Maladies of Power: A Kara Walker Lexicon

by Yasmil Raymond

-KARA WALKER-
The following lexicon identifies a number of key elements—character types, objects, bodily fluids, environments, and events—that appear repeatedly or occasionally in Kara Walker’s art and, when considered together, illuminate certain allegorical meanings, philosophical associations, and visual references between and beyond the works. The contradictions inherent in positions of power and acts of brutality are the underlying subject in this glossary of visual symbols and, I would argue, in Walker’s imagery as a whole. Put simply, the artist exposes the impossibility of moral absolutes within the dynamics of domination, a predicament that applies as well to art that deals with such subject matter. In his study on the visual representation of slavery, Marcus Wood argues that “art which describes or responds to trauma and mass murder always embodies paradox.” He adds, “How can aesthetic criteria be applied to describe the torture and mass destruction of our own kind? How is it possible to make something beautiful out of, and to perceive beauty within, something which has contaminated human values to such a degree as to be beyond the assumed idealizations of truth and art, beyond the known facts and beyond the manipulations of rhetoric?” Human slavery, the cruelest of capitalist systems, has yet to be, and may well never be, accurately described either verbally or visually. It is this impossibility, however, that has served as the impetus for Walker’s work over the past decade.

Appropriating preconceived ideas about the antebellum South, she has given visual form to the unimaginable acts, unspoken testimonies, and unanswered questions from that period in American history that continue to resonate today. As the artist has explained, “I don’t know how much I believe in redemptive stories, even though people want them and strive for them. They’re satisfied with stories of triumph over evil, but then triumph is a dead end. Triumph never sits still. Life goes on. People forget and strive for them. They’re satisfied with stories of redemptive stories, even though people want them.”

Depictions of the horrors of slavery and plantation life—slave hunts, mutilation, rape, and murder—became, starting in the late eighteenth century, the focus of slave narratives and abolitionist campaigns but rarely were the subject of literature and visual art. During the first half of the nineteenth century, paintings occasionally centered on scenes of life in the South, as in Eastman Johnson’s Old Kentucky Home—Life in the South (Negro Life at the South), 1869, oil on canvas, 36 x 45 1/2 in. (91.4 x 114.9 cm), The Robert L. Stuart Collection, on permanent loan from the New York Public Library, 5-225; Collection New York Historical Society.

The antebellum plantation in this first experiment of Walker’s and in subsequent depictions constitutes not only a historical and geographical reference but also a psychological terrain in which the cast shadows of masters and slaves embody the repressed prejudices, desires, and obsessions that the contemporary American collective consciousness refuses to acknowledge, visualize, and reconcile. Like Dana, 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.
By its very nature, the identity exercised in Walker’s imagery is a paradox in that its potential is dependent solely on viewers’ consciousness of their own body, race, and ancestry while at the same time engaging a third-person consciousness that reinforces Frantz Fanon’s verdict, “It is the racist who creates his inferior.”

**BOOTS AND SHOES**

Like clothing, footwear carries symbolic potency and potential in Walker’s imagery, helping to expose complex connections and reveal hidden plots and desires. From the sturdy knee-high boots of the plantation masters to the pointed-toe ankle boots of the mistresses, shoes appear selectively on the feet of Walker’s characters, primarily to differentiate nonslaves from slaves. But in instances when slaves are shown wearing shoes, Walker interrogates not only the status that such articles granted the wearer but also the symbolism they impart about the power dynamics between masters and slaves.

In the 1995 mural *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!* (fig. 3), a slave child, identified by her ripped skirt, wears an oversize male boot on her right foot. The left counterpart can be found on the foot of a master in the 1997 mural *Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause* (fig. 4), as a bare-chested girl wearing a banana-leaf skirt tries to set a palm tree on fire. The young slave girl, identified by the iron piece around her neck, approaches the grass at the foot of the tree with an air of defiance and a sense of purpose that contrasts with the innocence and immersed symbolism of children playing dress-up in the earlier examples. Furthermore, here the boots—a complete pair, even if slightly oversize—have real use value as protective covering for the feet and for running away from terror. They stand as a symbol of mobility and insubordination. Still, the correspondence between function and desire, sign and sentiment, introduces yet another level of dependency, which in turn transforms the boots into a different kind of fetish, one that embodies the promise of freedom.

This correlation between shoes and autonomy-mobile humanity will allow her to trudge through it toward an uncertain destiny. In Walker’s art, shoes are encoded with property issues. Their absence or presence, especially on the feet of slave figures, not only provides an immediate visual cue as to a character’s gender and race but also introduces allegory of elements to the compositions. In her fantastical revisioning of power relationships and ownership, material possessions help to set the terms of a character’s personality, role, and destiny. In her examination of the unending network of inhumane tortures that defined the plantation slavery system in the South, Walker relies on specific objects—boots, skirts, footwear, utensils, brooms, weapons, cotton balls—to signify power dynamics within ethical, sexual, and fetishistic scenarios.

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**FIG. 6** Detail of *Slavey! Slavey! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or “Life at ‘Ol ‘Virginny’s Hole” (sketches from Plantation Life)*! See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negro and leader in her Cause, 1997 (page 260 foldout).

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**KNIVES, RAZOR BLADES, AND ROPES**

Mutiations, murders, and suicides are common occurrences in Walker’s fantasized version of the antebellum South, where masters, mistresses, and slaves alike inflict their deepest internal conflicts upon
one another. Western art history is replete with images of torture and death, from the crucifixion of Christ and the martyrdom of the saints to the brutalities of war. One memorable example is the gory Judith Slaying Holofernes by the Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi (fig. 7). The disparity of scale between the bodies emphasizes the brute violence of the act: while Judith’s accomplice uses both arms to push down on Holofernes’ muscular body, the Hebrew heroine presses his head to the side and slices his neck with the heavy sword in her right hand. The slaying Judith is incarnate in the body of a child slave in Walker’s 2000 light installation Mistress Demanded a Swift and Dramatic Empathetic Reaction Which We Obliged Her (page 271). Using both hands to wield a machete as big as she is, her body arched to gather strength and her head tilted slightly to avoid looking, the petite girl pierces the abdomen of the mistress. Behind the small heroine an adult male slave with his hands and feet chained and wearing a punishment collar looks on, stunned by the action unfolding before his eyes. The figures are rendered in black cut-paper silhouettes, and the blue and purple light cast by the overhead projector frames the scene, which takes place outdoors at night, under an oversize tree dripping with Spanish moss. The lighting lends an element of secrecy and danger to the setting.

When Walker depicts children as executioners, she speaks to the manner in which their unspoiled frankness absolves them from maliciousness. In this way, their acts of murder take on the spontaneity of an accident or the inevitability of self-defense. In Look Away! Look Away! Look Away! (fig. 8), the master’s young daughter slices off her left hand with a butter knife. This violent act of self-mutilation is muted by the calm demeanor of the child and the absence of blood spills from the scene. In a second mural, The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire—A Reconstruction, also from 1995, a naked slave child runs holding an amputated hand while behind her an older girl, perhaps her sister, follows with the dismembered leg of the master, signified by the knee-high boot attached to it (fig. 9). Adding to the horror of the image is the evocation of serenity and the ease with which they hold onto the mutilated limbs, as if they were fresh-picked flowers. In both instances, we are inclined to believe that these are either acts of self-preservation or delirious visions of innocent children “playing” revolt.

Violence, which under slavery was the master’s mechanism to impose total control over the slaves, is meticulously depicted in Walker’s work. Her visual strategy, which she has previously defined as “two parts research and one part paranoid hysteria,” consists primarily in visualizing a tragicomedy of plantation slavery that demystifies the history of the Old South and plays out with sardonic humor an imaginary counteraction. Violence and murder are often accompanied in her work by extreme absurdity, whereby shocking juxtapositions of random and premeditated actions lead to vicious results. In The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (page 172 foldout), the young Eva is depicted swinging an oversize axe with the blade toward her own head while nearby an obese male figure with a peg leg balances himself with the help of his sword as he rapes a young slave girl and the tip of his blade pierces the chest of a slave child on the ground. Walker establishes her characters as potential assassins who are infected with what Michel Foucault called “the disease of power,” and she is eager to show us what happens when an object of torture is applied to a human being. This model of representation based on dominance and human bestiality is, above all, a caricature of power.
These scenarios are the slave’s ultimate revenge. A slave committing suicide was viewed as an assault on the master’s property, and those who attempted it but did not succeed were severely punished. In Walker’s few renderings of slaves taking their own lives, the act is often presented as a fable of martyrdom, as in two single-image silhouettes, *Cut* (page 268) and *Burn* (fig. 10), both from 1998. In each instance, the female victim resorts to extreme measures, the first by cutting her wrists with a razor blade and the second by setting her dress on fire. However, their gestures are defiant in tone and symbolism. In *Cut*, a slave woman, having just cut off both her hands, jumps in the air and swings her arms back over her head. Rather than depicting her as a collapsed victim awaiting her death, Walker directs our attention to the woman’s shamless gesture of bliss and defiance, which suggests that her suicide stands as an act of transgression and empowerment.  

In *Burn*, a prepubescent girl tosses to the ground the tin can that held the starter fluid. Her eyes are closed as large flames rise up around her, transforming her skirt into a burning bush. To her left we see a large bareheaded woman on the place. Her dress was filled with obelisks and tombstones. What is initially striking about this piece is the stoicism of the young profile of a woman, a Latin cross, and a cemetery, which Fanon poignantly described in the following paragraph: “The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved. The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.”  

**WATER**

Images of ships, tidal waves, washtubs, and sea monsters in Walker’s work reference the transatlantic encounters between Europeans and Africans and the traumatic diaspora that is estimated to have brought nine to twelve million Africans to North and South America and the Caribbean to work as slaves. In Freudian theory, the appearance of water imagery in dreams signifies birth, and Walker has described the cleansing property of water in relation to her work (see Birth); but more often than not, her scenes of flowing water are infused with feelings of loss, fragmentation, and mystery. The sea and watery creatures have populated her work since 1994, when she created *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negro and Her Heart*, which includes the image of a ghostly half-woman, half-boat figure drifting across a body of water, literally embodying the arduous journey of Middle Passage.  

The association between the brutal violence of the transatlantic slave trade and the dangers of deep waters is generated in Walker’s depiction of the ocean as a paradigm of contested ideas about origin and racial authenticity. Departing from the “ethnico-abolitionism that currently dominates black political culture,” Walker focuses on the routes of the Middle Passage, European colonial expeditions, and the circulation of people, before and after slavery, within this triangular network to propose a history of transcontinental entanglement of ideas and cultures that “provides a different sense of where modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both found and temper a self-conscious sense of western civilization.” Walker charts the implications of this historic encounter in her renderings of water, which takes on numerous forms: a turbulent and traumatic path, a sentimental shore of romantic departures, an underwater cemetery filled with ancestors, or the yearning nectar of thirsty beings unsure of their own needs and desires.

![Image](https://example.com/image1.png)

**Endless Conundrum, an African Anonymous Adventure, 2001** (page 300 foldout), made in 2001, delineates the concept of the Atlantic Ocean as a fluid force guiding this exchange of cultural codes, influences, and appropriations between the European trespassers and the indigenous Africans. At the bottom of the tableau, a naked toddler stands in a washtub, restrained by a ball and chain (fig. 12). Her head is lowered in sadness and perhaps resignation, and the hopelessness of the girl’s physical bondage is amplified by her lack of arms. In the upper right, a coastal scene shows a reclining female figure on the shore with her arm stretched out, finger pointing at her colonial admirer, who seems to be disappearing into the sea (fig. 13). Different from her treatment of the female bodies of her antebellum characters, Walker’s African counterparts are anatomically disproportionate and bear the traits, including cone-shaped heads and elongated faces, of African masks. This objectification of their bodies undoubtedly is meant to evoke the types of traditional African ceremonial objects that were sold widely in Europe in the early twentieth century as “fetishes” from the colonies and subsequently ended up in the glass vitrines of museum displays, stripped of their social and cultural context. The ideological degradation of African forms and subject matter was further pathologized in the studies of modernist artists such as Brancusi, Mattise, and Picasso, who limited the forms of these artifacts and mythologized them for embodying primal urges and power, especially in the realm of sexuality.

In Walker’s allusions to water, the Atlantic Ocean is the original sacrificial site where her characters engage in psychological and physical abuse in order to exorcise the horrors of the contaminated waters that feed the collective ancestry of Europeans, Africans, and Americans. The relationship between water and thirst as both a bodily need and a historical drive is exemplified in the central vignette of *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negro and Her Heart*.

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**Notes:**

1. Alice and the suicides in Walker’s silhouettes share an understanding of the violent and porous nature of power dynamics. In both cases, there is a refusal of ethics in their calculated acts of rebellion, as the ownership of their death is their main concern. Walker’s psychomaniacal’s have nothing to do with historical guilt or innocence; there is no doubt about whose hand held the whip. The concern is rather with the living effects of the trauma of slavery and how to materialize, characterize, and visualize this abstract condition. In *Burn*, the visual transmutes into a drop of water intended to satiate the thirst of a child, but more often than not, her scenes of flowing water are infused with feelings of loss, fragmentation, and mystery. The sea and watery creatures have populated her work since 1994, when she created *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negro and Her Heart*, which includes the image of a ghostly half-woman, half-boat figure drifting across a body of water, literally embodying the arduous journey of Middle Passage.

2. The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved. The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

3. The disaster of the man of color lies in the fact that he was enslaved. The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

4. Images of ships, tidal waves, washtubs, and sea monsters in Walker’s work reference the transatlantic encounters between Europeans and Africans and the traumatic diaspora that is estimated to have brought nine to twelve million Africans to North and South America and the Caribbean to work as slaves.

5. In Freudian theory, the appearance of water imagery in dreams signifies birth, and Walker has described the cleansing property of water in relation to her work (see Birth); but more often than not, her scenes of flowing water are infused with feelings of loss, fragmentation, and mystery. The sea and watery creatures have populated her work since 1994, when she created *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negro and Her Heart*, which includes the image of a ghostly half-woman, half-boat figure drifting across a body of water, literally embodying the arduous journey of Middle Passage.

6. The disaster and the inhumanity of the white man lie in the fact that somewhere he has killed man.

7. In Walker’s allusions to water, the Atlantic Ocean is the original sacrificial site where her characters engage in psychological and physical abuse in order to exorcise the horrors of the contaminated waters that feed the collective ancestry of Europeans, Africans, and Americans. The relationship between water and thirst as both a bodily need and a historical drive is exemplified in the central vignette of *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negro and Her Heart*.
Maladies of Power

Yasmin Raymond

Fig. 14 Detail of Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace, 2004, cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, Collection Tate Gallery, lent by the American Fund for the Tate Gallery
Infants and toddlers appear in a variety of vulnerable situations in Walker’s work: falling lifeless to the ground, dangling from delicate umbilical cords, or clinging to a mother’s breast. A fetus hanging from an umbilical cord underneath the skirt of a female figure was the subject of one of the artist’s earliest cut-paper silhouettes on canvas, an untitled work made in 1994–1995. Birth is also the central theme of her most recent animated film, 8 Possible Beginnings: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker (figs. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24). Walker’s creation myth was the result of a series of experiments with light and video projections, cut-paper marionettes, and live performance that began in 2001 and continued in 2004 with her first film animation, Testimonies: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions (page 344). Shot in black-and-white film and video, 8 Possible Beginnings consists of eight grim fantasies that hypothesize the genesis of the black experience in America. For Walker, the past is both the poison and the antidote for contemporary social ailments: “One theme in my artwork is the idea that a Black subject in the present tense is a container for specific pathologies from the past and is continually growing and feeding off those maladies . . .” (M)urky, toxic waters become the amniotic fluid of a potentially new and difficult birth, flushing out of a coherent and stubborn body long-held fears and suspicions.

The inspiration for 8 Possible Beginnings was Walt Disney’s highly patronizing 1946 animated film Song of the South, itself based on Joel Chandler Harris’s book Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings (1881). In Walker’s version, however, there is no sense of a happy ending. The film opens with a title card announcing the name of the film and its creator, in the style of D. W. Griffith’s infamous film Birth of a Nation. The first story, titled “Along a Watery Road,” unfolds at sea. As the waves part, a ship emerges, and the sound of strong winds alerts us to the approaching danger while the cast shadow of our hero foretells the fate of several bodies, which are labeled with various aphorisms for blackness: “AFRICAN,” “AUTHENTIC,” “BLACK,” “ONE FAKER,” and “A WANNABE.” As the bodies are thrown overboard and carried away on the waves, a mysterious palm tree appears floating on the horizon, which is to brees, abortion the beginning of the second story, titled “Motherland.” As the camera focuses on the palm tree, it emerges from the water as part of the head of an enormous sea creature, a female monster who feeds on the dead bodies of the Africans. We follow the bodies as they enter the monster’s mouth and travel down through her intestines until they are defecated. Our attention is now directed away from the sea and to the land in the third scene, titled “The New World,” in which a robust male figure is born from the pile of feces. His name is King Cotton, and he rises up from the ground and admires the cotton plants in the landscape around him. As he dances in the field, he encounters an ill-looking skinny master among the bushes, has a sexual encounter with him, and becomes pregnant. At this point, the cut-paper animation changes into live footage for a short “Interlude” during which a young woman dressed up as a maid creates a cut-paper silhouette of her master. In the fifth story, “New Labors,” a midwife helps King Cotton give birth to a black cotton plant. The sixth story, “A Darkey Hymn: ‘All I Want,’” unfolds inside a cave, where a young girl walks in darkness, stalked by the cast shadow of her master; she recites a monologue, echoed with a slight delay in the voice of an adult woman, that reveals her desire to “be white.” Suddenly, we are transported back to the plantation, in a scene titled “Plantin’ Time,” where we see King Cotton gently watering the newborn plant. In the final segment, “The Story of Br’er Rabbit, Br’er Fox, and How Briar Patch County Come to Be Called That,” Walker introduces Harris’s original characters. The segment opens with Lil Timmy, the master’s grandson, begging Uncle Remus to tell him a story. Fearing the whip of his master, the old man complies and recounts a gruesome tale in which Br’er Rabbit and Br’er Fox discover the lynched bodies of three black men hanging from a tree. The animation ends with little Timmy strolling joyfully past the bodies accompanied by the song “Zip-a-doo-dah,” the lyrics of which intimate the setting with bitter sarcasm.

Walker’s 8 Possible Beginnings is a visual riddle that poses many questions as it unearths the malignant roots of the black experience in the United States. Walker is not in favor of a generalized angst. She gives no accusatory voice to any of the characters, nor does she disguise the victim from the victimizer. Instead, she proposes eight hypotheses from which we might glean an ontological explanation for the origin, extent, and depth of racism. Unlike Uncle Remus, her role is that of a trickster who occasionally pulls the wool over our eyes to awaken the sleeping sickness of her audience and make us aware of our collective memory and the question of absolution. Symbolically, birth connotes origin. In Walker’s work, the representation of birth encapsulates not only self-preservation but also self-destruction. During slavery, breeding became the most insidious method of control; for the slave women forced to breed, abortion was a powerful gesture of revolt against the system. It is no accident that images of childbirth and of infants in Walker’s work epitomize the suffering and sacrifice of slaves while simultaneously adulating the disturbing and conflictive role that motherhood played in the lives of female slaves. In literature, this dilemma is keenly personified in the character of Sethe in Toni Morrison’s novel Beloved. Sethe is a runaway slave who, in order to prevent the slave-catchers from taking her children, kills them with her own hands. The description of her tragic solution reveals the redemptive intent of her actions.
Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four)—because she’d had the one coming when she cut—pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise properly to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in savethat; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one—the woman schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collar the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she’d gone wild, due to the mashing of the nephews who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run.26

To further complicate matters, Walker’s portrayals of childbirth transgress the very boundaries of gender. In The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (page 172 foldout), Walker first conceived the motif of a man giving birth. Toward the end of this 35-foot-long mural, the character of Uncle Tom, from Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin, is depicted with curls recording from his bald head, his arms raised to the sky in a gesture of defiance as he’s falling down, and an umbilical cord connected to a fetus trailing off behind him. In Walker’s hyperbolic, feminizing interpretation of Stowe’s ideal house-slave, Uncle Tom is rescued from the Victorian desexualized stereotype of the cassidy, big black man and rendered instead as a surrogate mother experiencing a hellish childbirth. Both Tom and Eva—the latter a reference to Stowe’s Evangeline, the blond girl who taught Uncle Tom to read the Bible and upon her deathbed gave locks of her hair to her slaves—were primary figures in Walker’s early imagery, notably in a series of drawings from 1995, collectively titled Negress Notes, in which the couple is depicted in sexually charged scenarios (pages 147, 152, 154) and Tom breastfeeds Eva (page 140) (see also Mother’s Milk).

In Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventure, the act of a slave man giving birth is depicted as defecation (fig. 25). This exchanging of parental roles—transferring the gestation function from mother to father—transforms the male slave into a surrogate mother who, lacking a vagina, must discharge his baby from the anus, masquerading the association between excrement and enslavement explicit (see also Feces and Semen). Indeed, there is an unsettling liveness to the newborns, even when they are attached to umbilical cords and especially when they are falling onto the ground. The body language of the surrogates communicates surrender, evoking the forced denial of parenthood and family ancestry under slavery.

Walker’s allegorical figures of men giving birth and of fetuses permanently attached to their umbilical cords are variations on her larger creation myth, relative to the black experience, that seems to permeate her art. For black Americans, the question of one’s origin is not about ancestry so much as language and speech—about who is labeled and by whom, as well as what these labels mean. This ontological question has also driven Adrian Piper’s work from early on, as she examines the construction of racial identity through dialectical arguments that combine her own autobiographical facts, eugenics theories, and identity politics. As part of her 1988 video installation Cornered (fig. 20), Piper is seen on a monitor speaking to the camera in the typical monotone voice of a news reporter. She engages in a monologue that begins with the self-labeling statement “I am black” and continues with a series of impersonations of rhetorical questions related to her light-skinned complexion. On the wall hang two birth certificates for Piper’s father, also a light-skinned African American, one of which categorizes him as white and the other as black. Piper’s rhetoric of race is not a strictly circular argument. Nor is the content strictly autobiographical. Lake Walker, her concern is to debunk conventional ways of seeing blackness, to critique the stereotypical notion that black Americans desire to be white, and to expand the discussion of race and representation beyond affirmations of difference and essentialized arguments of cultural identity. In both cases, the quest for identity is a quest for one’s true origin.

**FECES AND SEMEN**

Ten puddles of excrement mark the path of a naked toddler in The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (page 172 foldout). Obvious to the vulgarity of her actions, the young girl, playing her tambourine, marches past a group of children. Aside from her breaking of the social taboo against defecating in public, what is disturbingly precocious and symbolically relevant in this picture is the girl’s refusal to stop her march to take care of her business. Her unnerving procession is a mockery of good manners and self-discipline. The absurdity of the scene is highlighted by the abnormal ratio of body waste to the child’s actual size. But such disproportion also alludes to the proliferation in the postslavery era of racialized images and ephemera that objectified physical blackness in ridiculous, condescending, and outright hateful ways.27 Drawing on the vicious humor of racial stereotypes, Walker finds in such imagery the potential to disrupt and challenge depictions of the black body, the very kind at play in the unrelu behavior of the young girl. As the artist has noted, “Every time I enter a flea market, I see something like a pickaninny with its head in a toilet. This association of blackness with excrement conjures up a very early memory … wondering what the color of my white friends’ shit was. Whoever made the original toy literally employed a toilet to his or her humor, ha ha. I find these hawky/bodily associations extremely important, though. I relate through it as well … the black body … leering around and representing everything but itself.”28

Like many scenarios in Walker’s art that suggest infantile lack of restraint, the images of figures defecating are encoded with messages about obscenity, disobedience, and defiance. In World’s Exposition (fig. 27), a silhouette mural from 1987, a half-human, half-monkey figure hangs by her tail from the branch of a tree while painting the foliage and casually defecating. An allegorical figure of an artist, or perhaps even a self-portrait, the image points to the ways in which the racist imagination parades artists of color, particularly women artists, as exceptional species whose primal instincts and creative talents are intended to amuse and delight bourgeois audiences. For her part, Walker’s hybrid creature is acting in accordance with racist objectification of the black female body—“the naked image of Otherness,” as bell hooks contests, when speaking of this body being put on display for entertainment. As hooks notes,
FIG. 27 Detail of World's Exposition, 1997, cut paper on wall, 10 x 16 ft. (3 x 4.9 m), Collection Jannine Greenberg and Nicolas Rohatyn
“Objectified in a manner similar to that of black female slaves who stood on auction blocks while owners and overseers described their important, salable parts, the black women whose naked bodies were displayed for whites at social functions had no presence.”²³ And yet, Walker’s surrogate Josephine Baker, even though she is put on display like a caged animal at the fair, daringly shows off her “gifts” with double irony as she reveals herself to be both the artist’s muse and the artist. In both of the examples discussed above, the figures are engaged in infantile abandon and sexual defiance while exposing a heightened awareness of their bodies that is alienated not from reason but from obedience to prudish social constrictions.

In Christian symbolism, defecation is associated with dirtiness, indulgence, and greed. In the panel painting known as Hell, part of Hieronymus Bosch’s triptych The Garden of Earthly Delights (ca. 1504), a human figure defecating coins into a bottomless pit represents the deadly sin of avarice.²⁴⁻²⁶ The Garden of Earthly Delights represents the deadly sin of avarice and is destined to be extinguished in later years only to be replaced by a new interest in material possessions and fecal matter in "Character and Anal Eroticism," adding that "the man reaches out to hoard new possessions, the woman seems to be in a state of desperation. Eating dirt, after all, was a way for a slave to commit suicide"²⁷, the woman’s vulnerable situation, stuck inside the pile of feces, seems to confirm the inevitable outcome of her destiny.

If Walker’s scatological images can be interpreted as symbolizing slaves’ resistance to absolute domination, then her depictions of slave characters in unconditional submission to their bodies’ sexual desires can be interpreted as symbolizing their human weakness and vulnerability. In displaying emotional fragility and sexual abandon, Walker attempts to evade the amorphous nature of moral authority, or, to borrow a phrase from theorist Achille Mbembe, “the banality of power,” where neither oppressor nor oppressed are ethically superior.²⁸ Like Mbembe, Walker questions the notion of power based in traditional binary oppositions — good/evil, moral/immoral — and instead considers the impotence of power. This approach is openly disclosed in her nihilistic depictions of sexual encounters between masters and slaves, in which she strategically manipulates the codes and taboos of sentimentality, sexual desire, and miscegenation that remain prevalent in contemporary American culture.

Slave narratives and testimonial writing from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries tell us of women sold at auction while still breastfeeding their newborns. Some slave women served as nursermaids to the mistress’ children, and some as birthmothers of the master’s illegitimate offspring. Procreation was crucial in the mechanisms and calculations of plantation slavery in the South, with particularly harsh...
implications for women (see also Birth). As a natural extension, perhaps, of her birthing imagery, Walker’s work includes several depictions of breastfeeding that inspire associations with nourishment and motherhood or, in some cases, fatherhood, as well as symbolically affirming the lineage that slaves were denied.

An early example of the allegorical figure of the nursemaid in Walker’s work can be found in the first image of the five-part print A Means to an End ... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts (fig. 34), made in 1995. Here, a young slave woman, with one hand resting on her hip, is shown balancing a white boy in the air while he sucks from one of her breasts. A later conception of this balancing act, in The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (fig. 35), brings more physical tension and metaphorical implications to the initial motif. In this vignette, rendered as a pyramid of bodies, a young woman crouches to balance on her knees an infant whose mouth is aiming for her bare nipple; she herself sucks the breast of a second female figure, in front of her, who in turn, while holding a large watermelon behind her back as a counterweight, stands on her tiptoes and leans forward to suck the breast of a third woman (balancing in part on the back of the first). This fantasy arrangement holds great emblematic metaphoric and sexual tension to the scene as the male figure leans down toward the child and gazes in the distance as if on alert for an unwanted intruder. This image of paternal lactation is further displaced in the gouache drawing John Brown (page 164), made a year later. Here, the abolitionist leader, who was executed by hanging for his involvement in the 1850 raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, is shown bare-chested with his arms behind his back. Next to him, a slave woman holds a naked toddler in her arms as the child pulls with his teeth at one of Brown’s dry nipples. Brown’s stoicism is emphasized by the stiff posture of his torso, which does not yield to the child’s forceful pulling. Turning a cold shoulder to the pain — metaphorically speaking, to parenthood — he looks away from the child and the mother. John Brown is frequently depicted as a martyr sacrificed for the abolitionist cause; however, Walker’s portrayal of him as a dry father figure, a “failed patriarch,” brings into question his authority and entitlement in the pantheon of African American idols.

Intimate scenes of breastfeeding appear sporadically in Walker’s work, alternating between genders. In an early watercolor drawing from Negrress Notes (page 140), an elderly male slave, an Uncle Tom/Uncle Remus stereotype, is depicted nursing a young slave girl from a nipple that has metamorphosed into an elongated penis. The gender and age differences add ambiguity and sexual tension to the scene as the male figure leans down toward the child and gazes in the distance as if on alert for an unwanted intruder. This image of paternal lactation is further displaced in the gouache drawing John Brown (page 164), made a year later. Here, the abolitionist leader, who was executed by hanging for his involvement in the 1850 raid at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, is shown bare-chested with his arms behind his back. Next to him, a slave woman holds a naked toddler in her arms as the child pulls with his teeth at one of Brown’s dry nipples. Brown’s stoicism is emphasized by the stiff posture of his torso, which does not yield to the child’s forceful pulling. Turning a cold shoulder to the pain — metaphorically speaking, to parenthood — he looks away from the child and the mother. John Brown is frequently depicted as a martyr sacrificed for the abolitionist cause; however, Walker’s portrayal of him as a dry father figure, a “failed patriarch,” brings into question his authority and entitlement in the pantheon of African American idols.

The mouths depicted in these compositions are guided not only by penury and hunger but also, certainly, by libidinal desire. The appetites seem to be
driven by a deep longing for something that extends beyond food and warmth to comfort and pleasure, beyond sexual pleasure to a lust for life. Walker gives form to this desire in her characters’ oral fixation with the mother/father nipple, which proposes that their “feastism” originates from their enslaved condition. In this sense, these allegorical figures are imagined in a permanent state of infancy, constantly searching for nourishment, sucking endlessly but never fulfilling their old thirst. This condition is vividly captured in Comausa, a cut-paper piece from 1993 in which a bare-cested, pubescent girl wearing oversized high-heeled shoes and a banana-leaf skirt sucks on her own

breast while a toddler boy, most likely the master’s son, mimics her by suckling on one of the bananas dangling from her skirt. In this sexual fantasy scene the young woman, in a gesture of autonomy and self-preservation, has discovered in her own body a way to appease her woman, in a gesture of autonomy and self-preservation, has discovered in her own body a way to appease her

needs and desires while the infant, too young for self-motivation, pacifies his desire with a surrogate nipple. In a study of Walker’s work, Harriet Jacobs, in her

*Phallic Diorama: An Analysis of The Subjection of Women* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1979), 27.


10 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 177.

11 This photograph was taken in 1998 at the Fabrica, a Drostes Chocolate Advertisement in *Colescott’s Sense of Irony is evident in the* (Vienna: Museum in Progress in cooperation with the Franziskus Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and Williams College Museum of Art, 2003), 140–67.

12 For more on this topic, see Orlando Patterson, *Enslavement by Birth*, in his *Slavery and Social Death*, 132–35.


19 Testimony is reminiscent in form and technique of *Faulkner’s* *The Unvanquished* and *The Reivers*. Faulkner’s *The Unvanquished*, 1929–37. *The Reivers*, 1968


23 The film was made in 1951, was shown at the 13th Venice Biennale in 1956, and is included in the exhibition *The Malaise of Power*, curated by Yasmil Raymond (Paducah, Ky.: Collector Books, 1987).


25 Ibid., 17.

26 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.

27 See Orlando Patterson, “The Transatlantic Trade,” in his *Slavery and Social Death*, 159–64.


29 Ideal, 17.