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Kara Walker   *Slavery! Slavery!*

Robert Hobbs

> *Race, as a meaningful criterion within the biological sciences, has long been recognized to be a fiction. When we speak of "the white" or "the black race," "the Jewish race" or "the Aryan race," we speak in biological misnomers and more generally, in metaphors. . . . Race, in these usages, pretends to be an objective term of classification, when in fact it is a dangerous trope. . . . Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application.*
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> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, 1985

Contemptible collectibles, blackface Americana, black memorabilia, and anti-black artifacts are the terms most often used for the antiques and recently produced objects that are known by these different categories, depending on one's reaction to them. Sometimes the word "racist" is added to reinforce their original demeaning intent, but increasingly these articles that continue to stereotype African-Americans in terms of exaggerated features and controversial activities are becoming known under the simple, straightforward rubric "black collectibles." The noncommittal stance indicated by this term is appropriate since these tchotchkes, which range from late nineteenth-century pieces to recently manufactured ones, from trade cards to cookie jars, mechanical banks, and cast-iron groom hitching posts, (to name only a few of a much larger group of object types), have elicited a range of heated responses after becoming eagerly sought-after items in the past two decades by such notables as Julian Bond, Bill Cosby, Whoopi Goldberg, Bobby Short, and Mike Tyson.

In *Images in Black: 150 Years of Black Collectibles*, market specialist Douglas Congdon-Martin estimates that seventy percent of this material regularly purchased by African-Americans who acquire black memorabilia is because of a desire to understand their history even to the extent of wishing to comprehend how these racist stereotypes have contributed to it. He goes on to say that some blacks and whites buy these objectionable pieces with the express purpose of removing them from view. Others find them strangely nostalgic and even comforting, evidently assuming, with an alarming naiveté and a specious form of reasoning, that the sins of the past are permissible if they have contributed to our present state of affairs. Given this range of attitudes, it is not surprising that still others collect examples of these long invoked stereotypes because they are seeking confirmation of their racist views.[1]

A brief history of the acquisition and display of black collectibles is crucial to an understanding of the art of African-American artist Kara Walker since it enables us to appreciate conflicted attitudes regarding racist stereotypes that have developed in the wake of both Civil Rights legislation and Political Correctness policies that provide a basis for her work. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes analyzes the stereotype as a "word repeated without any magic, any enthusiasm, as though it were natural, as though by some miracle this recurring word were adequate on each occasion for different reasons, as though to imitate could no longer be sensed as an imitation. . . ."[2] Both Walker's work and this essay on it intend to denaturalize racist stereotypes though the contradictory process of re-mystifying them, making them appear as extraordinarily strange and different as they actually are. The basis for this type of analysis has been amply prepared by the vogue for collecting blackface memorabilia.

Although it has not been acknowledged in the critical literature on Kara Walker, this recently established collecting bent helped to set the stage for Walker's work and its phenomenal early success. Only months after receiving in 1994 an M.F.A. degree at the Rhode Island School of

Design, Walker impressed members of the New York art world with an imposing fifty-foot mural at the Drawing Center that she titled, as a send-up of Margaret Mitchell's famous novel, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. Apropos this exhibition, *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter commented:

> *Kara Walker explores drawing's narrative potential in a large figurative tableau that looks as if it were drawn in ink but is actually made of silhouettes cut from black paper. This technique, popular for making quick, inexpensive portraits in the last century, is decisively updated in Ms. Walker's hands as she fashions a surreal, raunchy, angry fantasia on the world of antebellum slavery. Looking like a cross between a children's book and a sexually explicit cartoon, this is skillful, imaginative work and will doubt-less be showing up elsewhere soon.*[3]

In spite of the fact that Walker's work immediately attracted a wide following, critics have regularly noted that neither the whites nor the blacks represented in it are characterized as winners. In the six years since its New York début, Walker's art, however, has proven particularly offensive to Civil Rights-era blacks who have regularly availed themselves of the modern propensity to essentialize and reify identity in their ongoing battle against racist images by creating in their art paragons of African-American morality. Viewing the world in terms of a blurring of binary oppositions, Walker's new hybrid and even incestuous couplings of both black and white stereotypes have made some members of this generation uneasy. Although her art has not been viewed in terms of the relatively recent post-Civil Rights fascination with black collectibles by upscale African-Americans, it is in part predicated on their reevaluation of this material.

    The first acknowledged gallery exhibition of black memorabilia

was the 1982 show *Ethnic Notions* at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, California which featured the collection of Janette Faulkner, an African-American social worker who began acquiring blackface objects in the early 1960s.[4] In her statement regarding reasons for building such a collection, Faulkner described her initial shock at finding in an antique shop a postcard picturing a stereotypical view of a man with missing teeth that bore the caption, "dares mo laak dis back home."[5] Faulkner explained that collecting and living with such objects over the years strengthened her ability to cope with racial prejudice by providing her with a historical perspective. Moreover, studying large quantities of this material enabled her to gain a needed aesthetic distance from it since she acquired over time the tempering lens of connoisseurship that enabled her to focus on issues of style, technique, and quality rather than dwell only on the subject matter of this material.[6]

Although Ms. Faulkner deserves high marks for her intrepid collecting tastes and for challenging herself to live with objects whose original intent was to poke fun at African-Americans by demeaning them, such exemplary stoutheartedness only partially explains how the acquisition of these objects soon became fashionable among black luminaries and professionals. Faulkner's appearance on NBC's *Today* show quickly spread the idea of owning such items, and the sixty-minute documentary film, also entitled *Ethnic Notions*, by independent filmmaker Marlon Riggs in 1987 helped to legitimize these artifacts. The phenomenon became so widespread in the 1980s that it generated a quarterly magazine called *Black Ethnic Collectibles* and a national group named the National Black Memorabilia Collectors Association (BMCA), which boasted in 1990 thirteen local chapters in metropolitan areas throughout the United States, a membership of over 700 people, and even an active youth component that served college, secondary, and elementary students.

But collecting black memorabilia became much more than rigorous acts of valor that intimately acquainted collectors with objects able to

steel them for adversity by reminding them that blatantly open acts of prejudice have been permitted, and even encouraged, in the past. Even though collectors of black memorabilia have regularly taken refuge in the rationale that they are buying history, a keen and assiduous appreciation for past reality, extending even to its darker aspects, is in retrospect not the main reason for pursuing this material. In *Ethnic Notions* Robbin Henderson, Director of the Berkeley Art Center, provides an answer by pointing out unequivocally, "This is not a collection of artifacts about black history. Most of this material was created by white people. It is the consciousness of the dominant class which we see in this collection."[7] The practice of collecting blackface memorabilia has thus become enormously empowering to blacks since these artifacts are now being seen as an ongoing indictment of racist white attitudes that have materialized as racist Americana. As Erskine Peters, then Assistant Professor of Afro-American Studies at University of California, Berkeley, opines:

> *Perhaps the [white] artificers of these images never really consid-*
> *ered that they were preserving and projecting what was actually a*
> *gulf within themselves more than outside of themselves. Perhaps,*
> *too, most of these artificers never considered that the figures*
> *should have been cast in white instead of blackface.*[8]

Peters concludes that blackface memorabilia is far mor incriminating of whites, who created and originally purchased these images, than of blacks, who were in turn subjected to the racist attitudes giving rise to these objects. While the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted as law by Abraham Lincoln before the end of the Civil War and full passage of Civil Rights legislation became a reality a century later, the equally difficult work of disinterring and critiquing the ideological morass attending slavery and segregation has only begun to be undertaken by African-Americans on a broad basis in the past few decades. Janette Faulkner may well be the

Rosa Parks of the current war on racist ideology, but the battle against its long-term effects is just beginning.

In a letter of 1981, written no doubt to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which helped support this exhibition, poet and novelist Alice Walker articulated the terms of this ideological battle that not only has pitted blacks against whites but also has created dissension among blacks. In her letter, Alice Walker establishes the parameters of this war on ideology. Even though her thoughts were unknown to Kara Walker when she was maturing as an artist, this same rationale has become crucially important to her work. Alice Walker writes:

> *These caricatures and stereotypes were really intended as prisons. Prisons without the traditional bars, but prisons of image. Inside each desperately grinning "sambo" and each placid 300-pound "mammy" lamp there is imprisoned a real person, someone we know. If you look hard at the collection and don't panic. . . you will begin to really see, the eyes and then the hearts of these despised relatives of ours, who have been forced to lock their true spirits away from themselves and away from us. . . .*
>
> *This is the way I now see Jan Faulkner's collection. I see our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, captured and forced into images they did not devise, doing hard time for all of us.*
>
> *We can liberate them by understanding this. And free ourselves.*[9]

Being "captured and forced into images they did not devise" is, according to Alice Walker, being forced into a stereotypical role, a particularly insidious and long-lasting form of slavery – a doubling of slavery akin to the title of Kara Walker's panorama, as we will see – that continues to the present.

Our familiarity with stereotypes does not equip us to understand the dynamics of how they entrap their subjects. Because of ideology's