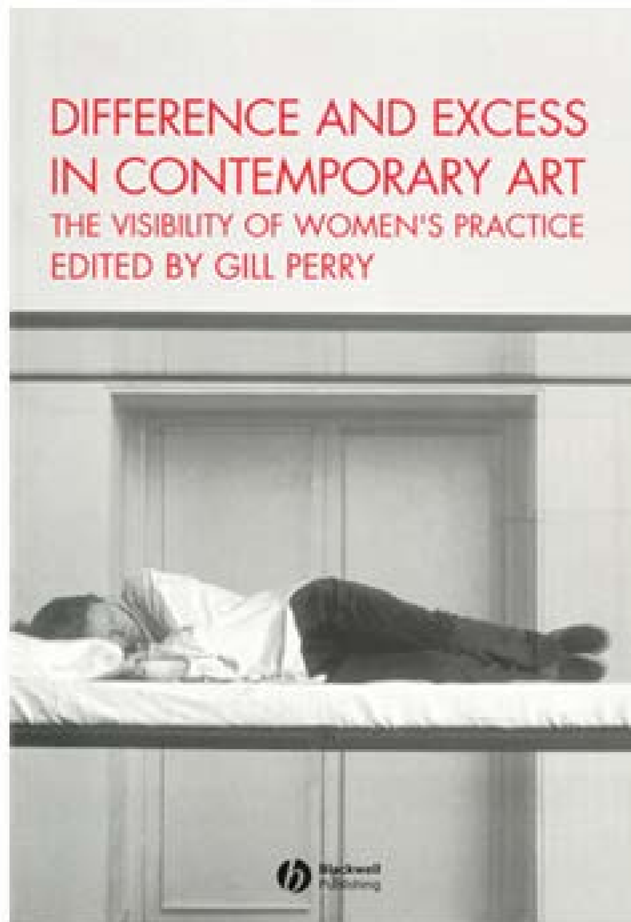


"Reading Black Through White: Kara Walker and the Question of Racial Stereotyping. A Discussion between Michael Corris and Robert Hobbs." *Art History* 26, no. 3 (June 2003). Reprint in Gill Perry, ed. *Differences and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practices*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2004; pp. 104-123.

Text © Robert Hobbs

6.1 Kara Walker, *Beat*, 1998. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 152.4 × 81.28 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York City.

6

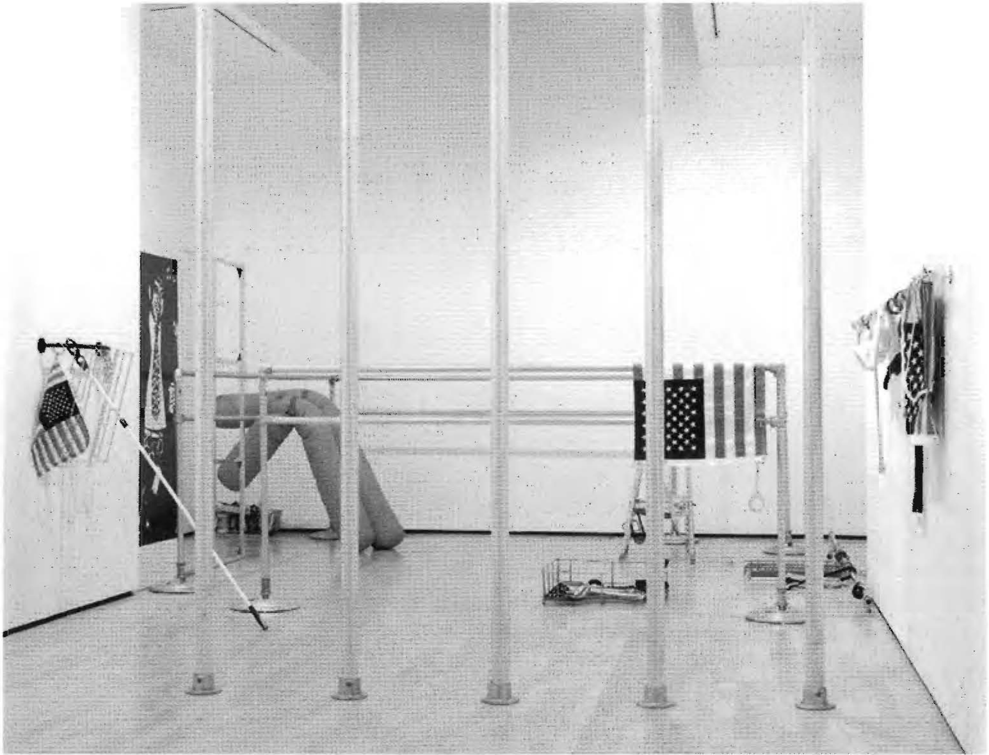
Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker

A discussion between Michael Corris *and* Robert Hobbs

Kara Walker, born in 1969 in Stockton, California, lives and works in Providence, Rhode Island. She studied art at the Atlanta College of Art, Atlanta, Georgia and the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. She began exhibiting in the early-1990s and has shown extensively throughout the US and the UK. Walker's work has been exhibited at, among others, the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Hayward Gallery, the Barbican Art Gallery, London, the Armand Hammer Museum of Art, Los Angeles, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. In 1997 Walker was the recipient of a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation grant, the so-called 'genius' award. Most recently, Walker was the featured US artist at the 25th Bienal Internacional de São Paolo (23 March–2 June 2002).

As a complex and controversial artist who powerfully references the institution of slavery and the visual resources of racial stereotyping, Walker's work continues to raise issues germane to an understanding of the African-American diaspora. While clearly indexed to the debate on ethnically explicit visual art in the United States, Walker's concerns and the controversies they engender are not without resonance for contemporary British artists, critics and historians. Work of the past decade by British artists of Afro-Caribbean descent, such as Sonia Boyce, Isaac Julien and Keith Piper, serves to demonstrate the continuing vitality in visual art of the issue of race and the Black diaspora. It also shows how artists have managed to extend such analyses by inflecting them with gender and class. Not surprisingly, some of the most generative work in the field has been, and continues to be, produced by women artists.

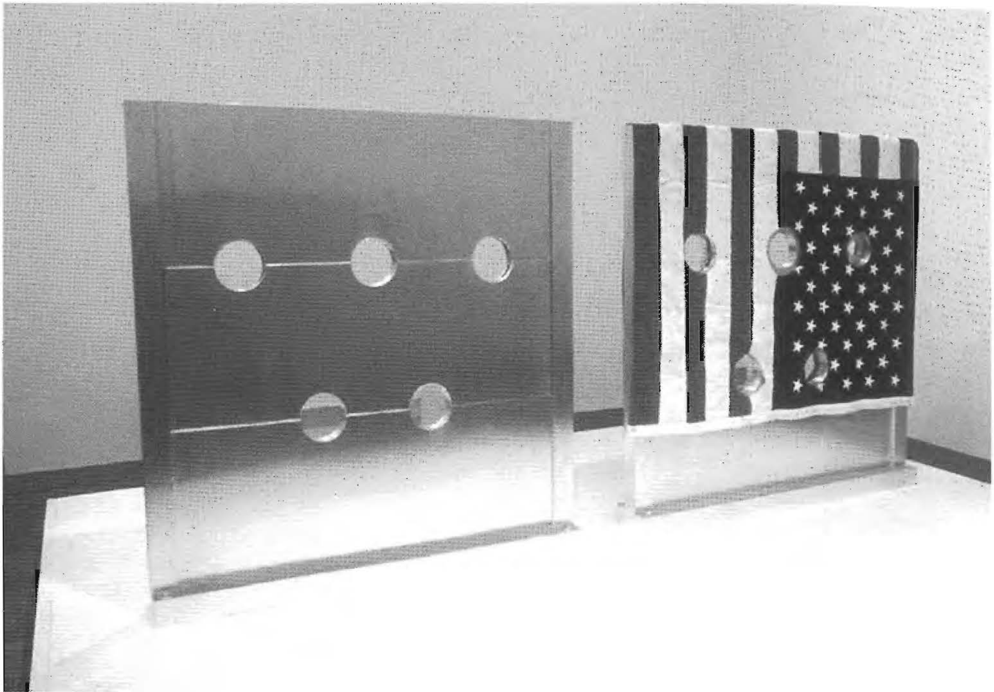
MC: *When asked about her obsession with violence in American life, the artist Cady Noland indicated that it is the circumstances under which people treat other people like objects that she finds of interest. Noland became interested in social psychology and the analysis of psychopathic behaviour because of the social phenomenon of objectification. For the artist, such social mores define the outer limits of a tendency already inscribed within American history and culture.*[1] *Noland's powerful evocation of American violence is indexed to specific socio-cultural contexts or class strata. One of these has been aptly described by the historian Brandon Taylor as being 'redolent of the mid-West or*



6.2 Photograph of Cady Noland's installation at the Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London, 1989. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London.

Southern states'.[2] *In her famously menacing installations of the early 1990s Noland always managed to treat violence as a differential category by sorting it out in terms of its relation to politics (for example, political assassination) and class (civil violence and police repression directed at a specific sector of the public), while making a more general point about its role in a society of conformity and harassed avenues of political dissent (plate 6.2). In Kara Walker's work, one also finds representations of violence framed by what strikes me as a similar kind of attitude. There is a menacing starkness, or cold-blooded feeling to Walker's panoramas. Representations of African-American slave bodies and white bodies are deployed as instruments to be used or vessels to be violated and discarded like trash. What is your impression of Walker's mixture of race and violence?*

RH: Cady Noland's violence is directed outwards, while Kara Walker's is directed inwards, and its target is the effect of that highly ideological construct: race. Instead of achieving the critical distance permitted Noland by her study of psychopathic social behaviour, Walker looks at the racist stereotypes that affect her, and she employs abjection as a means for rethinking them.



6.3 (left) Cady Noland, *Your Fucking Face*, 1993–94. Aluminium over wood, stock: 152.4 × 142.2 × 20.3 cm, stool: 53.3 × 30.5 × 29.2 cm; and (right) *Gibbet*, 1993–94. Aluminium over wood draped with the American flag, stock: 152.4 × 142.2 × 20.3 cm, stool: 53.3 × 30.5 × 29.2 cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Paula Cooper Inc., New York.

When you mention abjection, I cannot help but visualize Noland's self-portrait in a stockade (plate 6.3).

In Walker's art abjection is something distinctly different: a blurring of boundaries between self and shadow, black and white, publicly sanctioned acts and transgressive ones that are capable of destroying established and limited subjectivities (see plate 6.1). The body is opened to the social order, a more permeable world that experiences flows from the inside as well as from the outside. The ensuing destabilized abject realm becomes a virtual Garden of Delights on a par with Hieronymous Bosch's, in which couplings are less intended to constitute straightforward descriptions of orgiastic sex – although shock value does play an important role in characterizing the miasma of abjection – and more like symbolic references to the obfuscation resulting in an undermining of the established order of clearly defined stereotypes. The irony of Walker's work is found in her need to enter the stereotypical realm of the Antebellum in order to combat it. Conceptualized as the sense of emptiness that comes before the formation of a new ego – the void into which the present definition of the self is given up with no thought or hope of a new unifying ego – abjection represents the midnight of existence that Walker portrays as a insubstantial domain of vacancy lying beneath the surface of stereotypes.

Again, with reference to Noland's work, we understand the concept of abjection as it is coded through the use of the stockade, the allusion to the boxing ring, the restraining and offensive paraphernalia of police, and the way these elements are collaged or strung together. In principle, Noland's installations invite the physical participation of the viewer. Is there a similarly coherent, visceral iconography that is at work in Walker's panoramas?

The iconographic equivalent to the black hole and abjection in Walker's works are the piles of dung in *Slavery, Slavery!* which she at first excuses as a sign for 'letting it all hang out' (plate 6.4). Then she goes on to qualify faeces as a metaphor for 'finding one's voice in the wrong end; searching for one's voice and having it come out the wrong way'.[3] The difficulty facing those who have been deemed stereotypical and have internalized even a smidgen of its pernicious effects is that their voices have already been co-opted and lost. According to Julia Kristeva,

> excrement and its equivalents ... stand for the danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. ... Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become *autonomous, distinct* from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it.[4]

In *Slavery! Slavery!* Walker contrasts the heap of excrement (located at the extreme right-hand side of the composition) with an all-giving fountain (plate 6.5). Both are two-dimensional stereotypes in cut paper. While faeces reinforce the emptiness of a self that has already evacuated (abjected) itself, the fountain celebrates an ongoing permeable and continuously fecund mirror image that holds out the promise of a fuller self-image, even though it is, in essence, just another stereotype. We might say that the dung and fountain connote two different aspects of abjection: dung signifies the hollowness that attends rejection of one's current subjectivity, while the fountain portends a fuller, richer, and more complete self. Located to the side of the central moon in *Slavery! Slavery!* the two represent different cycles in the anxious night of destabilization that is the condition of abjection.

Walker asserts that there is no such thing as the African-American who is also not partially constituted by the racial stereotypes that were used to justify slavery, segregation, race murder, the KKK, etc. The critic bell hooks, on the other hand, interprets the stereotypes of Walker as a form of repression. They are seen by her to play into the hands of 'The White Man' who everywhere seeks to establish the conditions where actual and symbolic repression returns to thwart the aspirations of African-Americans. The stereotype, in effect, becomes a material fact in the ongoing repression of the African-American, a denial of her humanity. Walker is as personally aware as any African-American of the effect of racial stereotyping. Yet, she seems to be asking all Americans to take hold of this stereotype, to emblematize it, and to fantasize through it. Don't turn

6.4 Detail from Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery!*, 1997. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 3.57 × 25.9 m overall. Collection of Peter Norton Family Foundation. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York City.

away from it; rather, recognize it as a profound part of your being and consciousness as an African-American (and, for another sector of the audience, as a White American). It's your 'Mom-and-apple-pie' moment, your share of the American Dream Death Trip. While no one is suggesting that Walker does not believe deeply that racial stereotyping is abhorrent and a key element of racist thought, it is interesting to me that the artist's use of such stereotypes has been most vehemently contested by an older generation of African-Americans. To my knowledge, no white commentators have taken issue with her use of stereotypical imagery. But before we get into the specifics of that controversy, I'd like to explore further here the nature and function of stereotyping. With regard to this, Manning Marable refers to the 'stumbling block of stereotypes' as 'the device at the heart of every form of racism today'.[5] *For Marable, the degrading effect of the stereotype is not only the result of the objectification of human beings, but quite clearly a denial of a people's entire history and culture. Aside from Walker's fantastic portrayal of antebellum slavery, what role – if any – have other aspects of African-American diasporic history and culture played in the genesis and development of her work?*

Although Walker's 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 a re-evaluation of this material, which she collects on a modest scale. 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 so-called blackface objects in the early 1960s.[6] In her justification 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'.[7] Faulkner explained that collecting and living with such objects – which presented her with an historical perspective – strengthened her ability over the years to cope with racial prejudice. Moreover, studying large quantities of this material enabled her to gain a needed aesthetic distance. Over time, she acquired the tempering lens of connoisseurship that enabled her to focus on issues of style, technique and quality, rather than dwelling exclusively on the subject matter of racial stereotyping.[8] But collecting Black memorabilia became much more than a rigorous act of valour enabling her to steel herself against racial prejudice, violence and adversity. Even though collectors of Black memorabilia have regularly taken refuge in the rationale that they are buying history, an appreciation for a past reality extending to its darkest aspects is, in retrospect, not the main reason for the pursuit of this material. In *Ethnic Notions*, Robbin Henderson, Director of the Berkeley Art Center, provides an answer by pointing out unequivocally that '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.'[9] The practice of collecting blackface memorabilia has thus become enormously empowering to blacks, as these artefacts are now being seen as an ongoing indictment of racist white attitudes that have materialized as racist Americana.

6.5 Detail from Kara Walker, *Slavery! Slavery!*, 1997, showing the fountain. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 3.57 × 25.9 m overall. Collection of Peter Norton Family Foundation. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York City.

The suggestion that stereotypes depict the consciousness of the dominant class seems to me to be precisely at the heart of the criticism ranged against Walker and others who try make artistic use of such imagery. The charge against Walker is that stereotypical representations of African-Americans cannot be rehabilitated; they are absolutely inappropriate as resources of expression. During the late-1990s Walker – along with artists such as Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Michael Ray Charles, Ellen Gallagher, Fred Wilson and Robert Colescott – was among a coterie of African-American artists accused of racist complicity by Howardena Pindell.[10] *Pindell contended that these artists had sold their souls to the white art mainstream precisely because they continued to provide degrading images of blacks for the amusement of primarily white art audiences. Walker's reply to her critics simply inflamed them. 'What is troubling and complicates the matter', writes Pindell, '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.' In a similar vein, the American artist Betye Saar*[11] *circulated a petition that urged the MacArthur Foundation to rescind its 'genius' award to Walker. How, in your estimation, does Walker's work – her use and staging of stereotypes – compare to that of other African-American artists of her generation? Do you believe that the anger and betrayal felt by some segments of the African-American community is justified?*

The event that first alerted Walker to the ways that the enslavement of blacks can be both legitimized and romanticized was the 1977 television mini-series *Roots*, based on Alex Haley's 1976 book of the same title. This chronological tale, spanning the years 1750 to 1895, purportedly chronicles the diaspora of the author's own family from Africa to the New World and characterizes it as a journey from slavery to freedom. Although only eight years old when this mini-series made its initial appearance on television, Walker was puzzled by the fascination that both slavery and the antebellum period held for older African-Americans. 'I don't remember much of the story,' Walker recalled, '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.'[12] Extraordinarily popular, the series attracted 130 million viewers: the largest television viewing audience in the United States up to that time. Walker was too young to realize that Haley's narrative of his family's battles against enormous odds enabled her elders at long last to talk about the execrable institution of slavery and their ancestors' participation in it. But she did discern how post-*Roots* African-Americans inadvertently began to idealize the legacy of resiliency and strength they believed themselves to have inherited from enslaved forebears. Instead of continuing to be ashamed of their distant connections with slavery, Haley's fans began acknowledging this heritage and searched for ways to research their own genealogical backgrounds – by first facing the void that slavery had become, and then moving, if possible, beyond the Middle Passage to Africa. Although this acceptance was a distinct gain, it had the unmistakable drawback of glorifying slavery as a sacred myth and essential rite of passage.

Years later, in response to this effect, Walker commented cryptically that 'black people's "tolerance" of racial horrors in the past makes them better masochists and more colorful rioters in the future.'[13]

The 1990s was a decade when a post-Civil Rights, African-American identity became a full-blown reality. There are many wonderful artists working with this identity, as you suggest. Questions most often asked about them are: do these artists really need to signal their ethnicity in their art? Are they being unnecessarily encumbered by their ethnic orientation? Perhaps the question that should be asked is: why, in the 1990s, did these artists feel the need to declare ethnicity a central aspect of their work? I think the answer lies in the double bind of being still encumbered by the idealism of the mid-century Civil Rights movement, while still having to suffer the injustices of discrimination. Each member of this generation has formulated his or her strategy for coping with this double bind. Lorna Simpson plays with the unattainable masks that haunted Pan-Africanists. Gary Simmons views African-Americans as the blackboard on which the smudged, chalk-written signs of white racism are still evident. Fred Wilson re-inscribes, in one of his most notable works, the material traces of slavery in an historic museum which tried over the years to efface them. Michael Ray Charles reasserts the iconic emblems of Jim Crow-era stereotypes, while Glenn Ligon's mantra-like repetitions reinforce yet again the damning epitaphs and proclamations of bigotry. Among this illustrious group, Walker distinguishes herself in terms of the dialectic between silhouettes as culture and shadows as nature that forces her cutouts to participate in the schizophrenic insanity of being stereotyped and then displaced. It is a moot point whether anger is the generative force for these works. I tend to think that all these artists are deconstructionists who are rigorously confronting the imprisoning effects of racism that have mediated their identity by plaguing it with inherent contradictions.

I would like to cite at length a postscript added by Pindell in 2002 to her paper delivered at the conference 'Trade Routes, History, Geography, Culture: Towards a Definition of Culture in the late 20th Century', organized as part of the Johannesburg Biennale, October 1997:

> *Rasheed Araeen in his article 'The Art of Benevolent Racism' in* Third Text *(summer 2000) examines what he calls the 'positive stereotype' which he feels is encouraged by 'benevolent racism.' The 'positive stereotype' is the expectation that artists of color will create work about their ethnicity, therefore locating themselves outside of the mainstream, separate and different. The mainstream feels that it is not racist in encouraging and embracing the work, but if the mainstream embraces the work, it will not tolerate or acknowledge work by non-whites that is not ethnically based in difference. White artists, on the other hand, can create work which is avant-garde and addresses a wide range of issues.*[14]

The current situation, argues Araeen, has increased in complexity because artists of colour are ranged against both the white establishment and the new

functionaries of colour appointed to protect neo-colonial power and beliefs. In other words, artists of colour are damned if they do, and damned if they don't. Araeen argues that 'the use of "negative stereotype" reproduces and perpetuates an "apartheid" imperialistic culture while the "positive stereotype" makes it look benign.'

Mainstream culture's familiarity with stereotypes does not equip it to understand the dynamics of how these hackneyed and usually pernicious labels can entrap their subjects, thus making the polarities of positive and negative stereotypes irrelevant distinctions. Because ideology's chameleon-like ability allows it to assume the look of reality, its capacity for subsuming stereotypes under the guise of 'the natural' has proven more insidious than one might expect. Firmly established in the annals of black cultural studies, the received wisdom regarding these images is derived in part from the prescient thought of the ex-patriate Martinican psychiatrist, theorist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon. In his widely read *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon employs Jacques Lacan's well-known 1938 recasting of Freud's theory of identity formation in terms of ongoing paranoia as a basis for his own discussion of the type of problems that can result from perpetuating racial stereotypes. Fanon substantially rethinks Lacan's Imaginary realm by bumping it up to a level that focuses on the way that entire social groups, consisting of individuals each undergoing a similar process, can be held hostage by an image. In the process Fanon apparently conflated aspects of Lacan's Symbolic order, designating the world into which one is born, with his Imaginary sphere, because the two realms are viewed dynamically as desired or (perhaps, more realistically) necessary images in the structuring of an ego consistent with the dominant social order. Known as the 'mirror stage', Lacan's theory focuses on the alienation of Self that comes from a child basing its identity on an external mirror image or another person. Even though the 'mirror stage' references the first occurrence of this process of ego formation through disjunction, this process can be reformulated in terms of an entire social group.

The result of this broad-based operation is an insidious falsifying ego that subjects and enslaves individuals both socially and culturally, forcing them to identify with the degraded state of being that they have internalized. Fanon dramatizes this situation in the following hypothetical, yet tragically real situation:

> As I begin to recognize that the Negro is the symbol of sin, I catch myself hating the Negro. But then I recognize that I am a Negro. There are two ways out of this conflict. Either I ask others to pay no attention to my skin; or else I want them to be aware of it. I try then to find value for what is bad – since I have unthinkingly conceded that the black man is the color of evil. In order to terminate this neurotic situation, in which I am compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual solution, fed on fantasies, hostile, inhuman in short, I have only one solution: to rise above this absurd drama that others have staged round me, to reject the two terms that are equally unacceptable, and, through one human being, to reach out for the universal.[15]

While Fanon's solution is assuredly modernist in terms of its quest for universals and essences, Walker's development is manifestly postmodernist as it views the world in terms of clichéd historical romances that reduce all humanity into stereotypes which, by their own definition, are locked into the rigidities of limited perspectives.

In a lecture given at the School of the Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, on 24 October 2000, Walker alluded to the type of Lacanian reading of stereotypes that Fanon proposes. It's worth noting that her images have been so daunting that the Fanon connection has not been mentioned in the voluminous literature on her. 'When stereotypes attempt to take control of their own bodies,' Walker pointed out, referring to blacks at large, '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.' Rather than subscribing to the previous generation's crusade to create a morally uplifting and regenerative art capable of revivifying stereotypes, Walker's statement suggests that well-intended efforts by artists such as Betye Saar are doomed to failure. This is because even the most seemingly benign stereotype by its very nature has created, in Walker's words, an 'unredeemable' form of alienation.[16] Regarding this entire generation's desire to gentrify stereotypical images of blacks, Walker succinctly commented, 'I saw a lot of works steeped in history and in the awareness of self and pride – and enormous intangibles, issues that often get didactic.'[17]

And the staging, or tropes employed by Walker (plate 6.6)?

The insanity that Walker pictures is not a direct transcription of the external world but is instead the ossified and dehumanizing world of the stereotypical, similar to the art of Warhol, which she has acknowledged admiring.[18] But Walker is more than a mere Warhol follower; she is, in fact, a fellow traveller because she has discovered her own terrain in the fictionalized histories constituting the contemporary genre of Harlequin Romances and their turn-of-the-twentieth-century antecedents. These cheap-pulp, fictionalized histories are the novelistic counterpart to the blackface contemptible collectibles that have unleashed the recent spate of ideological battles we have been discussing. As an African-American, Walker was familiar with the tremendous power of Harlequin Romances and their perpetuation of racist stereotypes, because she had been subjected to the analogous situation of becoming someone else's stereotype. This obviously painful experience resulted in a need to construct a pseudonymous identity for herself as a stereotype which was, in turn, capable of generating a new series of stereotypes. The situation is akin to having her shadow, her alias, give birth to a new order of being. Its distinct advantage is the distance that it creates between herself and her imagery, allowing her to heighten the stereotypical nature of her imagery so that its removal from the real world is one of its key features. Instead of using herself as a lens for viewing the past, she enlists the aid of an alias from another time as the perspective from which to assess the contemporary world, so that the present is viewed in terms of the past.

6.6 Detail from Kara Walker, *Camptown Ladies*, 1998. Cut paper and adhesive on wall, 2.74 × 20.42 m overall. Rubell Family Collection. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and the Brent Sikkema Gallery, New York City.

But this bygone era is an ideological past, not simply a distant historical period; in other words, it is the fictionalized version of the past that has developed according to the rigid genre rules of the Harlequin Romance.

Her pseudonym initially took on the wonderfully archaistic sobriquet 'Miss K. Walker, A Free Negress of Noteworthy Talent' and was first used in 1994 for *Gone*. The pseudonym was a hybrid predicated on the tensions that developed from her readings of such slave narratives as Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and such racist novels as Thomas Dixon, Jr's *The Clansman*.[19] This novel – which served as the basis of D.W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* – spans the first years of Reconstruction from 1865 to 1870.[20] Walker then incarcerates both types of narration in the genre strictures of the Harlequin Romance, so that these earlier writings become the initial alembic that is then further distilled in terms of the distinct parameters used for contemporary pulp fiction. According to Dixon's story, Lydia Brown, the mulatto mistress of his protagonist Austin Stoneman, is portrayed as dragging her white lover into her 'black abyss of animalism'. Besides these sources, the persona of Miss K. Walker also draws on the artist's childhood fantasies about what life would have been like if she had been born a slave. These fantasies were undoubtedly catalysed by her experience of moving, when she was thirteen, from a liberal community in Stockton, California, to the reactionary town of Stone Mountain, Georgia,[21] where the Ku Klux Klan, which had been revived in the second decade of the twentieth century, held annual meetings.

I am struck by the sense of ambiguity that surrounds some of the action depicted in Walker's work. Do you agree with that assessment?

To return to Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* underscores the seductiveness of popular culture ideologies that are capable of alienating people from themselves:

> The Tarzan stories, the sagas of twelve-year-old explorers, the adventures of Mickey Mouse, and all those 'comic books' serve actually as a release for collective aggression. The magazines are put together by white men for little white men. This is the heart of the problem. In the Antilles ... these same magazines are devoured by the local children. In the magazines, the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary 'who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes'.[22]

In the situation Fanon describes, 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. Their insight, however, cannot take the now comforting view of W.E.B. DuBois's 'double-consciousness', as described in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In it, DuBois posits the idea that

the black person can discern himself or herself being seen through the perspective of mainstream culture.[23] But the self is not the natural entity DuBois assumes it to be; rather, it is a cultural construct subject to the whims and wiles of the models it has internalized, resulting in a type of ongoing paranoia.

In addition to identifying with heroes, collusion with negative ideologies often occurs through humour, which cajoles people into laughing about situations that may undermine their own positions. Recognizing the danger of this form of entertainment, Walker has pointed out,

> I have a funny problem with humor, I guess, because I don't consider it fun. I remember cartoons on TV that were old, pre-Mickey Mouse cartoons. These mysterious black-faced mice. I saw new prints of old Bull Durham ads with these coon scenes, genre scenes, sitting on the porch with all the animals. ... Whatever else they might be, they were also intended to be hilariously funny. The black person was the butt of all kinds of jokes from Vaudeville to Hollywood on up. Where are we now? I think we've stopped being funny.[24]

Isaac Julien describes his own work as having been profoundly informed by a political diasporic consciousness and it remains occupied with contesting racist images and stereotyping. In this regard, Julien's 1996 film Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask *– co-written by Mark Nash – is absolutely central. Walker, on the other hand, is far more ambivalent about such representations. Henry Louis Gates, Jr, director of the W.E.B. DuBois Institute at Harvard University, defends Walker's work as an act of artistic exorcism. He has written that 'only the visually illiterate could mistake this post-modern critique as a realistic portrayal, and that is the difference between the racist original and the post-modern, anti-racist parody that characterizes this genre.' What, finally, is the* African-American *subject that Walker seeks to constitute?*

Kara Walker's works play off the seamy excesses of such books as Kyle Onstott's *Mandingo*, with which she is well acquainted.[25] The copy for the back cover of this 1950s bestseller, which was made into a motion picture, interpolates a readership wishing to view the world in stark contrasts and bold headlines:

> Expect the savage. The sensual. The shocking. The sad. The powerful. The shameful. Human Breeding Farm. Behind the hoop skirts and hospitality, the mint juleps and magnolia blossoms of the Old South was a world few people knew existed – a world of violence, cruelty, greed and lust. MANDINGO brings to vivid life the sounds, the smell, the terrible reality of the slave-breeding farms and plantations where men and women were mated and bred like cattle. You may rave about MANDINGO or you may hate it, but you won't be able to lay it down, because it is a terrible and wonderful novel! A novel no one dared to publish until now!

The present to which this hype refers is 1957, a memorable time as regards Civil Rights battles for African-Americans who had witnessed the successful

resolution of the Montgomery bus boycott the year before. *Mandingo*'s excesses may have appealed to racists, who felt angered by the passage of the Civil Rights Act. That piece of legislation provided the Federal government with the ability to enforce voting rights for all Americans; it also established a Federal Civil Rights Commission with the authority to investigate discriminatory conditions and recommend ways of correcting them. In addition, *Mandingo* furnishes other readers with a titillating and sadistic screen onto which their anxieties about the effects of integration could be projected, symbolically experienced, and discharged. Although Walker is unconcerned with *Mandingo*'s original readership, she allows its mixture of sex and violence in the antebellum South to suffuse her work with its moonlight-and-magnolia air, thereby providing it with an ideological platform for staging her orgiastic scenarios.

There is sufficient justification for terming Walker's use of the stereotypical subject matter of such semi-pornographic books as *Mandingo* as 'signifying' if one looks closely at the way African-American studies scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr. qualifies the term. In his extract from *The Signifying Monkey*, entitled 'The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey' (published the year before his more extensive work was released), Gates condenses his theories by defining signifying as an African-American 'trope for repetition and revision, indeed ... our trope for chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft discursive act'.[26] Later in this essay, Gates abbreviates this definition even more, by equating signifying with 'parodying ... through repetition and difference'.[27] Gates's description of the figurative thrusts of the trickster figure – the signifying monkey – has been heralded as a major contribution to black literary theory. In retrospect, the incredible success of Gates's codification of this theory can be attributed to its ability to signify on both modernism and postmodernism, as it discerns the essence of postmodernism – an activity that is supposed to root out modernism's essences – to be consistent with African-American experience, which he reifies into a playful activity worthy of this infamous folk trickster. In the 'Blackness of Blackness' Gates undertakes the contradictory goals of explicating signifying's operations in terms of such classic rhetorical devices as chiasmus and metalepsis while preserving a distinct ethnic uniqueness for it. In doing so, he inadvertently sets up tensions between classical antecedents and African-American usage, so that signifying appears to be a distinct historical enactment of the mirror inversions of chiasmus. What makes signifying special is Gates's implication – supported by other prominent twentieth-century blacks from Zora Neale Hurston to Richard Pryor – that this process creates a space within the confines of mainstream culture for African-Americans to act. Of course, one can argue – as does theorist Homi Bhabha – that discernible differences occur whenever subjected groups mime their colonizers because their worldviews are so dissimilar.[28] Seen in this light, signifying is a special occasion of a much more thoroughgoing process occurring in colonial and postcolonial situations. In addition to its affinities with chiasmus, signifying cultivates tensions occurring in postmodern appropriation between established and new meanings that encourage readers to look for intertextual similarities and differences. And this Walker does when she hollows out spaces in *Gone With the Wind*, *Harlequin Romances*, history

painting and a number of other established sources in which to parade her cast of shadows. Her textual insurrection and redirection is chiasmic and appropriative; it is also a form of signifying because mainstream productions are being doubled in order to parody them and unfold a black perspective. This view characterizes society's ready acceptance of the clumsy machinations of entrenched ideology as incredulous and absurd shadow plays.

Would you comment on the kinds of bodies that Walker invents?

I do not think Kara invents bodies *as such*. Her figures are types, stereotypes actually, that have populated racist popular culture images for the past 150 years. In order to understand the semiotic of silhouettes as the essence of the bodies they represent – an idea that contributes to the irony of Walker's work – I would like to return to the origins of this nineteenth-century popular art form in the now-discredited science of physiognomy promoted by the minister Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801). In its overweening emphasis on the cranium and related cartilaginous areas, physiognomy differs from pathognomy, which purports to explicate the meaning of facial expressions created by coordinated movements of muscle and skin. In one interview, Walker indicated her knowledge of Lavater's physiognomy when she pointed to the nineteenth-century vogue for silhouettes and their connection with it:

> [The silhouette tradition] comes from a sort of polite middleclass society to some extent. It's not as haughty and aristocratic as a full-fledged oil painting portrait. Everyone could get one for a few pennies – and you had an image, you had connection with physiognomy.[29]

There is little doubt that the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century fashion for silhouettes developed from Lavater's tremendously popular demonstrations of physiognomy's merits, published in his *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe*, 4 vols (1775–8) and the English version, *Essays on Physiognomy* (1789–98). Six years later, a condensed version – *The Pocket Lavater* – was printed. No less significant a figure than Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) helped Lavater with his book. Their close friendship ended, however, when Goethe lost respect for Lavater's compulsion to convert people to his way of thinking, which the latter came to revere as if it were a new religion.

There is, admittedly, an intense spiritual subtext to Lavater's physiognomy because it developed out of the mystical thought of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). In particular, it relies on Swedenborg's idealist view of the world as a revelation of God's essential Being through His creations. Therefore, distinct correspondences between spiritual and earthly realms are evident, as well as those separating the interior realms and exterior visages of human beings. Taking up Swedenborg's theory, Lavater posited the concept of silhouettes as the primary diagnostic tool for physiognomic studies as he assumed that the divine spirit had a definite impact on human features. In Platonic terms, the profile was considered to be closer to the level of ultimate

Forms than the incidental accidents of symmetry or its lack because it was credited with reflecting formative psychic energies.[30] Although Lavater is guilty of subscribing to such clichés as aristocratic high foreheads, brutish thick lips and determined jaws, indicating his role as a synthesizer of popular attitudes rather than as a discoverer of a new interpretive tool, his *Essays on Physiognomy* – with its detailing sets of profiles and descriptions of how they reveal predominant individual features – influenced many painters. It also stimulated the widespread fashion for silhouettes and the popular belief in their ability to go beyond capturing a given sitter's physical likeness to convey a sense of his or her essential being.

What relation, then, does this popular form – the silhouette – have to Walker's imaginary scenarios?

Walker's two-dimensional silhouettes – which should be read as ciphers for two-dimensional characterizations – have as one of their sources the antebellum 'one-drop rule' that declared all mulattos to be legally categorized as negroes. This rule exacerbated rather than alleviated race relations because it ignored an intense and ambiguous middleground – mulatto slaves who were multiplying in the antebellum South as white masters coupled with their female property for sport and profit. In the 1850s this activity was efficiently organized and little discussed: female slaves were regularly impregnated, primarily in Virginia and the Carolinas, by both blacks and whites in order to meet the increasing demands for more negroes – to grow and pick cotton in the booming frontier slave states of Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana. The number of mulatto slaves is estimated to have increased by 66.9 per cent in the decade before the Civil War.[31] As the astute chronicler Mary Boykin Chesnut of Charleston noted at the time,

> God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an iniquity. Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulatto children one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.[32]

In consideration of this 'one-drop' ruling, it is important to note that Walker makes all the figures inhabiting her work, regardless of their ethnic affiliations, into black silhouettes. The implication is that the institution of slavery is itself a shadowy realm that joins together all those participating in it. Walker's work is far removed from the essentialist, modernist view of 1960s African-Americans, who proclaimed, 'Black is beautiful.' Her approach to blackness is closer to the parody of the 'blackness of blackness' prologue in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, summarized by Gates in the following manner:

> As Ellison's text states, 'black is' and 'black ain't.' 'It do, Lawd', 'an' it don't.' Ellison parodies here the notion of essence, of the supposedly natural relation between the symbol and the symbolized. The vast

> and terrible Text of Blackness, we realize, has no essence; rather it is signified into being by a signifier.[33]

Similar to Ellison's parody, Walker's work presents black as a destabilized term, whose meaning ricochets back and forth among a number of variables. This assessment correlates with her conclusion that 'the silhouette speaks a kind of truth. It traces an exact profile, so in a way I'd like to set up a situation where the viewer calls up a stereotypic response to the work – that I, black artist/leader, will "tell it like it is". But the "like it is", the truth of the piece, is as clear as a Rorschach text.'[34]

In addition to playing with stereotypical figures arising from the antebellum South, Walker's art participates in a shadowy realm that deserves a far greater explication than it has thus far been given in writings about her work. Shadow functions as both index and icon, to use Charles S. Peirce's characterization of an index as a motivated and contingent sign and an icon as an illustrative one. They are both dependent on an external light source directed towards a given entity, and function as representations of that same entity. The status of shadows as ideological constructs bespeaks not a double death but instead a twofold removal from life, as the shades represented in Walker's work are unable to die because their only prior existence is a fictive one. Instead of denoting the essence of an individual soul, Walker's shadows are extrinsic forms detached from humanity, which they only distantly resemble. Moulds for replicating reality on a par with Warhol's standardized products, her stereotypical shadows are both absences and voids. 'It's a blank space', Walker said in reference to her silhouettes, 'but it's not at all a blank space, it's both there and not there.'[35] Her images are similar to the likenesses presented to the hypothetical prisoners in Plato's cave, whose only sense of reality are Forms' pale vestiges in the guise of shadows, which could be construed, as they are in Walker's art, as ideological constructs. Unlike the shadows described by psychologist C.G. Jung, that are purported to represent the essence of an individual's repressed self or a collective identity pleading for recognition, Walker's shades are far from repressed. Instead of begging for acknowledgement, they are blatantly disruptive in their attempts to supplant reality through shock.

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Notes

1. See Cady Noland, 'Towards a Metalanguage of Evil', *Balcon Magazine*, 1989, re-edited 1992 and published as a pamphlet to accompany her project for Documenta IX, Kassel, Germany. That project – produced in association with the critic Robert Nickas – was described at the time by the artist as a three-dimensional realization of the essay.
2. Brandon Taylor, *The Art of Today*, London, 1995, p. 154. Noland – who now rarely exhibits publicly – is best known for works of exceptional visual and emotional impact whose elements are drawn from US history and contemporary American Society.
3. Jerry Saltz, 'Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire', in *Flash Art*, no. 191, November/December 1996, p. 84.

4 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York, 1982, pp. 71 and 108.
5 Manning Marable, 'Black America: Multicultural Democracy in the Age of Clarence Thomas and David Duke', Westfield, NJ: Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, 1992, p. 3.
6 *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind: An Exhibition of Afro-American Stereotype and Caricature from the Collection of Janette Faulkner*, exhib. cat., Berkeley: Berkeley Art Center, 12 September–4 November, 1982, p. 7.
7 *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*, exhib. cat., 1982, p. 7.
8 *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*, exhib. cat., 1982, p. 7.
9 *Ethnic Notions: Black Images in the White Mind*, exhib. cat., 1982, p. 12.
10 Howardena Pindell, 'Diaspora/Realities/strategies', a paper presented at 'Trade Routes, History, Geography, Culture: Towards a Definition of Culture in the late 20th Century', Johannesburg Biennale, October 1997, updated with a new postscript, January 2002, http://web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/pindell.htm.
11 Pindell, 'Diaspora/Realities/strategies', 2002.
12 Saltz, 'Kara Walker', p. 84.
13 Anonymous, 'Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes', *International Review of African American Art*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1997, p. 8.
14 Pindell, 'Diaspora/Realities/strategies', 2002.
15 Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, New York, 1967, p. 197. Note that on p. 161, n. 16, Fanon describes Lacan's theory of the 'mirror stage', which he terms the 'mirror period'.
16 Cf. Betye Saar, 'Unfinished Business: The Return of Aunt Jemima', in *Betye Saar Workers-Warriors, The Return of Aunt Jemima*, New York: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 1998, p. 3. Regarding her own efforts to achieve the rehabilitation of a stereotype, Saar has stated, 'The "mammy" knew and stayed in her place. In 1972, I attempted to change that "place" by creating the series *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. My intent was to transform a negative demanding figure into a positive, empowered woman who stands confrontationally with one hand holding a broom and the other armed with [sic.] battle. A warrior ready to combat servitude and racism.'
17 Saltz, 'Kara Walker', p. 82.
18 Dan Cameron, 'Kara Walker: Rubbing History the Wrong Way', *The Journal of Prints, Drawings, and Photography*, vol. 2, no. 1, September–October 1997, p. 11.
19 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, New York and Oxford, 1988 and Thomas Dixon Jr, *The Clansman, An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, New York, 1905.
20 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Thomas Dixon Jr, *The Clansman*, pp. 106 and 107.
21 Julia Szabo, 'Kara Walker', in *New York Times*, 23 March 1997, section 6, p. 49.
22 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 145.
23 W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (1903), New York, 1961, pp. 16–17.
24 Saltz, 'Kara Walker', p. 84.
25 Alexi Worth, 'Black and White and Kara Walker', in *Art New England*, vol. 17, no. 1, December 1995–January 1996, p. 27.
26 Henry Louis Gates Jr, 'The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey', in Henry Louis Gates Jr (ed.), *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, New York and London, 1984, rpt. 1990, pp. 285–321.
27 Gates, 'The Blackness of Blackness', p. 293.
28 Cf. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London and New York, 1994.
29 Saltz, 'Kara Walker', p. 82.
30 Victor I. Stoichita, 'Johan Caspar Lavater's Essay on Physiognomy and the Hermeneutcs of Shadow', trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen, *Res*, vol. 31, Spring 1997, p. 133.
31 Joel Williamson, *New People: Miscegenation and Mulattos in the United States*, New York, 1980, p. 63.
32 Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South*, New York, 1982, p. 199.
33 Gates, 'The Blackness of Blackness', p. 315.
34 Armstrong, p. 106.
35 Saltz, 'Kara Walker' p. 82.