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The Long Shadow of Slavery

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Despite the outcry last spring over radio shock jock Don Imus's on air denigration of the Rutgers University women's basketball team, the incident was a reminder, if one were needed, that racist clichés still have a lot of mainstream currency. While his critics excoriated Imus for his tasteless and hurtful comments, some of his defenders pointed to the use of equally offensive terminology in the lyrics of hip-hop music, arguing that the use of racial insults by prominent black celebrities had rendered such language fair game.

By bringing out the fault lines between political correctness, hate speech and free expression, the brouhaha stirred up some of the same arguments that embroiled the art world 10 years ago when artist Betye Saar initiated a letter-writing campaign against the work of Kara Walker, who in 1997, at age 27, had recently become the youngest person to win a MacArthur "genius" grant. Saar was offended by Walkers use of imagery based on stock characters like mammys, pickaninnies, Uncle Toms and lascivious young women whose exaggerated sexual characteristics echo those of the so-called Hottentot Venus, the African woman who was a star in Europe's sideshow circuit in the 19th century. In Walker's art these figures engage in perverse and often demeaning sexual acts with each other and with their plantation masters. In her letter, Saar fumed, "Are African-Americans being betrayed under the guise of art? Is this white backlash art elitist style? Kara is selling us down the river."

The imbroglio culminated in a 1998 symposium at Harvard, which Walker did not attend, that exposed an intergenerational divide within the black art community. Speakers and audience sparred over whether young black artists whose work, like Walker's, featured minstrel-era and other racist stereotype, is critical of, or complicit with, the worldview embedded in these images. Walker's critics, many of them African-Americans who had been involved in the civil rights struggles of the '50s and '60s, saw her work as a refutation of their own efforts to bury the degrading and racist clichés that made slavery and, later, segregation possible. In this view, her work appears to be part of a larger backlash against affirmative action, and represents an effort to cash in on lingering prejudice by legitimizing the views of racist whites. Walker's defenders argue that she is removing the sting of these images by exposing them, and that her subject is not the actual history of slavery and segregation, but the representation of them in popular media. Echoing the Imus uproar, two of the key points of contention were the questions: When can racist imagery and language legitimately be used, and who can use them?

The Kara Walker controversy was, in turn, reminiscent of the 1994 dustup over "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art," an exhibition curated by Thelma Golden for the Whitney Museum of American Art, which offered works by 25 artists mostly but not exclusively African-American, who played with stereotypes of the black male as criminal, victim, athlete and sexual predator. Here, too, critics of the exhibition assailed Golden for passing over positive

and uplifting representations of black men in favor of those that reinforce the mass media's largely negative or stereotypical images.

One of the realities underscored by both the Harvard conference and the “Black Male” show is the willingness of so many black artists to employ racist stereotypes in their work. These artists include many highly regarded figures (not all of them young) such as Adrian Piper, Michael Ray Charles, Robert Colescott, Renee Cox, Fred Wilson and Ellen Gallagher. In fact, in Walker’s defense, a number of commentators pointed to Betye Saar's own 1972 work *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima,* in which the jolly pancake icon wields a broom and a gun.

In many ways, disagreements over the artistic use of such imagery are the product of two very different philosophies: one grounded in a modern-ist belief in art as a purveyor of truth and authentic feeling, and the other in the postmodernist vision of "reality" as an ideological construct made up of representations that may have no validity in themselves. For Walker, as for others of her generation, political correctness and the demand for uplifting and positive images of historically disadvantaged groups rob us of a useful tool for investigating the power imbalances and hidden assumptions that shape consciousness of history, identity and race relations. Thus, while Walker's scenarios generally take place in the plantations and slave quarters of the antebellum South, they have less to do with verifiable events of pre-Civil War America than they, do with the imaginative world conjure by novels like *Gone With the Wind* and *Uncle* Tom’s Cabin*,* as well as the titillating interracial entanglements found in Harlequin Romances and the mix of sex, violence and paranoia in racist movies like Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman,* which served as the basis of D.W Griffith's epic 1915 film *Birth of a Nation.* To underscore her work's distance from any verifiable historical reality, Walker often refers in her titles to the work's author as a quasi-fictional character, e.g., “Miss K. Walker, A Free Negress of Noteworthy Talent” or a “Negress of Some Notoriety.”

While her critics tend to take her images of the perversity of plantation life at face value, Walker is in fact attempting to explore the secret lives of racist clichés. She made this point succinctly in a lecture at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2000, noting, “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. There-fore, racist stereotypes occurring in my art can only partake of psychotic activities.”

"Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love," a retrospective of the artist’s work curated by Phillippe Vergne for the Walker Art Center last Spring (it opens this month in New York at the Whitney Museum), offers a full-scale opportunity to assess the effectiveness of Walker's strategy. The first thing that becomes clear about Walker's work, which was well served by the Walker Art Center installation, is its sheer beauty and formal elegance. The second is the diversity of her visual sources, which include folk art, Victorian portrait silhouettes, Mother Goose illustrations, minstrel shows, illustrated sheet music, Javanese puppet theater and l9th-century illustrated weeklies. Images from these vernacular and often art-historically marginal sources are transformed, in Walker's hands, into works that compel as much for their esthetics as their content.

In Minneapolis, the show unfolded with a series of the cut-paper silhouette tableaux

that are the most widely known of Walker's many formats. Often very extensive, they were affixed to specially created curved walls. This format, which will be repeated at the Whitney, brings out the movement and rhythm of the figures and the sense of enveloping space created by such details as little snippets of landscape, implied horizon lines or celestial phenomena. Walker has noted that one inspiration for these sweeping panoramas is the 19th-century tradition of cycloramas, massive history paintings painted on cylindrical walls that offered a pre-cinematic experience of visual immersion.

The other inspiration, of course, is the traditional cut-paper silhouette, which originated in prerevolutionary France. Its name comes from a short-lived and unpopular French finance minister named Etienne de Silhouette who made a hobby of cutting profiles out of paper, In France, the practice was associated with the soon-to-be deposed aristocracy, but by the 19th century it had spread throughout Europe and to the United States. In America, especially, it took on a populist aura as itinerant sillhouettists traveled the country producing likenesses of famous and ordinary people. It also became an accepted "ladies' art." Walker's adoption of the form acknowledges its classist and racial undercurrents-slaves were sometimes enlisted to create silhouette portraits of their masters. The very blackness of traditional silhouettes is also put into play, both for the associations of the word "black " and for the fact that the black paper favored by silhouette artists had an unintended leveling effect by erasing differences in skin tone.

Tucked into smaller galleries were collect ions of framed drawings that recall Honore Daumier, George Grosz and Odilon Redon as well as political cartoons and graffiti. The show also included several video works, including one presented in a theatrical space amid stage flats depicting overhanging cypress trees. The videos draw on shadow puppetry as well as on silent movies-there are histrionic scenes framed by narrative placards that explain or in some cases obfuscate the action.

Roughly chronological, the show opened with a set of very early small cut-paper works on canvas from 1994-95 in which silhouettes are placed against moody gray grounds, as well as several large figural cut paper silhouettes set against the while wall, also early. 'These are quickly followed by the first monumental silhouette tableau, titled *Gone, An Historical Romance of A Civil war as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, which appeared at the Drawing Center in 1994 and earned Walker her first widespread critical attention.

Gone... draws on the mingling of bodice-ripping romance, casual racism and historical distortion found in the pages of *Gone With The Wind*. This mural introduces many of the themes and motifs that recur throughout Walker's work. Reading from left to right, the narrative opens with a romantic scene that seems straight out of the novel. A young gallant and a belle stand beneath a full moon, poised for a kiss under the branches of a sycamore tree. However, a closer look reveals the barefoot legs of a slave child emerging from beneath the belle's hoop skirt, suggesting the complicity and illicit intimacy between the classes of master and slave. From here things become even more peculiar. A naked slave girl handles a dead goose; a slave woman lies on the ground, her body resembling a boat and thereby referencing the horrific Middle Passage that brought the slaves to America. On a hillock, another slave girl

Next among the large murals in the show is *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (1995).* Here the level of violence and perversity has been ratcheted up. The inspiration is Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Toms Cabin,* which has been hailed for its role in the abolition movement and derided for its stereotypical portrayal of slaves, and, in particular, its sentimental vision of the ever-suffering house slave Uncle Tom. In Walker's version, little Eva, the saintly white girl whose dying wish is Uncle Tom's freedom, becomes a nasty little harridan swinging an axe over the head of a black baby, with the blade, oddly, aimed at herself. Uncle Tom, thoroughly emasculated, drops his pants to birth a baby. A slave child marches off into the distance leaving a trail of excrement. Meanwhile an elderly master with only a single peg leg props himself up by a Sword that stabs a black baby on the ground while he penetrates a young slave girl with his penis. On the far left, in yet another breach of both nature and decorum, a slave child and three slave women suck each other's breasts. Even a rabbit seems to have gotten in on the act, mounting what looks like another slave child. Here as in later works, sex, violence and power intermingle in a world in which all trace of social order seems to have broken down.

In contrast to *Gone*…, the composition seems episodic. The three small, highly detailed landscapes-seen-from-afar silhouettes seem designed less to establish a single coherent space than to provide an alternate view of the world under inspection. From a distance, the plantation appears almost peaceful (though one tiny landscape does feature a man running from the porch to the outhouse). By contrast, the larger foreground images, composed of clusters of figures involved in separate and discrete narratives, reveal the pathologies invisible in the landscape sections.

The third major mural is the massively titled *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 Institutions 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).* Walker notes that this work has two primary sources: a cyclorama of the battle of Atlanta, which is housed in a circular gallery in the city and Eastman Johnson's 1859 painting *Old Kentucky Home*, which depicts an idyll of carefree slave life behind the Big House. The mural is designed to be viewed completely in the round, though of necessity a door breaks it up; in Minneapolis the door separated the two parts of a hay cart into which a male slave is tossing his family via pitchfork for an escape on the Underground Railroad. In *Slavery! Slavery!* ... the relations of the races become even more complex, with a white man kneeling and farting before a fountain that features a dancing naked black girl who Spouts bodily fluids from every orifice. A slave trader marches off with a chained black man; a white woman with a black mask prances forward while a little boy in an Arab costume shoots perfume in her wake. There is also a confab of dancing and drum-playing slaves loosely taken from the Johnson painting, and a pair of belles peering through a keyhole in a fence (the fence is another reference to Johnson) into the buttocks of a young black man on the other side.

Formally, this is the most complex of the murals, with a much larger cast of characters and a far greater incorporation of landscape and background elements. A basic ground line is established with figures rooted to a shallow proscenium by shadows or bits of landscape. Behind them, however, shifts of scale seem designed less to place figures in a coherent space than to create emphasis. Oversized swaths

of Spanish moss-laden branches loom above certain figures as if to isolate them in a theatrical environment. Serving a similar function, a giant crescent moon hangs over a group of slaves puking and hauling away vomit. Other figure groups are rendered larger or smaller without regard to traditional perspective, as when a couple copulating on a roof in the distance is as dominant as the oblivious southern belles in the foreground below, or a plantation mistress shaking a child with two pairs of legs seems to float above the ground.
The fourth cut-paper mural is a bit of an anomaly. *Endlesse Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* (200 1) was originally created for a group exhibition in Basel, Switzerland, dealing with ornament and abstraction. Here Walker takes on the "Primitivism" debate, scattering images that meld her characteristic figures with African sculptures and Congolese *nkisi* objects. Moving out of the plantation context, she addresses the appropriation of African sculpture by European modernists.

The mural includes images of randy and violent European explorers, a recurring ornamental motif meant to recall Brancusi's Endless Column and even a European artist chipping away at a sculpture of an African woman that has come to life. Unlike the other murals, this one is on a flat rather than curved wall and is composed of images dispersed fairly evenly over its entirety, rather than strung out in an episodic manner. *Endless Conundrum* also contains a mix of black and brown paper silhouettes which serves to further separate vignettes. The mural is presided over by a dancer scattering bananas as she writhes. In keeping with the primitivism theme, this figure pays homage to Josephine Baker, the so-called
Black Venus who swept France in the 1920s and '30s with erotic dancing that played on her African heritage.

The final mural, *Excavated from the Black Heart of a Negress (2002),* lays gray and white silhouette figures over a black wall, lending them a shadowy character. This work gives bigger play to the masters and mistresses and their ambivalent relations with their slaves, but is less satisfying formally because figure groups are simply lined up across the wall without any effort to engage the surrounding space.
I n another room Walker combines black-silhouette cutouts with wall projections of colored shapes. The largest of these works is *Darkytown Rebellion (2001)*, in which rebellious slaves rally around a figure based on the flag-waving heroine in Delacroix's *liberty Leading the People.* Another projection, *Mistress Demanded a Swift and Dramatic Empathetic Reaction Which We Obliged Her (2000),* presents a vignette in which a slave girl stabs her mistress under the gaze of a chained male slave. Bathing floor, wall and ceiling in colored lights, these projections enhance the already theatrical nature of Walker's large-scale works, suggesting an interest in spectacle that she soon indulged in her video works.

The themes of the large murals continue in works of various scales and mediums. In fact, the range of Walker's production is quite broad. There are pencil drawings; collages of found, often pornographic, images laid over the pages of a 19th-century illustrated history of the CivilWar; small silhouette narratives that play against moody, stage-setlike backdrops; graffiti looks like scrawls and texts typed with an old typewriter on index cards and pinned to the wall.

There are also many series of small and not so small drawings using a variety of mediums. "Negress Notes (Brown Follies) are watercolor and charcoal drawings that deliberately echo the work of 18th-century caricaturists like William Hogarth and

James Gillray. Here, as in the murals, with their invocation of Victorian silhouettes and Mother Goose Illustrations Walker displays a remarkable flair for mimicry, while tying her work to popular visual forms that traditionally flourished beneath the radar of high art. No less than the fluid paper cutouts, her line drawings capture characters and evoke worlds rarely found in more respectably formats.

Walker has described these as historical notes, and they include real and imagined scenes in which, for instance, a blond girl watches a black one place a noose around her own neck. In another, Uncle Tom kneels lasciviously in front of Little Eva as she makes shadow images of a rabbit with her fingers. Figures of various races, genders and ages couple, defecate, give birth, attack each other and generally behave badly. In one, with the caption "The Oppressor/Oppressed Paradigm," one black girl chokes another. In a drawing inscribed with the phrase "The prevention of Oedipus," an angry black girl raises a knife on a child.

The ambiguity and ambivalence about standard race narratives reaches its height in a set of drawings from 1997, which a wall label notes were inspired by Walker's reaction to the controversy surrounding her work. With scrawled texts and cartoonish images, she presents racializcd sex fantasies, in which, for instance, she has sex with David Duke. Some quite pointedly reject the demand of older black artists that she present more uplifting images. A drawing with the caption "Positive Black Images" offers a set of signs that read "Kill Whitey," "We Shall Overcome." And "Defeat the Man." Coming from somewhere offstage a speech bubble reacts to the the last with "jus leave my man alone!" (perhaps a reference to the fact that Walker is married to a Caucasian). Another calls for "civil rights for everybody, not just special groups," noting, "Chinks, spicks, wops, macs, japs, jews, ayrabs and the like are all trying to cut in on our act."

Some large sepia drawings in the show seem indebted to Daumier. In *John Brown (1996),* the white abolitionist stands beside a slave mother holding a naked child who pulls at his own nipple. In another drawing, a woman in an elaborate hat is literally devouring the head of the man beside her. Even more explicitly than the murals, these diaristic drawings suggest Walker's unwillingness to embrace a purely dualistic view of race relations.

Several video works add movement and sound to Walker's narratives. One titled 8 *Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker* (2005) presents the story of African-Americans in the New World from a variety of Perspectives. Walker's inspiration was the 1946 Walt Disney film *Song of the South,* a sanitized version of the Uncle Remus stories, By means of a filmed shadow-puppet play rather crudely manipulated by a mostly off-camera puppeteer, Walker re-creates the story of the Middle Passage as slaves are hoisted overboard, only to be swallowed by a giant African goddess who has morphed out of a nearby island. They tumble through her intestines and are excreted into a new world. A black man born of this pile of feces becomes King Cotton and stars in a fantasy scene of slaves dancing in the fields, This vignette culminates with the male master and female slaw: having sex, an act that impregnates King Cotton. Following several other episodes, the work concludes with a sinister Uncle Remus and a lynching scene. Each of the little stories is ironically counter·pointed with vintage popular music, the happy messages of which belie the darker undercurrents of the narrative.

Another shadow-play video, *Testimony: Narrative of* a *Negress Burdened by Good Intentions* (2004), features explicit role reversals: the slaves on the plantation seize power and proceed exactly as would their white counterparts, complete with a search for white escapees, interracial sex and the lynching of the black heroine's white lover.

Walker's resistance to the stark dichotomy of victim/oppressor is on display throughout the show, nowhere more than in the rather scathing 1998 text piece from which the exhibition takes its title. Occupying an entire room, it addresses itself to a presumably white reader with the salutation "Dear you hypocritical fucking Twerp." The text, which looks like it's been written on an old manual typewriter, uses the litany "My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love"to engage an insidious aspect of the slave system. Illicit sexual ties, whether violently imposed or quasi consensual, the introduction of mixed-race progeny into the largely closed system of plantation life, as well as the intimacy that resulted from the proximity in which slaves and master lived their lives served to undermine the supposedly absolute distinction between the two classes.

This complexity may explain the violent reactions Walker has often encountered. Even more than the adoption of racial stereotypes, the aspect of her work that draws particular censure is the sexual, and often deliberately obscene, nature of so much of her imagery. The recurring presence of dancing figures inspired by Josephine Baker or the "Hottentot Venus" as well as the obsession with child abuse, bestiality, onanism, erotically charged breast-feeding and the promiscuous dis-charge of bodily fluids suggests that unnatural taboo and degrading sex acts are at the center of Walker's vision of racism. Nor is it clear that sex here is simply a matter of the exploitation of the weak by the powerful. Sex also seems to operate as a counter to the otherwise clear lines of authority, hobbling the master and disrupting plantation life.

In a perceptive essay written in the catalogue for Walker's contribution to the 2002 Sao Paulo Bienal, Robert Hobbs points to the centrality of abjection to Walker's vision. Abjection, as defined by Julia Kristeva, is essentially a form of border-crossing in which taboo materials like dirt, hair, excrement, dead animals, menstrual blood and rotting food and taboo subjects like castration and dismemberment serve as a means of breaking down the prescribed order of polite society. In Walker's work, sex serves as an agent of mixing, disrupting order and creating impurities through a willful breaching of established boundaries. In the end, Walker seems to be saying, slavery, and the racism that is its ongoing legacy, deforms all that it touches, victim and victimizer alike. It creates a set of distorted identities that depend on each other for their continued existence. As a result, though the stereotypes which Walker parlays may not reflect "real" people, that fact does nothing to abridge their power.