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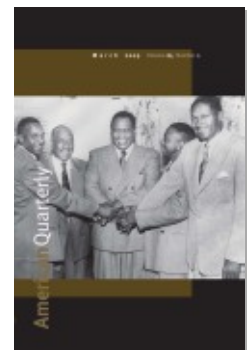
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A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History

Roderick A. Ferguson

Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love. Organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, February 17–May 13, 2007; ARC/Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, June 20–September 9, 2007; Whitney Museum of American Art, October 11, 2007–February 3, 2008; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, March 2–June 8, 2008; Museum of Modern Art, Fort Worth, Texas, July 6–October 19, 2008. Exhibition curated by Philippe Vergne and Yasmil Raymond.

In February 2007, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, premiered the first U.S. full-scale survey of work by African American artist Kara Walker. From the Walker, the exhibition traveled to ARC/Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and the Museum of Modern Art in Fort Worth, Texas. The exhibit was the brainchild of Philippe Vergne, the Walker's deputy director and chief curator, and assistant curator Yasmil Raymond. In her foreword to the exhibition book titled *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Kathy Halbreich, the Walker's former director, addressed concerns about the artist's controversial work by saying, "I've tried to convey that part of our mission as a cultural institution, which I know some will characterize as relativistic folly or naïveté, is to represent many different value systems, to give space, alongside more familiar or palatable expressions, to the unfamiliar, the invisible, the unspeakable, and the contested."¹ The unfamiliar, the invisible, the unspeakable, and the contested are precisely what I would like to concentrate on in this essay. In particular, I am interested in how those elements account for the gendered and sexualized contentions within African American intellectual history. I understand these disputes to have everything to do with the epistemic and moral components

of that much-congratulated invention known as African American history. And much of the storm around Walker's work takes place because she dares to target that invention and its machinery.

To begin with, Walker's art drives at themes that are at the core of African American gender and sexual formations, themes that have been at a certain center since the dawn of American chattel slavery. Despite the reassurances of progress, those annoying issues of immorality and respectability still wash up on the shore—to use historian Stephanie Smallwood's productive metaphor—like saltwater bringing in evening tide, slave ships, and the human cargo that would be subjected to new ways of measuring life and diminishing it.² Walker's most famous means of depicting the persistence of those immoralities are those life-size silhouettes, those black holes that have made her work both admired and condemned. Whether we are talking about “The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven” from 1995 or the film *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions* from 2004, the viewer is always confronted with those black holes that mark wall, paper, and screen. Discussing the function of the silhouette in her work, Walker states, “The silhouette is a blank space that you [can] project your desires into. It can be positive or negative. It's just a hole in a piece of paper, and it's the inside of that hole.”³

We might read those holes as the invisible blemishes that African American history—as a way of writing and imagining community, as a script for living it—is supposed to withhold from conversation and keep out of sight. In this way, African American history is more than an academic enterprise, more than a matter of what month or months to discuss black contributions to the American landscape. It is the basis upon which we participate in politics. Whether taken from the histories of civil rights or black power, we rely on those histories to affirm the political choices and maneuvers that we make in the present. As Hayden White argues in his foreword to Jacques Ranciere's *The Names of History*, “participation in politics hinges on conceptions of membership in communities whose pedigrees are either confirmed or denied by an appeal to history.”⁴ History in its conventional form is a record of descent, conferring not only membership within a community but establishing the terms of how to participate within and represent that community. The ways in which we appeal to history and claim it determine whether or not we can represent it. In the context of African American history, claiming history has meant, and—if the controversy around Kara Walker's work is any indication—still means, ignoring the holes that ornament the historical page. Whether the page is how we narrate history, identity, or community, the point is still

the same: the holes and blanks represent those unspeakable things that haunt us, and we must never refer to any specific acts or events that account for the shadows that make up the unspeakable and its terrifying range. Naming and defining them means risking not only our claim on history and its promises of membership; it means forfeiting our claim on politics as well.

Along with White, Michel de Certeau theorizes history as that mode of discourse that “seeks to establish, for the place of power, the rules of political conduct and the best political institutions.”⁵ The machinery of African American history—its procedures for determining membership and its prescription for what counts as politics—went to work in 1997 with the launch of a protest campaign led by African American artist Bettye Saar. In her letter for that campaign, Saar criticized Walker’s art for its “negative images” and for attempting to “reclaim and reverse racist imagery through irony.”⁶ To underline the presumed danger of the artwork, Saar alerted her readers to the possibility that “these images may be in your city next.”⁷ African American history’s machinery went afoot again in 1999 when the Detroit Institute of the Arts (DIA) decided to pull Walker’s “A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts” from its exhibition “Where the Girls Are: Prints by Women from the DIA’s Collection.”⁸ The DIA removed the work from the exhibition after its advisory group the Friends of African and African American Art objected to the installation, arguing that it was not “an appropriate time for the display of the work,”⁹ and that it was controversial and possessed “no clear art-historical position.”¹⁰ In their understanding of Walker’s art as politically unviable and historically illegible, the Friends were implicitly invoking the proscriptions of history itself, chastising Walker for not working according to those proscriptions.

It has been the convention of African American history to try to fill the space around those blanks with talk of respectability, social progress, or revolutionary potential. But the holes have always persisted, haunting African American history with their blank immoralities. We can think of Kara Walker’s work as exposing those blanks by imagining their form through visual art. We cannot thus read those blanks as historical or sociological documents that can tell us what happened in the where and when of U.S. slavery.¹¹ We must instead read her art as a meditation on the ingredients of African American history itself. From her art we see the ways in which African American history is both constitutive and disclaiming of the social impurities that have made up American existence, in general, and African American existence, in particular. Another way of thinking of this is to say that African American history, like history in general, is constituted out of a poetics of evasion—avoiding

those elements that confound our narratives of heroism, political purity, and innocence. Kara Walker's art, then, opposes this poetics of evasion with an aesthetics of engagement and confrontation and looks bold-faced at those elements to which African American history has turned its back.

Immoralities without Referent: The Conventions of African American Historical Writing

Ironically, the historical archives themselves provide ample opportunity to observe this poetics of evasion that constitutes African American history. In the May 1893 issue of the *Atlanta University Bulletin*, for instance, a Rev. Dr. J. W. S. Bowen, field agent for the Methodist Episcopal Church delivered an address to the students titled "Progress Through Moral Development" at that historically black university. In that speech, he invoked the blank immoralities that frame issues of African American respectability and politics and motivate Kara Walker's art. He states,

To say that heretofore we have had no real family life, and sacred fireside altars, is to utter a truism. Used not only as chattels for gain in the commercial markets but as tools and dupes for licentious and lecherous lusts, our poor homes were in many cases the pits of infamy and the pesthouses of corruption. How we survived with any virtue left, God only knows. But, thanks to Him, we came out of that den of immorality with some trace of divinity left, and a few virtues, with which to rebuild the ruined walls of our castle. I stamp as unjust and untrue all those calumniations upon the Negro race as universally immoral and depraved. He had the proclivity to immorality as other peoples, and by force, and the power of example, he was dragged into the depths of the Christian Anglo-Saxon. The properties of the occasion, and the conventional rules of public speech, muzzle me in expressing the depth of the turpitude, and the heinousness of the crime perpetrated against us in the most sacred chamber outside of heaven. The evil to-day among us is the *black flower* of the seed planted in our system. Our whole moral system has been inoculated with the licentious virus for *the degrading, diabolical past*; and the breath of many a home to-day among us is the breath of death due solely to the evil that was done us in the past. In the articles upon the Negro by some churchmen and statesmen in our day, all reference to the evil upon the Negro himself, and the debauchery practiced upon him by his Christian master, is *conspicuously evident by its absence*. This is a subject upon which they dare not trench. It is among the unspeakable things to-day.¹²

For Bowen, slavery denotes the epic of moral turpitude, the season in which blacks slid into immorality because of the evils of the slave system. Bowen's "black flowers" are not a species of perversion that ended with emancipation. Indeed, they are responsible for the vices and ruins that take place in the period after slavery.

Those flowers inspired a diverse range of liberatory politics as well. Touching on the ways in which much of African American politics and history is articulated against the vices and ruins that those flowers represent, Herman Gray notes in his own discussion of Kara Walker's work that "slavery is the site of racial terror out of which black collective memory has tried to forge a countermemory and oppositional culture."¹³ Bowen's quest at Atlanta University, to use Gray's language, is about inaugurating a "countermemory" against the terrible immorality that slavery unleashed. Moreover, Bowen's depiction of slavery as an era of sexual depravity was without a doubt the motivating factor for the rise of a "culture of dissemblance"¹⁴ among black people, in general, and black women, in particular, during the nineteenth century. In later years, the black flowers that Bowen evoked would become the primary motivations for installing respectability, dissemblance, and normativity as the nationalist cornerstones of African American countermemory and oppositional culture. This mode of history and political life that obliges normativity and frames it as oppositional practice is the context for the hysteria around Walker's holes and silhouettes.

Toward a "Psychoanalysis" of African American History

Notwithstanding presumptions of African American history's faultless and unruffled passage, it has been the subject of great rebuttals long before Kara Walker's installations. While African American history writ large was training black folks to turn away from unspeakable things in the name of unity, progress, and normativity, black feminists in the 1960s and beyond were crafting forms of art and history that were built around confrontation. Indeed, in her classic article "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," Hortense Spillers implied this epic mission of African American feminism when she wrote, "W. E. B. DuBois predicted as early as 1903 that the twentieth century would be the century of the 'color line.' We could add to this spatiotemporal configuration another thematic of analogously terrible weight: if the 'black woman' can be seen as a particular figuration in the split subject that psychoanalytic theory posits, then this century marks the site of 'its' profoundest revelation."¹⁵ Indeed, black feminism, as Spillers suggests, was that revelatory enterprise that deliberated upon the split between the history of polymorphous gender and sexual formations among African Americans and the social pressures toward gender and heteropatriarchal integrity. In fact, we might understand black feminism as an effort to reckon with what Spillers calls those "confounded identities"¹⁶ that went by such names as "Peaches," "Brown Sugar," "Sapphire," "Earth Mother," "Aunty," "Granny," and so on.

In many ways Kara Walker's art is the visual counterpart to black feminism's literary maneuvers as she tried to contend with those confounded identities that accounted for black womanhood. Indeed, as Hilton Als notes, Walker's silhouettes were the result of "an intense period of looking" at the work of black feminist writers such as bell hooks, Michelle Wallace, Octavia Butler, and Toni Morrison.¹⁷ This reading list is what accounts for the ways in which her silhouettes and her subsequent work bear the trace of a post-civil rights black feminism. Indeed, through her art, Walker has attempted to unpack the components of that peculiar character that she calls "the nigger wench." For her, this figure is a "young and pretty black girl whose function is as a receptacle—she's a black hole, a space defined by things sucked into her, a 'nigger cunt,' a scent, an ass, a complication."¹⁸ Like the aforementioned critics and writers, Walker is interested, generally, in the layered figuration called "black woman" and particularly, in the ways in which that figuration receives an array of racialized, gendered, and sexualized projections.

Walker's work also takes up black feminism's historic effort of compelling people to brave the unspeakable. If we remember back to those heady days of the seventies and the eighties, we might acknowledge that African American women's literature was not only about asserting the visibility of black women. Whether it was through tales of rape, incest, or same-sex love, black women's literary work also tried to instill in elites and everyday folk an unprecedented will to engage the unthinkable, and in doing so tried to bring forth a new mode of literacy. That will to engagement was the first casualty in the opposition to Walker's art. In truth, the controversy around her art is not simply a measure of many people's aversion to its sexual explicitness. It is also an indication of how far that grand effort of black feminism has receded. It is a sign of how removed we are from those days when engaging difficult issues of racialized gender and sexuality was what it meant to be a reader and viewer of black women's intellectual and artistic efforts. In this capacity, her work reminds us of an old but forgotten covenant that we made with African American feminism and the literacies that it tried to produce.

As with much of African American feminist art and writing, there is also a certain "psychoanalytic" aptitude to Walker's art, especially in its ability to force us to confront the unspeakable and scary things that haunt and motivate us. As Yasmil Raymond writes, "[viewers of Walker's work] are metaphorically and emotionally transported to the plantation of their own racial and gender prejudices, superiority and inferiority complexes, and anxieties and fetishes."¹⁹ If black feminism—in the words of Grace Hong—"gestures toward what cannot be known, what has been erased, and how,"²⁰ then Walker's art—in a kind

of psychoanalytic fashion—has always tried to depict what has been effaced, what can never be resolved, but what must be worked through all the same.

About psychoanalysis, Michel Foucault said in *The Order of Things* that it deserved a special place in knowledge because it formed,

a perpetual principle of dissatisfaction, of calling into question, of contestation of what may seem, in other respects, to be established . . . Psychoanalysis stands as close as possible, in fact, to that critical function which, as we have seen, exists within all the human sciences . . . Whereas all the human sciences advance towards the unconscious only with their back to it, waiting for it to unveil itself as fast as consciousness is analysed, as it were backwards, psychoanalysis, on the other hand, points directly towards it, with a deliberate purpose—not towards that which must be rendered gradually more explicit by the progressive illumination of the implicit, but towards what is there and yet is hidden, towards what exists with a mute solidity of a thing, of a text closed in upon itself, or of a blank space in a visible text, and uses that quality to defend itself.²¹

Psychoanalysis's own principle of dissatisfaction, we might say, was aimed at the critique of the rational and undivided subject. Touching on this aspect of psychoanalysis, Stuart Hall writes that Freud's discovery of the unconscious profoundly decentered the rational subject as the model of a fixed and unified identity.²² Thus, Freud and later Lacan countered the smug confidence of the rational subject with the unruly maneuvers of desire and the unconscious. As psychoanalysis based its own "principle of perpetual dissatisfaction" against the claims of the rational subject, we might think of Kara Walker's work as being perpetually dissatisfied with the claims of a historical subject that emerges from nationalism's poetic evasions, a subject who is licensed to participate in politics only by contracting with normative and nationalist regimes of belonging. In opposition to those poetic and evasive maneuvers, her silhouettes are ways of getting at those blank spaces that reside in that text of visibility known as African American history. Because of the ways in which her work takes challenges that once belonged primarily to the province of literature and delivers them to visual jurisdictions, her art deserves a special place within the order of knowledge.

Notes

This essay was adapted from a talk given at the Hammer Museum for the Kara Walker retrospective.

1. Kathy Halbreich, foreword to *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 1.

2. See Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).
3. See http://www.artnews.com/issues/article.asp?art_id=1097 (accessed January 5, 2009).
4. Hayden White, foreword to *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*, by Jacques Rancière, trans. Hassan Melehy (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), ix.
5. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 8.
6. See Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 115.
7. Ibid.
8. For an account of the letter-writing campaign and the Friends objection to Walker's art, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004).
9. Ibid, 105.
10. Ibid.
11. For a critique of such a reading, see Avery Gordon's essay "More on Positive and Negative Images: The Case of Kara Walker" in her book *Keeping Good Time: Reflections on Knowledge, Power, and People* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2004).
12. From the *Atlanta University Bulletin* collection at Robert W. Woodruff Library, the Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia.
13. Herman S. Gray, *Cultural Moves: African Americans and the Politics of Representation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 126.
14. See Darlene Clark Hine's "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs* 14.4 (Summer 1989). See also Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," in *We Specialize in the Wholly Impossible: A Reader in Black Women's History*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine, Wilma King, and Linda Reed (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson, 1995). Indeed, inasmuch as black women's history exposed the gender and sexual requirements for political conduct, that version of feminist history represented a profound disruption of history's hegemonic protocols.
15. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), 455.
16. Ibid.
17. See Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act," in *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2007 (83.30), 70–79.
18. Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 19.
19. Yasmil Raymond, "Maladies of Power: A Kara Walker Lexicon," in *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, 348.
20. Grace Hong, "'The Future of Our Worlds': Black Feminism and the Politics of Knowledge in the University Under Globalization," in *Meridians* 8.2 (2008): 106.
21. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1973), 374.
22. See Hall's chapter "The Question of Cultural Identity" in *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, ed. Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert, and Kenneth Thompson (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996), 607.