker's early installations, like *Gone*, the questioning of black essentialism is evident in the formal characteristics of her technique (fig 1). The blackness of the silhouettes, perhaps their simplest quality, creates an extraordinarily complex examination of racial representation. While nineteenth century silhouettists saw the medium as expressing an internal essence, from a formal perspective the silhouette functions as an evacuation of a person's interior, representing only the outline of their form. In this way, the silhouette can be seen as a black hole, a negative space, an absence.

Regardless of their race, the visual relation between black and white forms all the characters in Walker's silhouettes. All the figures in Walker's tableaux are cut from black paper, so that the only evidence she provides for determining the racial identity of the figures are socially constructed signifiers of racial identity. Some of these signifiers seem innocuous, such as particularities of antebellum dress or hairstyle, while others, such as exaggerated lips, are derived from the realms of racist caricature, the minstrel show and their far-reaching visual legacy.

Prolonged contemplation reveals the instability of this structure for attributing identity. For example, the Southern belle figure on the left of the scene in *Gone* could just as easily be the "Negress" of the installation's title. The viewers' ability to identify the Negress draws attention to the lasting currency of ubiquitous racial stereotypes and implicates the viewer's complicity within this visual system. On a fundamental level, Walker's paradoxical use of black paper to represent multiple skin colors exposes the color-based conception of race to be illusory and reductive.<sup>24</sup> By using the medium of silhouette to flatten race, Walker makes it re-emerge as infinitely complex and multi-dimensional. For Walker, racial identity is defined through the matrix of popular

imagery, negating the possibility of a black identity separate from the pervasive white definition of black identity. Yet despite her assertion of the inherent falsehood of black identity in the popular imagination, Walker's work also suggests the impossibility of escaping this falsehood.

Scholar Robert Reid-Pharr examines Walker's interest in the social construction of racial identity. In his essay for the exhibition catalog *Pictures From Another Time* Reid-Pharr dismisses the controversy over Walker's work as dated for its fixation on the use of negative stereotyping.<sup>25</sup> Summarizing the debate he writes:

Walker operated for a time in the mid- and late nineties as a sort of barometer of one's aesthetic and ethical preferences. If you liked her, then you were thought to be a member of the younger generation, fascinated by the intricacies of postmodern theory... If you disliked Walker, you were considered (dare I say it?) 'Old School.' You marked yourself as part of an aging generation bent upon the policing of aesthetic production, particularly Black American artistic production.<sup>26</sup>

Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell both protested and reinforce this framework. Pindell particularly takes offense to the suggestion that it is only "older" artists that criticize Walker, and attributes this to a general disrespect for the opinions of older African American women. Whether or not their reasoning is generational, it is clear that the source of Saar and Pindell's anger is Walker's use of negative stereotypes.

In Reid-Pharr's opinion, this focus on negative stereotypes misses the point of Walker's work entirely. Walker's stated artistic intentions, as well as the subtleties of the works themselves, clarify that Walker's representation of black history is strategically indirect. Reid-Pharr asserts that the artist's real focus is "neither the history of American race relations nor the physical and psychological damage that has been visited upon

(Black) American people, but instead the very discursive and aesthetic field that would allow the confusions surrounding her work to become so prominent.”<sup>27</sup> As Reid-Pharr suggests, the sphere of Walker’s interest is not history but racial discourse. Her work does not propose reality or attempt to re-tell history. Instead, Walker’s work deconstructs the tropes of American history and racial politics in order to illuminate the embedded ideologies concealed within.

In a 2007 interview, in response to a question about Betye Saar’s criticism, Walker said,

I’m not making work about reality... I am making work about images, I am making work about fictions that have been handed down to me, and I am interested in these fictions because I am an artist, and any sort of attempt at getting at the truth of a thing, you kind of have to wade through the levels of fictions, and that’s where the work is coming from.<sup>28</sup>

Walker’s representation of race and history is actually a representation of the *representation* of race and history. Her work is not about slavery or the nineteenth century, but about the legacy that era has had in American visual culture, and the fundamental impact that legacy has on the construction of black subjects today.<sup>29</sup>

Walker’s statements about her intentions, her process, and her source materials provide significant insights about the artist’s approach to African-American history. Walker is an avid researcher of art history, citing *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, and *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory* (an anthology of paintings from and about the Civil War) as invaluable references for her imagery.<sup>30</sup> Literature is an equally important source, and the titles of her works often reference the narrative she is examining.

Walker is fond of ironic pairings in her source material that work together for a subversive effect. For example, *Gone* combines references to Margaret Mitchell’s 1936

romantic epic *Gone with the Wind* while *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* references Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (fig 1 & 2). Slave narratives, such as Harriet Jacob's 1861 memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, also play an important role, often serving as a source for appropriated language for titles or text works.<sup>31</sup>

In Walker's work, the use of art historical and literary material becomes a lens through which to examine her own, personal, contemporary experience. Her interest is in the way contemporary black subjects are formed by the images of them produced throughout a broad swath of American culture. Yet she also emphasizes the personal nature of her inquiry by linking her observations to what she describes as her "overzealous imagination interfering in the basic facts of history."<sup>32</sup>

Walker describes her project as "about the sincere attempt to write *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and winding up with *Mandingo* instead. A collusion of fact and fiction that has informed me probably since day one."<sup>33</sup> This statement points to the slipperiness of historical representation, and Walker's intentional perversion of the tropes of slavery. Jacobs's memoir *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was the first text published to describe the sexual abuse endured by female slaves at the hands of their masters. While it makes use of melodrama and the format of romantic novels, Jacobs sought to exculpate black women from accusations of promiscuity and raise awareness of the brutality and amorality of slavery. *Mandingo*, on the other hand is a 1957 novel about a plantation in antebellum Alabama, adapted as a racy Blaxploitation film in 1975, presenting a lurid plot about sexual relationships between slaves and masters, and a fetishizing, pornographic presentation of cruelty to slaves (fig 25). By conflating racist

literary materials and images with abolitionist non-fiction works like *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Walker posits all literary accounts of slavery as equally fictional, equally fantastic, and equally problematic.<sup>34</sup>

Recently, cultural critics such as Touré have identified Kara Walker as a member of the Post-Black art movement.<sup>35</sup> Curator Thelma Golden, current director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, claims to have coined the term Post-Black in conversation with the artist Glenn Ligon. They developed Post-Black jokingly, while discussing how to unify the artists in a 2001 exhibition called *Freestyle*, curated by Golden. Kara Walker's work was not included in the show, but Golden lists her in the introduction among the generation of "empowered" artists who "reinvented the debate on culture and identity in contemporary art and informed my practice as a curator concerned with these issues," setting the stage for a new era of Post-Black contemporary art.<sup>36</sup> In the introduction to the catalogue, Golden writes:

Post-black was a shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. For me to approach a conversation about 'black art' ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time...It was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions.<sup>37</sup>

The "ideological and chronological dimensions" Golden refers to are those embodied in the conflict between Walker and the earlier generation of black artists. As Golden suggests, the issues most relevant to black artists in the 1960s and 70s are less so to artists in the 1990s, when racism was still endemic, but in a more covert way. While Pindell criticized Walker and her peers for their negative black images, Walker's work rejects the effectiveness of positive black images. I use the word positive to evoke both senses of the

word positive, positive as good and positive as empirically knowable. What unites the Post-Black generation is their rejection of the feasibility of positive black images in both these senses.

For Golden, Post-Black refers to the generation of artists rejecting a restrictive definition of black art, while still engaged with issues of race and black identity. In the *Freestyle* catalog, Golden says Post-Black “was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested in redefining notions of blackness.”<sup>38</sup> Golden’s description of this new genre of art was strikingly similar to the definition of the New Black Aesthetic defined by Trey Ellis.

The term post-black has its obvious downsides, and Golden herself described it as “an absurd use of language.”<sup>39</sup> In its construction, the idea of post-black implicitly groups all black art and artists together, dismissing them as essentialist. In his critique of post-black scholarship, Derek Conrad Murray asserts: “It should be asked if blackness is inherently synonymous with racial essentialism? Does it hold the potential to produce any other meaning?”<sup>40</sup> Murray is concerned that too much allegiance to the tenets of post-black art limits our ability to draw interesting and complex cultural understanding from the work of non-white artists.

The danger of post-black is that it loses much of the critique black and feminist artists made in the 1970s about Eurocentrism in the contemporary art world. For example, in *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, Darby English attempts to escape the trap of reading black artists as “black artists” by discussing Walker’s work in relation to the tradition of European landscape painting. English’s chapter on Glenn

Ligon reads his conceptually loaded textual paintings in the framework of American Abstract expressionism.<sup>41</sup> Thus his well-intentioned attempts at post-black art history reinscribe these artist's within a Euro-centric model of art history.<sup>42</sup>

While Reid-Pharr is right to emphasize the discursive aspect of Walker's approach to blackness, her work is certainly not dispassionate in its examination of racist imagery. Part of what makes Walker's art so painful is its unflinching attention to the way negative images of blackness affect contemporary black subjects. Another element of Walker's work that has made her so offensive to critics like Saar and Pindell is the way she eroticizes the psychological effects of racism. For example, in a textual drawing from the 1997 series *Do you like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*,

Walker writes:

in my first Racialized Sex fantasy Me and an (unnamed) Black girlfriend decide to "Bring Down" David Duke the former Klansman and almost Louisiana Senator in SCANDAL! Yes, he's ~~seduced~~ 'RAPED' by two Black girls And then tied, humiliated, photographed, etc. Somehow it was more exciting then- Doesn't seem So unlikely now- But that I would fuck an Avowed RACIST-not at all unusual. Since all I want is to Be loved by you And to Share all that deep contradictory love I possess. Make myself your Slave girl so you will make yourself my equal- if only for a minute. (Do I lower myself onto you? Do you raise yourself up to me?) or neuter? Or Nought (fig 26)

The voice in Walker's text works frequently expresses these types of racialized fantasies, in which the subject's internalized racism has been transformed into masochistic desires.

The theme of black subjectivity in Walker's work has been examined through theoretical frameworks derived from psychoanalysis. One of the most useful approaches relates Walker's project to the writing of black cultural theorist Franz Fanon. One of Fanon's most important contributions was his analysis of the psychological impact of

racial stereotypes. In his 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* (published in English in 1967), Fanon reworked the Lacanian concept of the “mirror stage” in order to clarify the process of black subject formation.<sup>43</sup> In Lacan’s 1936 essay “The Mirror stage as formative of the I,” he proposes that a human child only begins to perceive himself as a unique individual when he recognizes his own image in the mirror as distinctly other from those around him. For Fanon, this is translated into the black child’s experience of recognizing his own image as distinctly other, not only from white people, but from the stereotypical images of black people presented in the media. As Hobbs describes it, “ideology works through mass-media publications and encourages blacks to become blank screens for the projection of white racist stereotypes. Initially, they internalize white supremacist views by identifying with them; only later, and very rarely so, do they realize that their complicity results in estrangement from themselves.”

For Fanon, this realization results in a de-centering of black subjectivity, a fragmentation of Self. At a lecture at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2000, Walker alluded to Fanon’s theory of stereotypes, stating, “When stereotypes attempt to take control of their own bodies, they can only do what they are made of, and they are made of the pathological attitudes of the Old South. Therefore, the racist stereotypes occurring in my art can only partake of psychotic activities.” It is clear this statement applies to both her black and white stereotypical characters, all of which mirror the worst aspects of their stereotypical roles.<sup>44</sup> The hysterical, violent, and sexual activities of the characters in Walker’s artworks reflect the tropes of racist stereotypes taken to an extreme level.

In an essay on Walker's formulation of race relations in her work, Anne Wagner draws attention to the autobiographical format of Fanon's writing. Fanon's book has a first person narrator, which Wagner characterizes as a "vehicle for insistent stagings of what is a historically specific and simultaneously mutable black male self." In this way, as Fanon explores his theory of black subjectivity, he implicitly includes himself in the neuroses he is diagnosing and attempting to cure. Wagner explains that while Fanon ends the book with such triumphant declarations as "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny...My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values," he makes it clear that he cannot achieve this freedom without conjuring the specters or shadows of black history.

In Fanon's writing, this ambivalence about representing the race is a key psychological insight. For Fanon, the black intellectual (or artist, or writer, etc), is caught between wanting to understand and express the construct of blackness, while also wanting to be free of it. Much of Walker's work expresses similar sentiments. In a 2011 interview she explained,

When I started making my real work I knew I was stepping into an arena that I didn't want to get stuck in. I didn't want to take on all the baggage that goes with being a Black Artist: I didn't want to have to uphold the race. Recently, I've been reexamining the New Negro movement of the '20s, in which Alain Locke and others admonished black artists to make responsible, respectable work and to proclaim our past and struggles. The art associated with black liberation movements tends to be propagandistic in tone and is often redundant—the subject matter can't expand and complicate and the art doesn't either.<sup>45</sup>

Despite Walker's rejection of the call by the African American community to "uphold the race," her work manifests a clearly political engagement with the representation of blackness in America. This political engagement entails drawing attention to the way racist ideologies shape the most banal of human interactions from all angles. Yet it also

entails a rejection of the expectations of black artists. Paradoxically, her work is political in its refusal to be uniformly or comfortably progressive.

There is a tension in Fanon's writing between the fragmented black subject he identifies and the defiant "I" who rejects definition by the dehumanizing white media.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, Walker continually inserts herself as both protagonist and author in the ecstatic, abject narrative of her scenes. Exploring the fragmentation of identity, the artist has repeatedly identified herself with the Negress of her titles. The Negress represents the ambivalence of the black artist, who is both empowered and enslaved by cultural expectations.

Discussing Walker's work with her mother, Alison Saar tried to explain that Walker's work asserted the "subtle and persistent" nature of racism. Betye Saar protested, "a lot of people don't interpret the imagery in this way and the artist's intent should not have to be explained because 'a picture is worth a thousand words.'"<sup>47</sup> It is a matter of opinion whether or not an artist's intent should *need* to be explained, but Walker has invested substantial energy in explaining the motivations of her work. In the final section of my thesis, I examine how the performative strategies of Walker's public persona serves as a complement to her artwork, as another level of clarifying her work's meaning and political agenda.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act. Kara Walker's Vision," in *Kara Walker: The Black Road*, (Malaga: CAC Malaga, 2008), 117.

<sup>2</sup> [Juliette Bowles Harris], "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *The International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3, (1997): 2-16.

<sup>3</sup> Howardena Pindell, *Kara Walker-No, Kara Walker-Yes, Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009) and Howardena Pindell, *Kara Walker: Evasion, Denial, Privelege [Sic]*. (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> [Juliette Bowles Harris], “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 3-16.

<sup>5</sup> Betye Saar quoted in [Juliette Bowles Harris], “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 4.

<sup>6</sup> Betye Saar quoted in [Juliette Bowles Harris], “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 6.

<sup>7</sup> Betye Saar, quoted in [Juliette Bowles Harris], “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Howardena Pindell, *Kara Walker-No, Kara Walker-Yes, Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009), 60-61.

<sup>9</sup> Howardena Pindell, “Diaspora/Realities/Strategies” *n.Paradoxa* online issue 7 (July 1998), 12-26 (pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Howardena Pindell, *Kara Walker-No, Kara Walker-Yes, Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009), 60-61.

<sup>11</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Kara Walker; Ill-Will and Desire,” *Flash Art* no. 129 (Nov/Dec 1996): 86.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Corris & Robert Hobbs, “Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker,” *Art History* 26, no. 3 (June 2003): 430.

<sup>13</sup> “Best Seller List” *New York Times*. (Nov. 1976). It is interesting to note that *Roots* was placed in the “Nonfiction” section of the list, and that Haley emphasized his research into the actual genealogy of his family as source material for the novel. However, later scholars questioned the authenticity of Haley’s story, and even friends of Haley, such as the prominent African American literary scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. asserted that *Roots* was a “work of the imagination.” Gates Jr. is interviewed in Alex Beam, “The Prize Fight over Alex Haley’s Tangled Roots,” *Boston Globe* (October 30, 1998), 53.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Corris & Robert Hobbs, “Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker,” *Art History* 26, no. 3 (June 2003): 430.

<sup>15</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Kara Walker; Ill-Will and Desire,” *Flash Art* no. 129 (Nov/Dec 1996): 84.

<sup>16</sup> Arlene Keizer, “Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory,” *PMLA* 123, no.5 (October 2009): 1656.

- <sup>17</sup> Peter Norton and his family, who commissioned Walker's artist's book *Freedom: A Fable: A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times* for their annual Christmas gift, are a notable example.
- <sup>18</sup> "In the Studio: Kara Walker with Steel Stillman," *Art in America* (May 2011), 92.
- <sup>19</sup> Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* no. 38, (Winter 1989), 242.
- <sup>20</sup> Trey Ellis, "The New Black Aesthetic," *Callaloo* no. 38, (Winter 1989), 237.
- <sup>21</sup> Kendall Thomas, "'Ain't Nothin like the Real Thing': Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity" in *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain* ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 129.
- <sup>22</sup> Kendall Thomas, "'Ain't Nothin like the Real Thing': Black Masculinity, Gay Sexuality, and the Jargon of Authenticity" in *The House that Race Built: Black Americans, U.S. Terrain* ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 129.
- <sup>23</sup> Walker describes this drawing in Jerry Saltz, "Kara Walker; Ill-Will and Desire," *Flash Art* no. 129 (Nov/Dec 1996): 86.
- <sup>24</sup> Much more complex writing has been done on the meaning and significance of black and white in Walker's work, for a more in depth discussion, Anne Wagner, "The Black-White Relation" in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (New York: MIT Press, 2003),
- <sup>25</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost" in in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 27.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost" in in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 27.
- <sup>27</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost" in in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 28.
- <sup>28</sup> Kara Walker, interview by Farai Chideya, *Pop & Politics*, NPR, March 7, 2008 quoted in Howardena Pindell, *Kara Walker-No, Kara Walker-Yes, Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009), viii.
- <sup>29</sup> Robert Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost" in in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 28.

<sup>30</sup> David Bindman, Henry Louis Gates, and Karen C. Dalton. *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010)  
Harold Holzer and Mark E. Neely, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: The Civil War in Art* (New York: Orion Books, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Golden in *Pictures from Another Time*, 46-47.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Robert Reid-Pharr, “Black Girl Lost” in in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Robert Reid-Pharr, “Black Girl Lost” in in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 32.

<sup>34</sup> Shaw emphasizes the “validating role that editors and amanuenses played in the creation and promotion of nineteenth century slave narratives,” and thus the mediating power white abolitionists had on their content. For a fuller discussion of the controversy over the authenticity of slave narratives, see Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 141-2.

<sup>35</sup> Touré, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What it Means to Be Black Now*, (New York: Free Press, A Division of Simon & Schuster, 2011), 33-38.

<sup>36</sup> Thelma Golden and Hamza Walker, *Freestyle* (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

<sup>37</sup> Thelma Golden and Hamza Walker, *Freestyle* (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

<sup>38</sup> Thelma Golden and Hamza Walker, *Freestyle* (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

<sup>39</sup> Thelma Golden and Hamza Walker, *Freestyle* (New York, NY: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Derek Conrad Murray, “Post Post-Black: Some Politically Incorrect Thoughts on the Reception and Contemplation of African American Art,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 4 (Winter, 2007), 113.

<sup>41</sup> Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010).

<sup>42</sup> Derek Conrad Murray, “Post Post-Black: Some Politically Incorrect Thoughts on the Reception and Contemplation of African American Art,” *Art Journal* 66, no. 4 (Winter, 2007), 114.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Corris & Robert Hobbs, "Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker," *Art History* 26, no. 3 (June 2003): 433.

<sup>44</sup> Michael Corris & Robert Hobbs, "Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker," *Art History* 26, no. 3 (June 2003): 431-8.

<sup>45</sup> "In the Studio: Kara Walker with Steel Stillman," *Art in America*, (May 2011).

<sup>46</sup> Anne Wagner, "The Black-White Relation" in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (New York: MIT Press, 2003), 98-100.

<sup>47</sup> Betye Saar quoted in [Juliette Bowles Harris], "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 4.

**CHAPTER IV**  
**“THE GREAT NEGRO HEROINE”:**  
**REPRESENTING THE SELF AS OTHER**

Since the beginning of her career, Walker has strategically blurred the boundaries between her public persona and the black female characters in her work. In the introduction to their anthology, *Interfaces: Women / Autobiography / Image / Performance*, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith argue that women’s self-representation can be productively read as a specific and significant genre of 20<sup>th</sup> century art. Watson and Smith theorize women’s self-representation as “a performative act, never transparent, that constitutes subjectivity.”<sup>1</sup> Self-representation and performativity are closely linked: by performing her identity, an artist gains control over her own image. A performative identity is thus an empowered identity.

Watson and Smith’s framework for analyzing women’s autobiographical art draws on the explosion of performance theory in the fields of gender and queer studies in the 1990s.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, E. Patrick Johnson’s book *Appropriating Blackness*, explores artistic performance in the interface between blackness and performativity. For Johnson, a path to escaping the troubling realm of racial authenticity is exploring blackness as a performed identity. By examining Walker’s artistic persona as a performative construct rather than a transparent reflection of her psyche, it becomes clear that the artist uses autobiographical narrative to destabilize coherent notions of identity.

Walker’s work is not only about larger concepts of African American identity and politics, her practice mines the complex and problematic construction of the African

American female artist without recourse to sentimentality or resolution. Her work is political and allegorical, but in the feminist tradition, it is also personal. By incorporating personal reflection into her meditations on the discursive nature of black identity, Walker seeks (and fails) to locate a singular identity for herself within it. Walker presents herself in a continual process of self-creation and self-destruction that simultaneously asserts and undermines her artistic persona.

Descriptions of Walker's artwork almost invariably include a narrative of the artist's life that she subtly transformed into auto-fiction by transposing it into the historical realm of her artwork. *Auto-fiction* is a term used in literary criticism to refer to a form of fictionalized autobiography, capturing the artful way Walker encourages confusion between her Self and her work.<sup>3</sup> Walker frames her adolescence and artistic development as a metaphorical slave narrative. As Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw describes it, based on conversations with the artist, "It is a narrative that began in childhood, when she was taken from the relative racial freedom of northern California to the segregated world of suburban Atlanta, before gaining her artistic freedom by 'escaping North' to graduate school in Providence."<sup>4</sup> For Walker, the move to Atlanta was a brutal awakening to the relevance of racial history and the legacy of slavery to her identity; she calls this transition "the culture shock that defines my life."<sup>5</sup>

In discussions of the influence of this period on her racial outlook, Walker emphasizes the importance of her "escape" to the North as a prerequisite for speaking about these issues. As Walker has said: "I often compare my method of working to that of a well meaning freed woman in a Northern state who is attempting to delineate the

horrors of Southern slavery but with next to no resources, other than some paper and a pen knife and some people she'd like to kill."<sup>6</sup> Walker repeats this insight in different contexts while discussing her work, making it one of the tropes of her auto-fiction. In the nineteenth century, an author's location in the North was a necessary condition for writing a slave narrative. Positioning herself as a freed-woman in the North, Walker implies that her process requires distance from the horrific experiences of the South and that the scenes she depicts are unspeakable from within.

In an interview with Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, Walker explained her artistic inspiration as stemming from psychological self-exploration.

When I began graduate study at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design] I was coming out of a period where I was experimenting socially and theoretically with the 'psychosexual Legacy' of southern racism [if you will] but this experimentation did not take on any clear visual form...<sup>7</sup>

Speaking of this period of her life in other interviews, Walker has clarified that these experiments involved sexual relationships with white men. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, *Kara Walker: The Black Road*, Hilton Als asks Walker to explain what she learned from her "experiments." Her response was "becoming a black, being objectified," and "being an object of white male desire... without hitting a couple dark milestones in my sense of self, I wouldn't have started making the silhouettes. Or without confronting these dark milestones."<sup>8</sup> This response suggests that Walker came to an understanding of her own black identity by seeing herself fetishized in the gaze of white lovers.

Als continues by clarifying that one of these "dark milestones" was Walker's "on-again, off-again sexual relationship with an older white man that ended when she left

Atlanta in 1992.” After pressing Walker to explain more about the relationship, she wrote  
Als this letter:

I have for years been overcoming the vast mythology I constructed around one Fred [as I shall call him]... certain that to acknowledge him publicly would mean my imminent death. so, my fears run deep—and yet—maybe it is the heat—I am putting his name—or his pseudonym forward as a kind of death-wish... To contact him, would I think put me back in a psychologically dangerous place, as I think I have alternately suggested he is a sadist, a racist, a misogynist, a pedophile (this I am almost certain) and, perhaps less credibly: Satan himself. At the time of my entanglement with him (between 1990-1992) I suffered something my therapist later called a “schitzoid reaction” maybe a made up term (who knows) where I became two very different people, kind of jekell and hyde-ish,—and behaved a bit like a trapped animal. it is true, I learned a lot during that time, but all of it couched in silence and a deep sense of terror.

So there is that. To contact this person would have probably little effect. I was to him “an enigma” and there was no love lost.<sup>9</sup>

This letter presents the personal background for Walker’s artistic interests in the sexual power dynamics of masters and slaves, also participates in the auto-fiction of Walker’s oeuvre. While the story she tells is perhaps true, it was conscious decision on Walker’s part to have this story published in an exhibition catalog of her recent work. She alludes to her own fictionalization of the story when she frames the experience in terms of a “vast mythology.” This mythology pervades her artistic practice, as in the text-piece “Letter from a Black Girl,” discussed in Chapter II (fig 15).

In the narrative of her artistic development, Walker explains that these sexual and social experiments were in part inspired by the conceptual performance art of Adrian Piper. Speaking again with Shaw she explained:

I was thinking along the lines of some of Adrian Piper’s early performances, where she invented an identity for herself and spoke through her ‘Mythic Being’ in public arenas. These actions of mine were only missing the necessary elements of structure and documentation. So it was not until I escaped the South (where I still find it impossible to speak) that I began to seek out any references to

Interracial Romance, American Chattel Slavery, Black Womanhood and the Fictions of the South.<sup>10</sup>

In this statement, made in 1999, Walker demonstrates her interest in persona and performance. She frames her early “social and theoretical experiments” as a precursor to her mature artwork. This explanation of her artistic evolution suggests that origin of her visual artwork was in performance. This interest in performance did not disappear from Walker’s oeuvre, but was transformed into the performativity of Walker’s mature artistic practice. Walker’s interest in performative art is illuminated by a closer examination of Piper’s early performance work.

Working since the late 1960s, Adrian Piper has achieved canonical status among feminist artists for her conceptual and theoretical engagement with issues of race and gender identity, as well as her innovative approach to performance art. Piper is most known for her performances, such as the *Catalysis* series and the *Mythic Being* series. In the *Mythic Being* series, Piper transforms herself into a racist stereotype of a black male, donning artificial facial hair, sunglasses, and an afro wig. The *Mythic Being* performed actions befitting the hyper-sexual and hyper-aggressive stereotypes of black masculinity. In the performance *Cruising White Women*, Piper sat on a curb in Cambridge Massachusetts ogling and cat-calling the women that passed.<sup>11</sup> The *Mythic Being* series presents this archetypical figure as a conceptual black hole, taking in and absorbing all the negative qualities stereotypically associated with black masculinity. Piper framed the performance series with photographs of the performances and drawings that articulated the meaning of her performative actions. In one drawing, the *Mythic Being* explains of himself: “I embody everything you most hate and fear” (fig 27).<sup>12</sup>

In addition to her art career, Piper is also a professor of philosophy and a prolific writer; her essays about her artwork are useful for understanding her influence on Walker's artistic strategies. In the essay, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object," Piper uses dense, philosophical language to theorize and explain her physical presence in her artwork. For Piper, the purpose of art is to catalyze change in the viewer. With this purpose in mind, the most effective way to make art as "catalysis" is to make the work physically and psychologically confrontational.<sup>13</sup>

Explaining her emphasis on performance, Piper explains that she is abandoning the "intermediary of the discrete form," in favor of a more direct confrontation between the artist and the viewer of the art object. By removing the distraction of a painting or sculpture, "the artist himself becomes the catalytic agent inducing change in the viewer; the viewer responds to the catalytic presence of the artist as artwork."<sup>14</sup> Piper cautions that this performative process should not be confused with "life as art" because the artist's performance creates something *separate* from their natural self. She explains, "The aesthetic formality and artifice of the work temporarily replace or veil the personal attributes of the artist as a private individual. The artwork consists in artificially assumed attributes of the artist."<sup>15</sup> Piper emphasizes that despite her physical presence in the performance art, the performative persona is composed of "artificially assumed attributes," and is *not* the real artist. In this manner, the presence of the artist serves as the vehicle for the concept of the artwork.

While Walker is less clear about the separation between her artistic persona and her real self, the "aesthetic formality and artifice" Piper speaks of is certainly in play. As discussed above, Walker transforms the mundane facts of her life (grew up in California,

moved to Georgia, and then to Rhode Island) into the melodrama of a nineteenth century slave narrative. By aestheticizing her biography, Walker draws her public persona into the frame of her artistic practice. Her presence becomes a vehicle to confront the viewer with the message of the work.

Piper argues that in her art the presence of the artist is not performed for purposes of self-reflection or self-expression, but functions as a conduit for accessing the viewer, who she terms the “reflective perceiver.”<sup>16</sup> By presenting her self as the artwork, Piper facilitates a level of direct communication between the artwork and its viewer that could not otherwise exist. Explaining the reasoning for her focus on interpersonal communication, she writes:

As a human being, any identity I may assume seems to depend largely on my interaction with other human beings. And just as I define myself as an individual partially in terms of how I affect others, defining myself as an art object seems to necessitate the significance of my effect on others in much the same way.<sup>17</sup>

In this passage Piper articulates a principle that pervades Walker’s work: human identities are relational. This principle can also be related back to Fanon’s reworking of the Lacanian “mirror stage.” Both Piper and Walker are interested in the way black subjects are formed by the images projected on them. By mirroring and exaggerating these racist images, these artists defamiliarize this process of identity formation.

Like Piper’s *Mythic Being*, Walker’s *Negress* is a character formed by racist stereotypes of black women. The *Negress* is a character Walker first named in the title of her installation, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart* (fig 1). As mentioned in the previous sections, *Gone*’s title references both Margaret Mitchell’s Southern epic *Gone with the*

*Wind* and Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*.<sup>18</sup> While *Gone with the Wind* is remembered fondly as a romantic classic of literature and film, *The Clansman* has slipped into the shadows of history for its virulent racism. However, the novel lived on in a more famous form when adapted into D.W. Griffith's groundbreaking silent film *Birth of a Nation*.

Walker has explained that the Negress is based upon the "scheming mulatto mistress" Lydia Brown, who uses her sexual wiles to persuade her white lover to take punishing actions against Southern whites.<sup>19</sup> Brown's power is rooted in her sexuality, and she uses it to destroy the virtuous foundation of American civilization. Dixon's novel is an allegorical argument against Emancipation, warning Northerners about the savage dangers of an unrestrained African American populace. In Walker's words, Brown's function in the novel is to serve as an "icon of all that is wrong and sexual and vulgar."<sup>20</sup>

Lydia Brown was part of a larger trope of racial caricature prevalent in the Reconstruction Era, which Walker channels. In his essay "The Blackface Stereotype," Manthia Diawara terms Brown's particular trope the "Tragic Mulatto," describing her as opposite of the domesticated and unthreatening "Mammy" character. According to Diawara, in the history of racist media, the "Tragic Mulatto" was "the most popular target for promoting the black body as the site of unrestricted sex and evil."<sup>21</sup> This character was constructed as dangerous and threatening in two opposite ways: first by associating her with primitive savagery of Africanism and second, by her attempts to "usurp the ways and manners of a white lady."<sup>22</sup> As Eric Lott explains, in the Reconstruction Era "cultural appropriation is a one way street; black borrowings from the dominant culture, according to whites, result by definition in absurdity."<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, an African American female's

adaptation of white mannerisms threatened the strict ideological separation of the races. These contradictory fears about black womanhood are representative of the irrationality and fear that Walker seeks to highlight and critique with her work.

Despite Walker's identification of the Negress in the title of *Gone*, it is unclear exactly who the Negress is, or what her role in the plot of the scene could be. The figure floating in the water on the left of the scene seems a likely candidate. However, as the title refers to a "Historical Romance," about a psychological or emotional civil war *within* the Negress, it suggests that the whole scene is a melodramatic fantasy on the part of the Negress. Thus the Negress is not necessarily a character pictured in the work, she is the creator of the work.

When asked who the Negress of *Gone* was in her interview for *Art: 21*, PBS's documentary series about contemporary artists, Walker explained:

Well, the Negress, as a term that I apply to myself, is a real and artificial construct. Everything I'm doing is trying to skirt the line between fiction and reality. And for the most part I've titled exhibitions and a book or two as though they were the creations of a 'Negress of Noteworthy Talent,' or a 'Negress of Some Notoriety.' I guess it comes from a feeling of being a black woman, an African American artist—that in itself is a title with a certain set of expectations that come with it from living in a culture that's maybe not accustomed to a great majority of African American women artists. It's like a thing in itself. And it's a construct that is not any different to me than the Negress.<sup>24</sup>

By defining the Negress as an analog for her experience as a contemporary African American female artist, Walker addresses the highly fraught racial dynamic of the contemporary art world. In this passage, Walker asserts that the concept of an African American Artist is loaded with racial meaning in a manner that is no less insidious than the tropes of racist American fiction. Walker's identification with the Negress draws attention to matrix of subtle stereotypes that all African American artists work within.

Walker continually speaks of the Negress in interviews, artist's statements, and public talks, yet never identifies specific images of the Negress. This ambiguity suggests that the concept of the Negress can be applied to all Walker's black female characters. Walker elucidated her feminist approach to the character in a 1996 interview in *Flash Art*. Describing the Negress in cryptic and metaphorical terms, Walker explains, "The sidelong glance [is] my answer to the male gaze. It's the little look and it's full of suspicion, potential ill will, or desire. It's a look unreliable woman give... The unreliable woman is the negress."<sup>25</sup> By referring to the male gaze, Walker references Laura Mulvey's iconic feminist essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," which catalyzed a body of writing analyzing the male gaze as the dominant psychological force in cinema.

In Mulvey's framework, the male gaze reduces women to an image; they become the symbolic object of male desire. This dynamic sets up a dichotomy between the male as active agent and the female as a passive source of visual pleasure. According to Walker, the complicated mixture of psychological responses projected by the Negress subverts patriarchal expectations of women. The Negress is sensual and desirous, yet simultaneously hostile and paranoid. Walker describes her as unreliable because she is contradictory, she does not fulfill her prescribed role to provide visual pleasure.

Walker's identification with the Negress character of her work is a performative strategy because it gives voice to an otherwise silent image. By embodying the Negress, Walker can use her to explore the sexual, emotional, and political position of the contemporary African-American female artist, who is still embedded in racial identity constructions of the past. Walker encourages conflation of her personal and professional

life with the fictional Negress. For example, when the *Village Voice* critic Jerry Saltz asked “Are you in your installations?” she replied “I’m in it all over the place. Actually, cutting out a racist caricature draws you very close to that caricature. Art is just like this, I guess. You get very attached to the thing you do and it stops being an ironic gesture—which I like and I don’t like.”<sup>26</sup>

The Negress emerges as particularly autobiographical in the paper silhouette *Cut* of 1998 (fig 13). In *Cut*, the figure’s ecstatic posture suggests an erotic display of joy, jutting her breasts forward and curving her spine into the iconic “hysterical arc” of early psychiatry.<sup>27</sup> Floral sinuous curves spouting from the figures’ wrists simultaneously suggest the decorative forms of Art Nouveau and a fatal outpouring of blood. The razor blade in the figure’s hand has a double significance, as both the emblematic tool of suicide, and as Walker’s trademark tool of artistic expression. The razor blade in this image functions as both the tool of the figure’s destruction and creation; destruction of the figure as illusory subject but creation of the figure as material art object.

Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw interprets *Cut* as a self-portrait meditating on the dark side of the artist’s performative persona in the public sphere. Shaw begins her analysis of *Cut* by presenting a Noe DeWitt photograph published in *Interview* magazine in 1998, in which Walker is depicted jumping for joy in a pose that is similar to the female figure in *Cut* (fig. 28).<sup>28</sup> Strangely, Walker is presented in a starchy apron and clothing that seems to reference the usual costume of her nineteenth century Negress. Describing Walker’s reaction to the interview and photo spread, Shaw says that the artist was “struck by the way it masked the difficulties of her situation as an African American woman artist, the

way it conveyed much of the pleasure and little of the pain of her professional life as it presented her for the viewer/reader as the ‘artworld’s New Negro.’”<sup>29</sup> Shaw further describes the effect of the image, declaring: “One can almost hear the command ‘Jump when I say ‘Jump!’ She responds willingly, with an eager-to-please grin on her face. And then later, regretting the capitulation to those who would fetishize and control her body, she recasts it in the figure of *Cut*, under her own control and yet still out of control.”<sup>30</sup> In Shaw’s view, *Cut* serves as a response to this uncomfortable experience, displaying the painful self-destruction wrapped up in the continual performance of artistic otherness.

Examining *Cut* in relation to the DeWitt photograph illuminates the relationship between the Negress and Walker’s position in the contemporary art world. In *Cut*, Walker uses her blade to create an image of herself clothed in her Negress persona, and then uses the blade to kill off that persona. The distinctive combination of sexuality and violence that characterizes the Negress is present in *Cut*, though the violence is self-directed. A close examination of the rendering of the wrists emphasizes the materiality of the piece; the sharp edges of the figure’s wounds clearly represent the clean cutting of paper, rather than the messy cutting of flesh. As scholar Darby English describes, “Like the physical action of the figure itself, the activity of the hands is rendered hyperbolically, incongruously: wrists slit so deeply they would be powerless to grip anything, let alone administer a cut to another limb.”<sup>31</sup> Through this materiality, *Cut* seems to be insistently about Walker’s artistic practice rather than her psychological state.

Beyond the dissonant depiction of the figure’s wrists, *Cut* has another strange element that elides a straightforward interpretation of the image. The amorphous form of the figure’s skirt appears to be inflated, like a hoop skirt of the antebellum period, but the

strange forms on the skirt's right side don't correspond to the way the fabric's folds should flow. These strange contours suggest what appears to be a man's face in profile, perhaps holding a knife, or in Shaw's description, a conductor's baton. Shaw suggests that the man's position implies "that not only is he servicing her in a sexual manner, but he is also controlling her movement."<sup>32</sup> Who is this mysterious man under the figure's skirt, driving her to erotic self-destruction? Perhaps it is not any specific man, but *the man*, the rhetorical white man, whose "bestial fantasies" Howardena Pindell accused Walker of performing for.<sup>33</sup> Walker seems to be addressing the accusation that white museum directors are promoting her work as an act of "closet-racism."<sup>34</sup> In Shaw's formulation, this man under the Negress's skirt is symbolic of the contemporary art world that alternates between chastising Walker, praising or fetishizing her genius, and bestowing her with financial success.

As an African American artist presenting stereotypes of blackness to a largely white audience, accusations of minstrelsy in Walker's work are not unfounded. Yet Walker's engagement with the aesthetics of minstrelsy is strategic and critical, and explores the concept of blackness as product of performative acts. In drawings and prints in which the figures are not silhouettes, Walker's black characters often have the facial characteristics of blackface makeup (fig 29). A frequent character in Walker's later silhouettes is Josephine Baker, whose erotic, primitivist dances had strong ties to the minstrel tradition. In her silhouette piece *Consume* and other works, Walker uses Baker's iconic banana skirt as a signifier of her character (fig 30). But a closer examination of the way Walker engages the history of blackface minstrelsy sheds light on her approach to

performativity. While white blackface performers, like Al Jolson, are more commonly remembered in the history of minstrelsy, African Americans were also performing stage shows in black face as a form of popular entertainment as early as the 1840s.<sup>35</sup> Bert Williams, a preeminent vaudeville performer who went on to success in popular music and film, was one of the most famous of African American blackface performers.<sup>36</sup> In a time when African Americans were severely disenfranchised, minstrelsy and blackface performance provided one of the few venues for black performers to make an independent living.

In her historiography of developments in Minstrel Theory, Mikko Tukhanen explains that historians have moved beyond an understanding of minstrelsy as a cultural form exclusively controlled by whites. While still acknowledging the tradition's deep racism, minstrel theorists now explore blackface minstrelsy as a hybrid or "creolized" form. By the time black performers became common on the minstrel stage, the form of minstrelsy had developed into a vernacular performative mode that had "no *necessary* connection with the black Atlantic culture." Despite this independence of form, Tukhanen says minstrel theorists suggest that black performers altered the course of the tradition, "creolized it." The effect of this reading allows for a more complex interpretation of blackface minstrelsy:

Although blackface has more often been considered as a dehumanizing, distorting mask imposed on African-American and colonized subjects, this mask, when actively deployed, can also denote the racially marked subject's becoming inaccessible to the culture otherwise bent on determining him or her.<sup>37</sup>

By turning their blackness into a mask of superficiality, black performers were able to satirize the racial stereotypes, and separate them from their internal identities. In this vein, Susan Gubar suggests that some black performers, within the restricted sphere of

minstrelsy, altered and confronted racist stereotypes by performing “white people’s conceptions of the stage Negro with a defensive irony that called attention to the artifice of the role.”<sup>38</sup> However, Gubar also cautions against the temptation to “romanticize racial masquerades that indubitably discount African-American subjectivity,” and emphasizes the “blatant racism of minstrelsy.”<sup>39</sup>

What emerges from this type of scholarly approach to minstrelsy is a complex ambivalence, an ambivalence that permeates Walker’s artistic persona. Walker’s performance in *Interview* magazine, and then her repetition of that performance in *Cut* relate to the ambivalence of black minstrelsy. The relevance of the tradition of minstrelsy is explicit: Walker was exploring her own participation in the historical tradition of black artists performing for a white audience. Walker’s use of history in this exhibition becomes a strategy for problematizing or questioning the terms of her own success. As curator Eungie Joo wrote: “This type of invocation... in the context of late 20<sup>th</sup> century race relations generally, and art world politics specifically, suggests criticality towards one’s benefactors and oneself that at once authenticates the work and undermines strivings for the authentic or authoritative black voice.”<sup>40</sup>

Walker seems to be problematizing the role of the contemporary black artist by drawing parallels to the minstrels of earlier times. At the same time, she is criticizing the white audience’s eagerness to consume this performance, while simultaneously orchestrating the whole perverse interaction. Through her decision to group these works together, her inclusion of her own image, and her inclusion of an artistic voice through the text in the title and within the show, Walker performs her artistic persona, like a

minstrel, as a mask which distances her interiority from the racial stereotypes of blackness yet also traps her within them.

Walker began explicitly identifying herself with the Negress in her titles shortly after her emergence onto the public stage. In a 1996 exhibition at Wooster Gardens Gallery, her fifth solo exhibition, Walker titled her installation *From the Bowels to the Bosom, a Reconstruction by Miss K. Walker, a Free Negress of Noteworthy Talent*. Taking this concrete step of associating the Negress with her self as author further collapsed the distance between her persona and the subject of her artwork. The Negress, as Walker defines her, is a sexualized racist archetype of a black woman. By identifying with this archetype, she turns her self into a cultural fiction, a socially constructed image. Yet by performing this racist archetype, she takes ownership of it, asserts her control over it.

The trope of including her own name in the titles of both individual artworks and full exhibitions has consistently evolved since the beginning of Walker's career. Though it may seem trivial, the middle initial "E." is a key marker of the carefully constructed artistic persona that pervades Walker's work.<sup>41</sup> The "E" signifies a specific version of Kara Walker, the simultaneously pompous and self-effacing artistic persona that she presents as the semi-fictional author of her work. The effect of the middle initial is to formalize her name in a manner that harkens back to earlier authorial conventions.

*Cut* appeared in Walker's first show after being awarded the MacArthur genius grant, which was sardonically titled "*Missus K. Walker* returns her thanks to the Ladies and Gentleman of New York for the great *Encouragement* she has received from them, in

the *profesßion* in which she has practiced in New England.”<sup>42</sup> Shaw suggests that this title was inspired by an illustration Walker would have encountered in Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson’s classic volume *A History of African-American Art and Artists*. This illustration was of an advertisement placed by African American painter Joshua Johnson in the 1802 edition of *The Baltimore Telegraph* and read:

Joshua Johnson, No. 52 Gay Street, returns his thanks to his friends and the public in general for the encouragement they have been pleased to afford him, towards establishing him in the line of PORTRAIT PAINTING; he therefore, flatters [sic] himself, from an unremitting attention to give general satisfaction to the ladies and gentleman of Baltimore, to merit a continuance of their favors, as he is determined to reduce his prices agreeable to the times, and use every effort to please them.<sup>43</sup>

By adopting this language for her titles, Walker is facetiously playing the part black artists were historically forced to play, as excessively indebted to the white patrons for their success.

Another early example of this strategic naming was in a 1997 exhibition at the Renaissance Society titled *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon my Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored*. Fittingly, this was an exhibition that traveled across the country. Walker’s self-naming in this exhibition title makes use of the formal rhetorical style of Joshua Johnson’s nineteenth century advertisement, but also alludes to W.E.B. Du Bois. This allusion seems to call on Dubois’s concept of the “talented tenth,” the elite group of exceptional African Americans, elevated by their intelligence and virtue, which Du Bois designated as the saviors of the Negro race.<sup>44</sup> In an interview with Thelma Golden, she explained the language of her titles:

It’s a little bit overblown, a little bit pompous, and I’ve been trying to acquire that sense of confidence. But at the same time there is always a little backhanded

slight. I think the first few titles or show announcements were really aimed at provoking the audience's sense of entitlement and superiority... Each title repeats the thing before and never quite makes the kind of progress you are set up for.<sup>45</sup>

In more recent shows, she has grown from her early title of "Missus" to "Dr. Kara E. Walker," in the 2011 exhibition *Dust Jackets for the Niggerati—And Supporting Dissertations, Drawings, Submitted Ruefully by Dr. Kara E. Walker*. By naming herself "Dr. Kara E. Walker," and naming the works "Supporting Dissertations," Walker slyly pokes fun at her enthusiastic acceptance in the academic sphere.<sup>46</sup> This exhibition demonstrates the distance Walker has traveled since her early work. There were no silhouettes in the exhibition, as Walker has been focusing on large-scale charcoal drawings. In keeping with the title of the exhibition, the works in this show acknowledge Walker's current status as a prominent, internationally known artist. In a similar mode to *Cut*, these works show Walker grappling with her identity as famous artist.

In this exhibition Walker presented a moderately sized drawing that she identified as a self-portrait (fig. 31).<sup>47</sup> This drawing was called "The Great Negro Heroine," and in gestural charcoal strokes it presents two black women, one dressed in an old fashioned maid's costume, and the other clad only in a bra and slip. The scene is one of punishment and abjection, as the maid uses a large toilet plunger to violently force the head of the other woman into the toilet bowl. There is a suggestion of self-abuse in the bleeding cuts on the kneeling figure's legs. Evidence of self-destruction permeates the scene, littered with mysterious puddles of spilled liquid, an empty wine bottle and an empty pill bottle. Parading obliviously in the backdrop is the shadowy figure of a jovial white man, dressed in clothes that hint at a confederate soldier's uniform.

Emblematic of Walker's complex approach to self-representation, this double

self-portrait presents a number of themes that have been continuous since the beginning of Walker's career, but is also quite specific to her current position of privilege and acclaim in the contemporary art world. The figure dressed in maid's clothing can be identified as the Negress, Walker's performative public persona. Perhaps the figure crouched in front of the toilet is the real Walker, like in *Cut*, being destroyed by the monstrous persona she created.

Which figure is the "Great Negro Heroine" of the image's title? Perhaps it is the Negress, for attempting to flush away the part of her self that is defeated by shame. Or perhaps the title ironically points to the flawed, impossible nature of such a construction as a "Great Negro Heroine," a construction that traps the artist into a model of tragedy and self-annihilation. Other works in the exhibition likewise deconstruct the cultural concept of a black heroine. For example, Walker's hand lettered prints *Billie Holiday*, *Nina Simone*, and *Louise Beavers* cleverly highlight the popular and problematic cultural construction of these iconic black artists (fig 32). Despite their old-fashioned aesthetic, the texts are lifted from Wikipedia biographies of the artists, which portray them as talented figures inevitably doomed to a tragic downfall, plagued by drug abuse, domestic violence, and mental illness.<sup>48</sup>

The ambivalence between surface and content, between image and reality is key to understanding Walker's relationship to the Negress. As discussed earlier in relation to Adrian Piper's work, Walker is interested in examining surfaces, personas, identity constructions, masks. Like Piper's *Mythic Being*, Walker's Negress is purposefully a void shaped by racist stereotypes, not containing any internal content, but shaped by her

society's constructed image of her. The tension of this relationship is reciprocal; while Walker gives multiple dimensions to the Negress, the Negress also flattens Walker. By the construction and continual reinforcement of Walker's self-identification with the Negress, Walker turns herself into part of the artwork, giving it a power it would not otherwise have. As Piper put it, Walker "becomes identical" with the art object, and is able to catalyze change in the reflective viewer through direct confrontation.

Walker's art, in its conceptual complexity, its aesthetic beauty, its abundant research, is an art of excess. In this excess, a proliferation of interpretation and criticism has expanded Walker's project from the visual sphere to a discursive debate on post-modern (or Post-Black) African American culture. Yet Walker's work is polemically open-ended, and rather than ascribe a fixed message to the artist, one must take up the questions she raises. The meaning of authorship is a central question of Walker's work. As Walker once said "I am pretty aware that socially and politically I'm pretty ambiguous and there are times that I'm quite the old school painter, 'Oh I don't need to talk about my work,' which I actually don't believe, but I feel it somewhere in my heart."<sup>49</sup> Would her artwork have the same effect without the complementary element of her artistic persona? Walker's construction and performance of an artistic identity is an integral and intentional part of her overall practice and a key component to the interpretation of her work.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Particularly foundational is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), in which she defines gender as a series of performative acts.

<sup>3</sup> Adair Rounthwaite terms Walker's work auto-fiction in "Making Mourning from Melancholia: The Art of Kara Walker" *Image & Narrative* no. 19, (Nov. 2007), <<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/autofiction/rounthwaite.html>>

<sup>4</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 19.

<sup>5</sup> Darby English, "This is Not about the Past," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (New York: MIT Press, 2003), 146.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Annette Dixon, "A Negress Speaks Out," in *Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>8</sup> Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act: Kara Walker's Vision" in *Kara Walker: the Black Road* (Malaga: CAC Malaga, 2008), 113.

<sup>9</sup> Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act: Kara Walker's Vision." in *Kara Walker: the Black Road* (Malaga: CAC Malaga, 2008), 113.

<sup>10</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Maurice Berger, *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery University of Maryland, 1999), 142.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Berger, *Adrian Piper: A Retrospective* (Baltimore: Fine Arts Gallery University of Maryland, 1999), 142.

<sup>13</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 33.

<sup>14</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>17</sup> Adrian Piper, *Out of Order, Out of Sight, Vol. 1*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 35.

<sup>18</sup> Kara Walker, “Kara Walker: The Melodrama of ‘Gone with the Wind,’” interviewed for *Art21.org*, <http://www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind>

<sup>19</sup> Kara Walker, “Kara Walker: The Melodrama of ‘Gone with the Wind,’” interviewed for *Art21.org*, <<http://www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind>>

<sup>20</sup> Kara Walker, “Kara Walker: The Melodrama of ‘Gone with the Wind,’” interviewed for *Art21.org*, <<http://www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind>>

<sup>21</sup> Manthia Diawara, “The Blackface Stereotype” in David Levinthal, *Blackface* (Santa Fe, NM: Arena, 1999), 11.

<sup>22</sup> Manthia Diawara, “The Blackface Stereotype” in Levinthal, *Blackface*. Santa Fe, NM: Arena, 1999, 11.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 241n4.

<sup>24</sup> Kara Walker, “Kara Walker: The Melodrama of ‘Gone with the Wind,’” interviewed for *Art21.org*, <<http://www.art21.org/texts/kara-walker/interview-kara-walker-the-melodrama-of-gone-with-the-wind>>

<sup>25</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Potential Ill-Will and Desire,” *Flash Art*, (Nov/Dec 1996), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Jerry Saltz, “Potential Ill-Will and Desire,” *Flash Art*, (Nov/Dec 1996), 82.

<sup>27</sup> I am referring to the image made famous by the 19<sup>th</sup> c. French psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot, in *L’Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*. For more information see: Georges Didi-Huberman and J. M. Charcot, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 126-27. The article being discussed is by James Hannaham, “Pea, Ball, Bounce” in *Interview*. It is unclear from Shaw’s text whether she is guessing that *Cut* is a self-portrait, or if Walker explicitly told her that.

<sup>29</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>30</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 140.

<sup>31</sup> Darby English, "This is Not about the Past," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (New York: MIT Press, 2003), 144.

<sup>32</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 133.

<sup>33</sup> Howardena Pindell, *Kara Walker-No, Kara Walker-Yes, Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009), 60-61.

<sup>34</sup> Betye Saar quoted in [Juliette Bowles Harris], "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 4.

<sup>35</sup> Mikko Tukhanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jacques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy" *Diacritics* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 17. Walker mentions her interest in African American blackface performers in the interview "In the Studio: Kara Walker with Steel Stillman," *Art in America* (May 2011), 91.

<sup>36</sup> See Louis Onuorah Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-on-Black Minstrelsy, and the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> Mikko Tukhanen, "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge: Richard Wright, Jacques Lacan, and the Ambivalence of Black Minstrelsy" *Diacritics* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 17. Earlier in the essay, Tukhanen is careful to note the dangers in analyzing colonial encounters as hybrid forms, discussing the criticism Homi Bhabha has received for this approach in his research.

<sup>38</sup> Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), 96-97.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Gubar, *Racechanges: White Skin, Black Face in American Culture*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), xvii-xviii.

<sup>40</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 145.

<sup>41</sup> Scott Briscoe (Gallery associate at Sikkema Jenkins, Inc.) in discussion with the author, December 2011. Briscoe informed me that Kara Walker doesn't use her middle initial in daily contexts; that it signifies her artistic persona rather than the real her.

<sup>42</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>43</sup> See Romare Bearden and Harry L. Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993). Bearden and Henderson emphasize that there is not conclusive proof that Johnston was African-American, but the evidence seems to suggest that he is the earliest African American painter to produce a substantial body of work. It is also notable that his work became most popular in the 1930s when a curator, (with an interest in selling his work), publicly announced that he was the first significant African-American painter.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Reid. *PostNegritude Visual and Literary Culture*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 14.

<sup>45</sup> “Thelma Golden/Kara Walker: A Dialogue” in *Pictures from Another Time* ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 47.

<sup>46</sup> Walker received an honorary doctorate degree from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco in 2009.

<sup>47</sup> Scott Briscoe (Gallery associate at Sikkema Jenkins, Inc.) in discussion with the author, December 2011. Scott Briscoe informed me that Walker identifies this drawing as a self-portrait. Jerry Saltz also discusses the work as a self portrait in Jerry Saltz, “Drawing from Nightmares,” *New York Magazine* (May 2011), <<http://nymag.com/arts/art/reviews/kara-walker-saltz-review-2011-5/>>

<sup>48</sup> Walker discussed her process for these works in the “Hammer Conversations” series event held at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 2011. <[http://hammer.ucla.edu/programs/detail/program\\_id/1081](http://hammer.ucla.edu/programs/detail/program_id/1081)>

<sup>49</sup> “Thelma Golden/Kara Walker: A Dialogue” in *Pictures from Another Time* ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 49.

APPENDIX

FIGURES



Figure 1. Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and her Heart*, 13 x 50 ft, 1994, installation view at The Drawing Center, New York



Figure 2. Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995



Figure 3. Kara Walker, *Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery, or, "Life at Ol' Virginny's Hole (sketches from Plantation Life)"* See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause, 1997

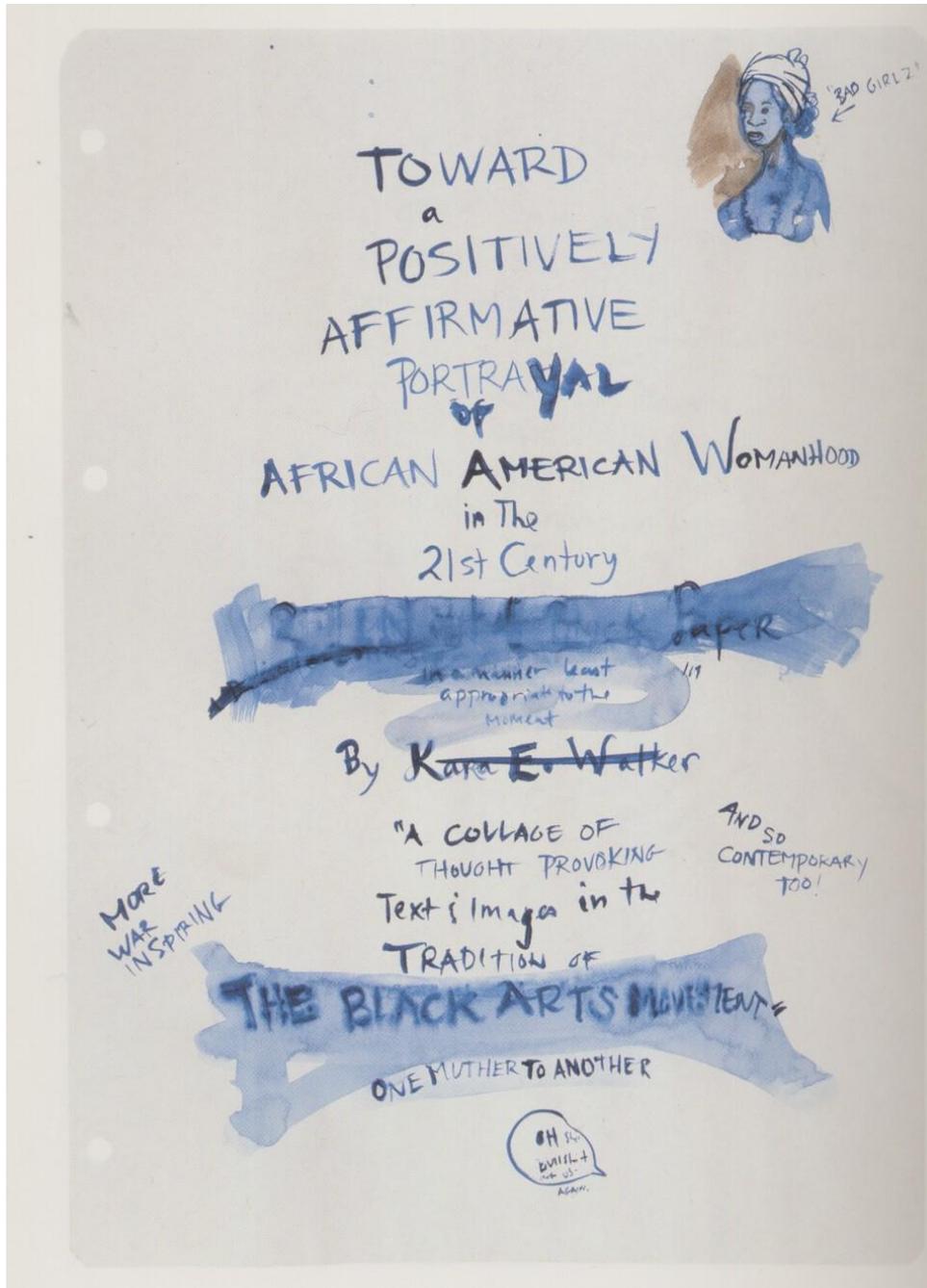


Figure 4. Kara Walker, *Do You like Crème in your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* 1997

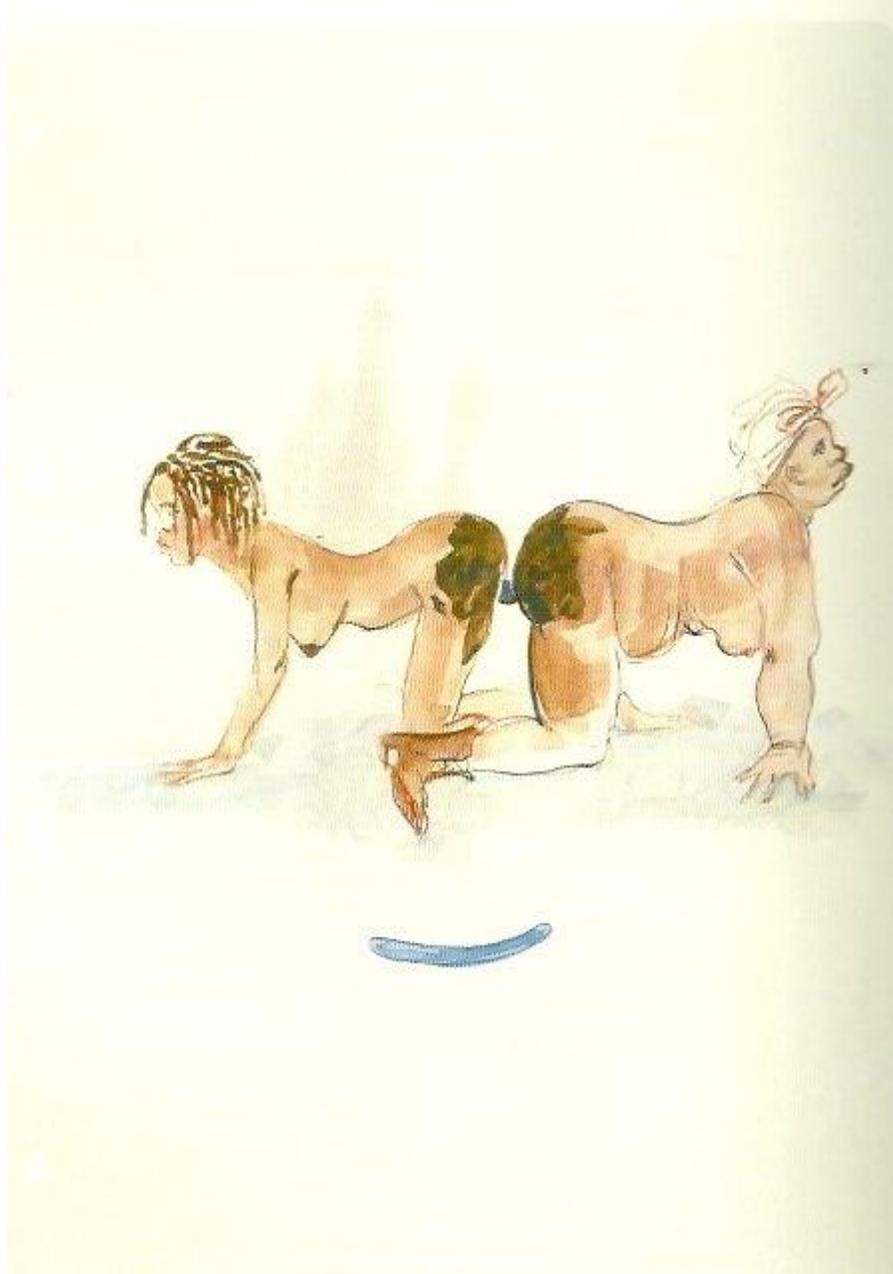


Figure 5. Kara Walker, *Untitled* from the Series *Do You like Crème in your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* 1997



Figure 6. Kara Walker, *Mistress Demanded a Swift and Dramatic Empathetic Reaction, Which We Obligated Her*, 12 x 17 ft., 2000

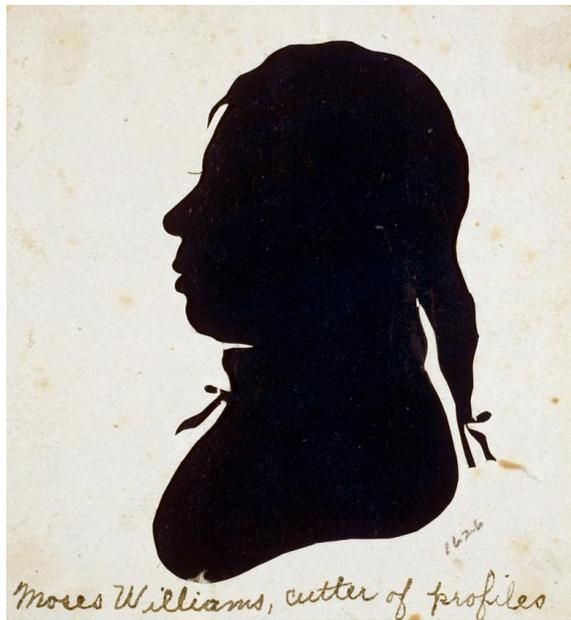


Figure 7. Raphaele Peale (attr.), *Moses Williams, Cutter of Profiles*, ca. 1803, White laid paper on black stock, 4 x 5 in., Library Company of Philadelphia

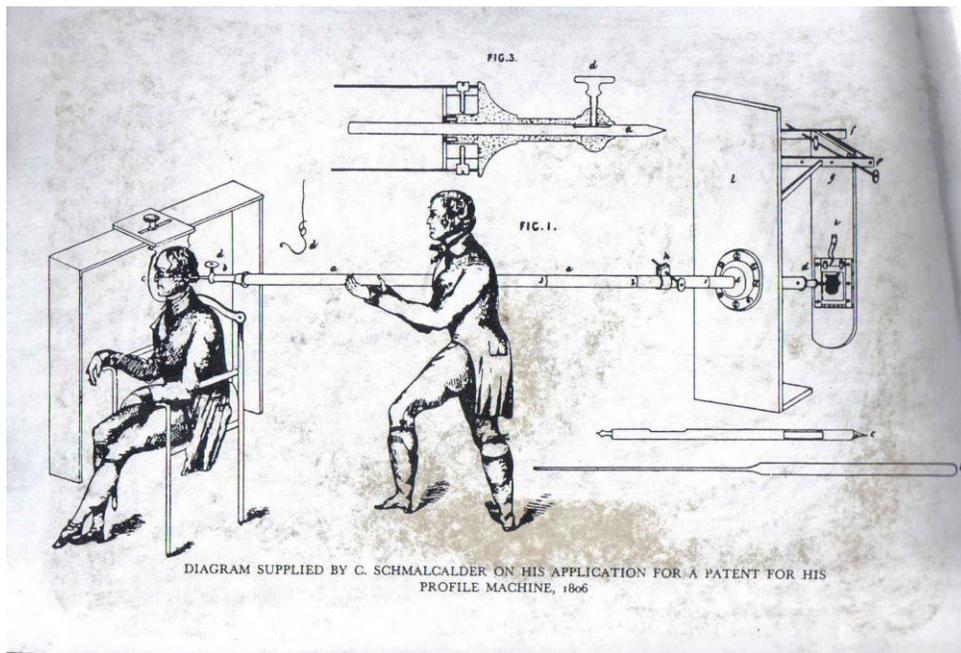


Figure 8. Patent Application Diagram for the Physiognotrace, 1806



Figure 9. *Machine for Drawing Silhouettes*, from the 1794 English edition of Johann Caspar Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*

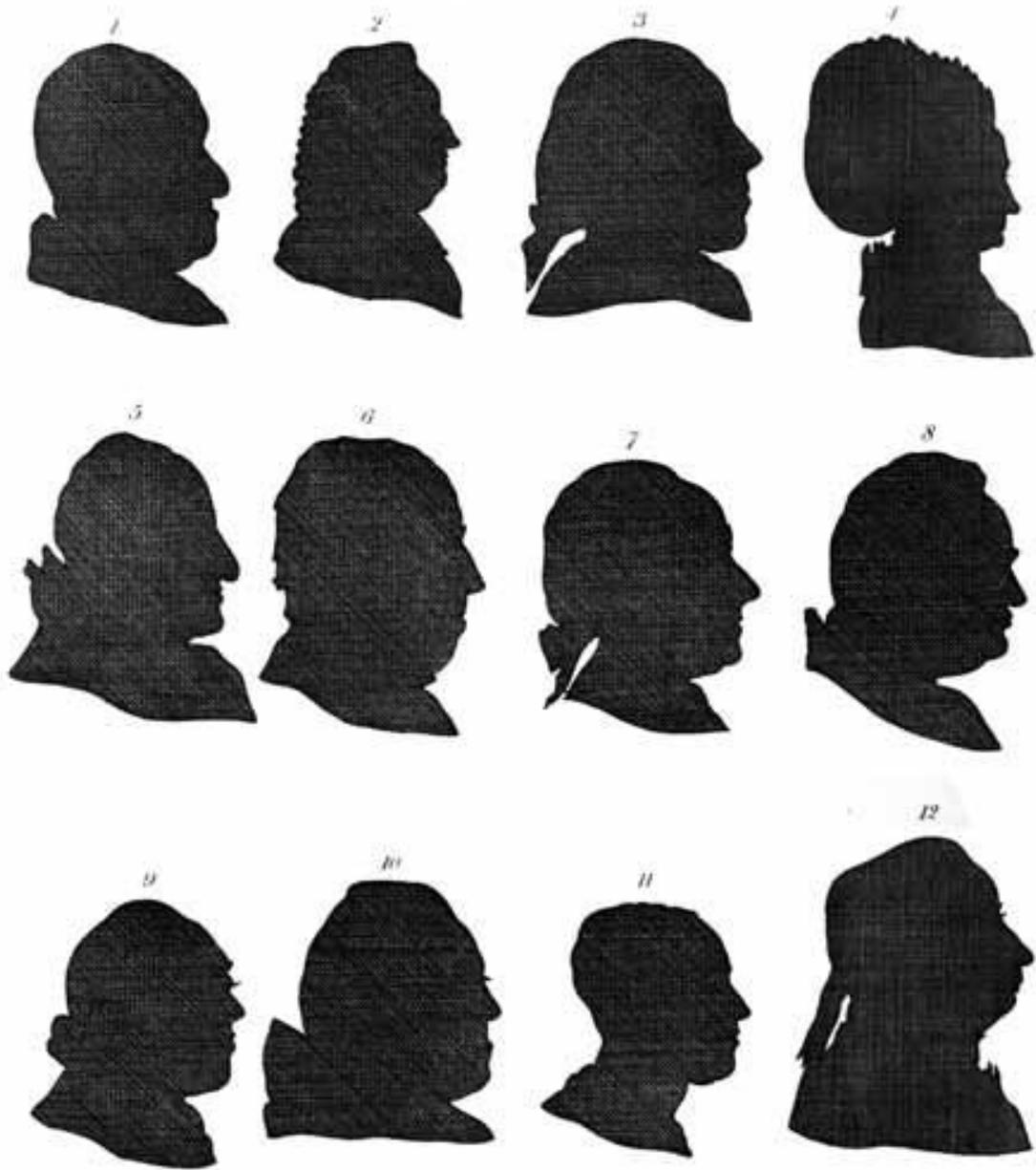


Figure 10. Page of silhouettes from Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy*



Figure 11. Walker at work on a Silhouette, Production Still from *Art: 21*

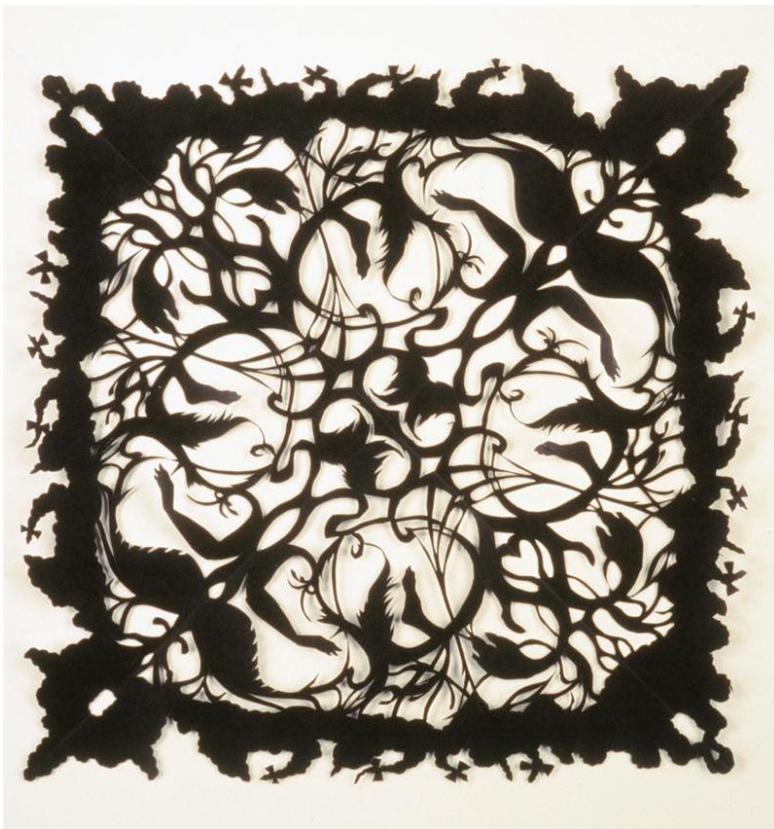


Figure 12. Kara Walker, *Untitled*, 10.75 x 10.75 in, 2002, Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York



Figure 13. Kara Walker, *Cut*, 88 x 54 in, 1998, Wooster Gardens, New York



Figure 14. Paul Philippoteaux, Detail of *The Cyclorama of the Battle of Gettysburg*, 1884

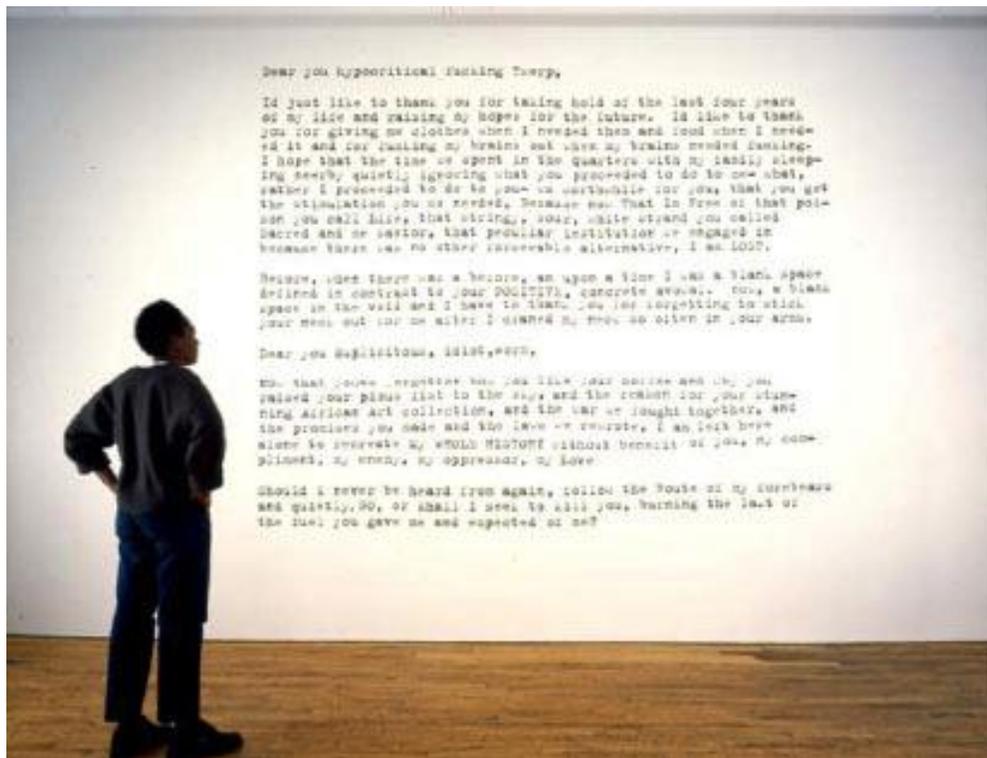


Figure 15. Kara Walker, *Letter from a Black Girl*, transfer text on wall, dimensions variable. Installation view, Wooster Gardens/Brent Sikkema, 1998.

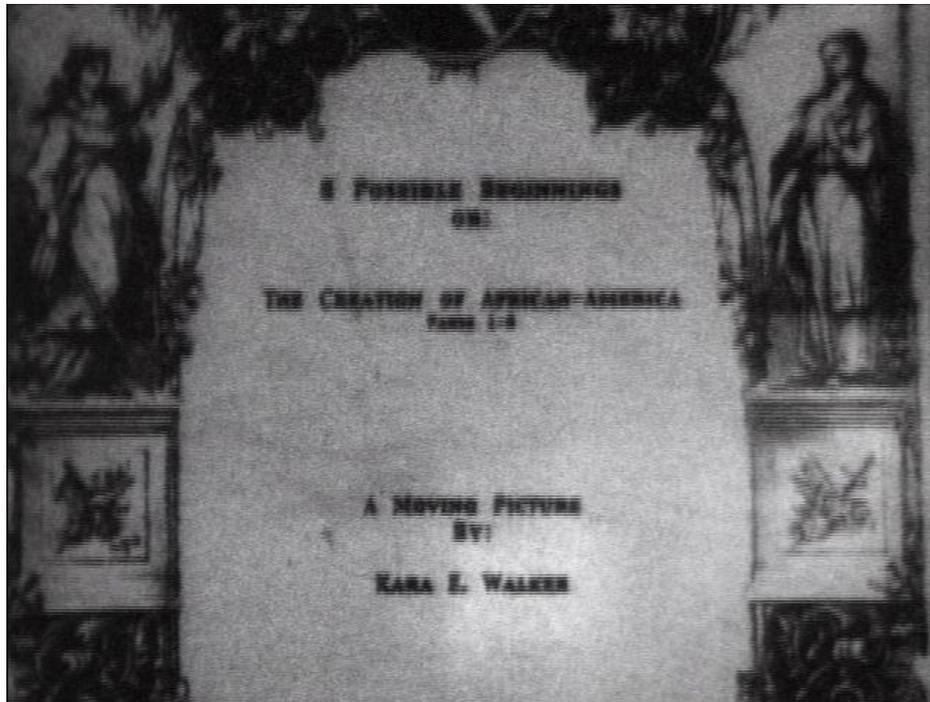


Figure 16. Kara Walker, film still from *8 Possible Beginnings: or the Creation of African-America: A Moving Picture* by: Kara E. Walker, 2005.

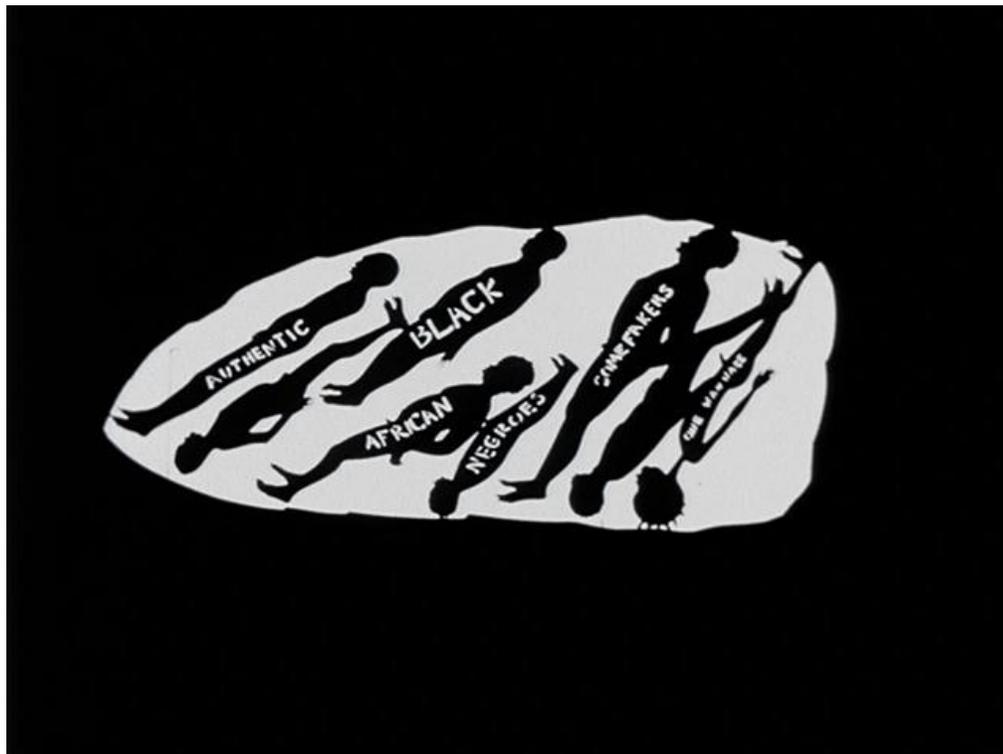


Figure 17. Kara Walker, film still from *8 Possible Beginnings: or the Creation of African-America A Moving Picture* by: Kara E. Walker, 2005.



Figure 18. Kara Walker, film still from *8 Possible Beginnings: or the Creation of African-America A Moving Picture* by: Kara E. Walker, 2005.



Figure 19. Kara Walker, film still from *8 Possible Beginnings: or the Creation of African-America A Moving Picture* by: Kara E. Walker, 2005.



Figure 20. Kara Walker, film still from *8 Possible Beginnings: or the Creation of African-America A Moving Picture* by: Kara E. Walker, 2005.



Figure 21. Lotte Reiniger performing a Shadow Play

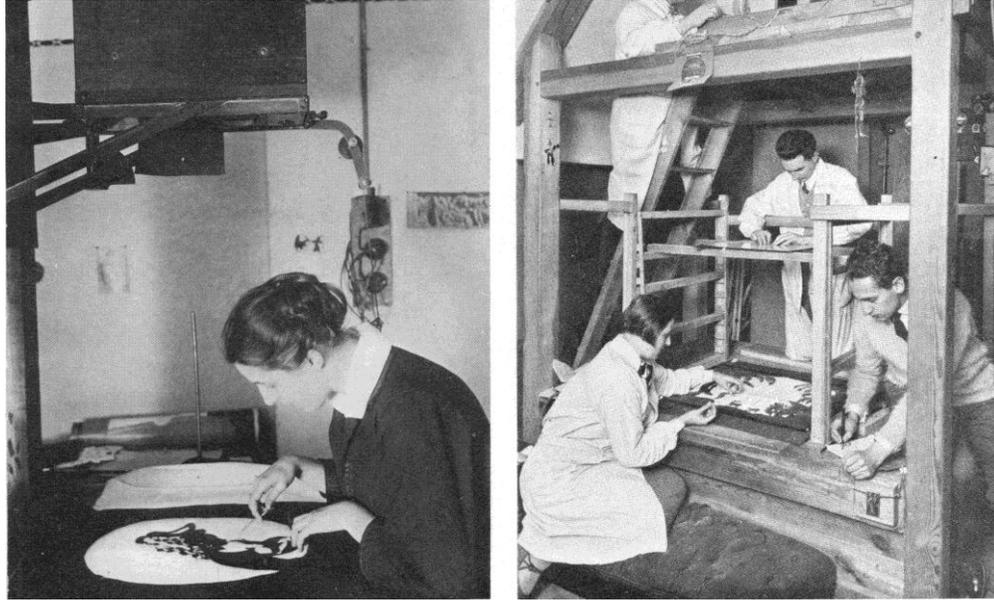


Figure 22. Animator's working on Reiniger's Silhouette film

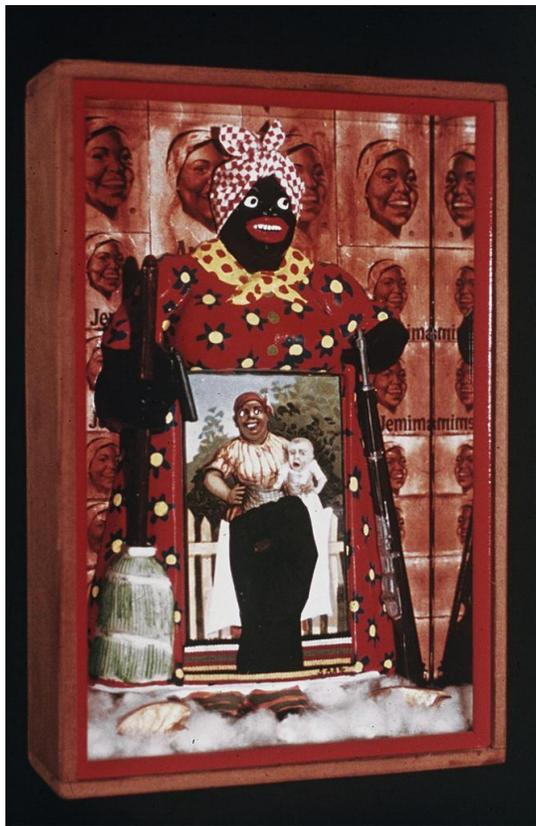
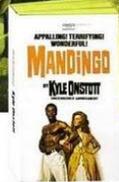


Figure 23. Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972



Figure 24. Howardena Pindell, *Free White and 21*

Expect the savage.  
 The sensual. The shocking.  
 The sad. The powerful. The shameful.  
 Expect all that the motion picture screen  
 has never dared to show before.  
 Expect the truth.  
 Now you are ready for "Mandingo"



Based on the big,  
 bold best seller that sold  
 over 9½ million copies!

DINO DE LAURENTIIS  
 presents



starring

**JAMES MASON SUSAN GEORGE PERRY KING**

**RICHARD WARD BRENDA SYKES** and introducing **KEN NORTON as MEDE**

co-starring **LILLIAN HAYMAN** based on the novel by **KYLE ONSTOTT** and upon the play based thereon by **JACK KIRKLAND**

screenplay by **NORMAN WEXLER** music by **MAURICE JARRE** executive producer **RALPH SERPE**

produced by **DINO DE LAURENTIIS** directed by **RICHARD FLEISCHER**

**TECHNICOLOR® A PARAMOUNT RELEASE**



Figure 25. Poster of *Mandingo*, 1974

in my first Racialized  
Sex fantasy Me and an (unnamed)  
black girlfriend decide to 'Bring Down'  
DAVID Duke the former Klansman and  
almost Louisiana Senator in SCANDAL!  
yes, his Seduced ~~by~~ by two Black girls  
And then tied, humiliated, photographed etc.  
Somehow it was more exciting than

Doesn't seem so unlikely now

But that I would fuck an  
Avowed RACIST not at all unusual.  
since All I want is to be loved by you  
And to share all that deep contradictory  
love I possess - Make myself  
your Slave girl so you will make  
yourself my equal - if only for a minute

(Do I lower myself onto you? Do you raise yourself up to me?)  
\* Neutro? or Neight.

Figure 26. Kara Walker, *Untitled*, from the Series *Do you like Crème in your Coffee and Chocolate in your Milk?*



Figure 27. Adrian Piper, *The Mythic Being: I Embody Everything You Most Hate and Fear*, 1975



Figure 28. Noe DeWitt, *Kara Walker*, 1998



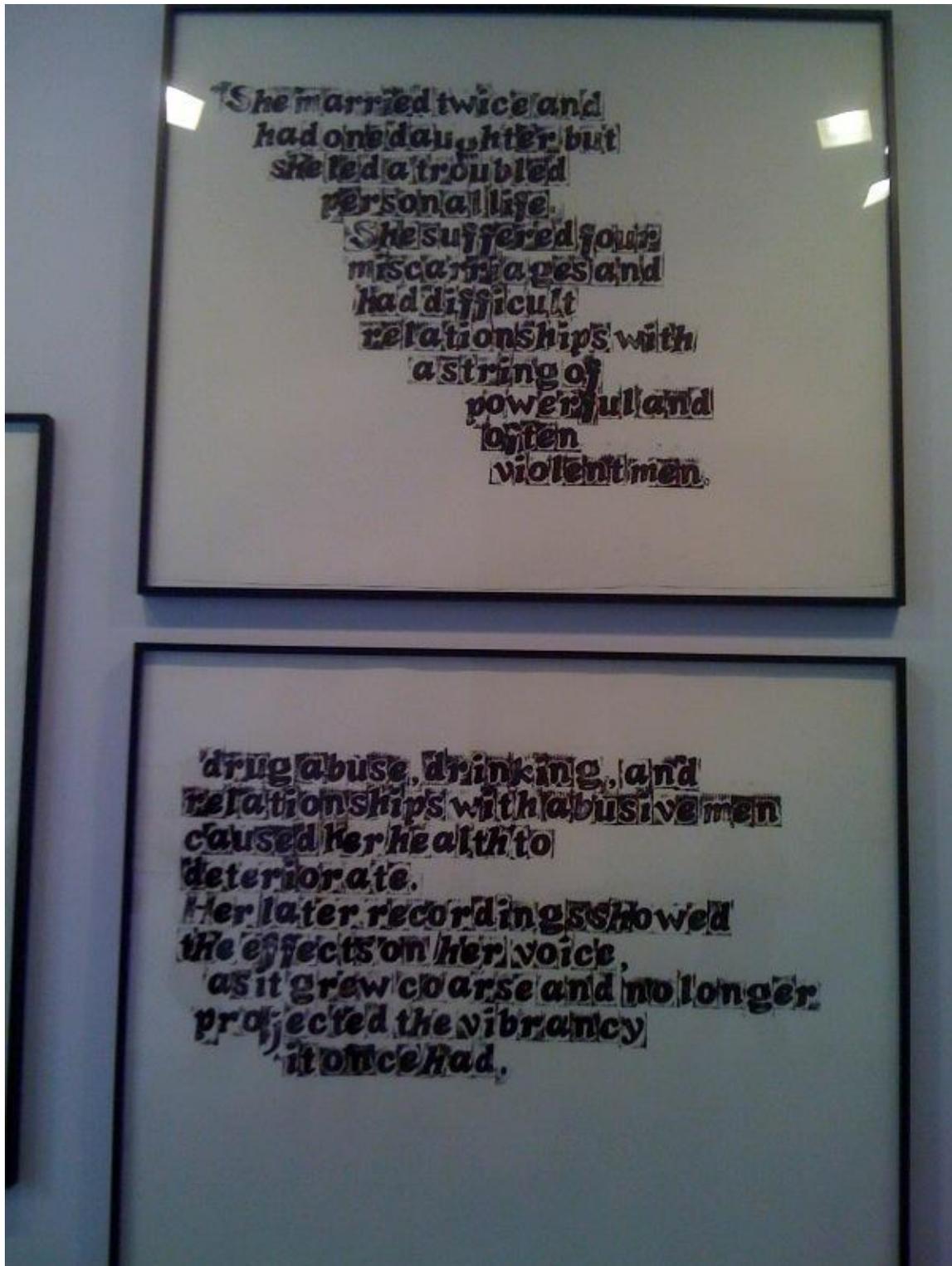
Figure 29. Kara Walker, *BOO-HOO (for PARKETT 59)*, 2000



Figure 30. Kara Walker, *Consume*, 1998



Figure 31. Kara Walker, *The Great Negro Heroine*, 2011



She married twice and  
had one daughter, but  
she led a troubled  
personal life.

She suffered four  
miscarriages and  
had difficult  
relationships with  
a string of  
powerful and  
often  
violent men.

drug abuse, drinking, and  
relationships with abusive men  
caused her health to  
deteriorate.

Her later recordings showed  
the effects on her voice,  
as it grew coarse and no longer  
projected the vibrancy  
it once had.

Figure 32. Kara Walker, *Nina Simone* (top) and *Billie Holiday* (bottom), 2011

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