

**Maladies of  
Power:  
A  
Kara Walker  
Lexicon**

by Yasmin 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?”<sup>1</sup> 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 make mistakes. Heroes are not completely pure, and villains aren’t purely evil. I’m interested in the continuity of conflict, the creation of racist narratives, or nationalist narratives, or whatever narratives people use to construct a group identity and to keep themselves whole—such activity has a darker side to it, since it allows people to lash out at whoever’s not in the group. That’s a constant thread that flummoxes me.”<sup>2</sup> This lexicon of symptoms, tools, weapons, and ordeals attempts to articulate this conception of the amorphous nature of power and of morality, which

drives Walker’s efforts to visualize the histories of injustice that plague our past and continue to feed our present conscience.

## HOOP SKIRTS

Among the best-known portrayals of the antebellum South are Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* and its equally popular 1939 film adaptation. Set in 1861, Mitchell’s mythologized depiction of the period as a genteel and benevolent agrarian society permanently fixed in the American psyche a distorted account of the American South. The broad cultural influence, popularity, and sheer longevity of both the novel and the film give evidence to a continuation on some level of white-supremacist values in popular culture and an implicit justification, long after manumission, of slavery and segregation.



— FIG. 1 Eastman Johnson, *Old Kentucky Home—Life in the South (Negro Life at the South)*, 1859, oil on canvas, 36 x 45 1/4 in. (91.4 x 114.9 cm), The Robert L. Stuart Collection, on permanent loan from the New York Public Library, S-225; Collection New York Historical Society

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.<sup>3</sup> 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)* (fig. 1). Made before the outbreak of the Civil War, it perpetuated the myth of a harmonious rural life while disguising the inhumane treatment endured by slaves—some four million of them in the United States alone.<sup>4</sup>



— FIG. 2 Detail of *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994 (page 116 foldout)

In 1994, Walker exhibited her first cut-paper silhouette mural, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, a tableau some 50 feet long and 13 feet high that was unprecedented in form, scale, and subject matter (page 116 foldout).<sup>5</sup> The figures, slightly larger than life-size, were first drawn with white chalk on black paper and then cut with an X-ACTO knife and adhered to the wall to create a panoramic mural reminiscent in scale to the *tableaux vivants* and cycloramas that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Flanking the pastoral scene are two large trees covered in Spanish moss that evoke the warmer climate of the American South. A total of thirteen figures, four objects (a sword, a bust, a pumpkin, and a broom), and one dead duck are rendered in the reductive fashion of caricatures and with the idealized, well-proportioned, and eternally youthful features of fairy-tale illustrations. The full moon above concedes the clandestine nature of the events unfolding in front of our eyes: in the left foreground, a female figure wearing an overflowing hoop skirt leans forward to kiss her lover while revealing the legs of someone else, a young female lover, hiding beneath her garment (fig. 2).

The hoop skirt, a symbol of morality and the quintessential fashion statement of Southern women before the Civil War, is an ever-present motif in Walker’s imagery; both mistresses and slave women don such garments not to protect their virtue but to disguise their own repressed desires. In *Gone*, the breaching of the hoop skirt unleashes a series of lustful events, including a scene in which a toddler girl sucks the penis of a boy her junior. Above, in the sky, a naked

boy rises up with the help of his balloonlike penis while below, a young black woman lifts her leg to give birth to twins (see also *Birth*).

The mural’s scale insists that the viewer participate in the experience by walking across the periphery of the landscape as if spying on the events taking place. Despite the surrealism of the actions, the veracity of the figures—which exhibit human proportions and traits—incites us, whether consciously or unconsciously, into an unexpected interaction. We are drawn into role-playing and time travel in a manner that recalls a passage from Octavia E. Butler’s 1979 novel *Kindred*. The modern-day protagonist and narrator, Dana, has been suddenly thrown back in time to come to the aid of her white ancestor Rufus, now a young boy; when she asks him what year it is, he replies:

“It’s ... eighteen fifteen.”

“When?”

“Eighteen fifteen.”

I sat still, breathed deeply, calming myself, believing him. I did believe him. I wasn’t even as surprised as I should have been. I had already accepted the fact that I had moved through time. Now I knew I was farther from home than I had thought. And now I knew why Rufus’s father used his whip on “niggers” as well as horses.

I looked up and saw that the boy had left his chair and come closer to me.

“What’s the matter with you?” he demanded. “You keep acting sick.”

“It’s nothing, Rufe. I’m all right.” No, I was sick. What was I going to do? Why hadn’t I gone home? This could turn out to be such a deadly place for me if I had to stay in it much longer.

“Is this a plantation?” I asked.

“The Weylin plantation. My daddy’s Tom Weylin.”<sup>6</sup>

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 exorcism present 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."<sup>7</sup>

## BOOTS AND SHOES

Like clothing, footwear carries symbolic potency and poetry 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.



— FIG. 3, left Detail of *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!*, 1995, cut paper on wall, 13 x 45 ft. (4 x 13.7 m), Marieluise Hessel Collection, Hessel Museum of Art, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

— FIG. 4, right Detail of *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995 (page 172 foldout)

In the 1995 mural *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!* (fig. 3), a slave child, identified by her ripped skirt, wears an oversized male boot on her right foot. The left counterpart can be found on the foot of a naked toddler in the mural *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, also from 1995 (fig. 4). Apart from the master's children, the rest of the figures in both murals are depicted without shoes. This deliberate absence problematizes the nature of the object and assigns it a specific symbolic value and desire. A child wearing oversized shoes as if "dressing up" suggests an affectionate relationship with the owner of the footwear. In this sense, if a

slave child is wearing the boots of the master, the implication is that the child has access to the residence and may in fact be the offspring of the master and a domestic slave. Such a relationship did not necessarily correspond to a privileged position vis-à-vis the field slaves, but it did inevitably afford greater accessibility to material possessions. As Orlando Patterson contends in his analysis of the conditions of slavery, "Proximity to the master also carried enormous risks and disadvantages. The slave was under the constant supervision of the master and therefore subjected to greater and more capricious punishment and humiliation than those housed elsewhere."<sup>8</sup> Walker knows that it is unlikely that slave children were permitted to wear the master's shoes, and so the unsettling question remains: How did they get their hands on these objects?

In these two early murals, the children share the trophies of their master's affection while crippling the boots' potential use value. This splitting of the object's functionality renders each individual boot an icon of love, of accessibility to the master's property and "heart," granting the boots sentimental value and thus instilling the scene with an underlying fear of what would happen if these objects were lost. Furthermore, by being oversized—of having room to "grow into"—the shoes themselves propose the terrifying fate that awaits the children, who will eventually grow up and be put to work or sold and, in the case of the girls, most likely be raped. This horrendous scenario is articulated in the gasping gesture of one young girl in *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!* who holds her hand close to her mouth as she witnesses another slave girl nearby accepting a gift from an adult male figure who is naked from the waist down. From his beard and pince-nez, we take him to be the master.



— FIG. 5 Detail of *African't*, 1996, cut paper on wall, 12 x 66 ft. (3.7 x 20.1 m), Collections of Peter Norton and Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica, California

In 1996, the image of a child wearing a pair of oversized female ankle boots appeared in the mural *African't* (fig. 5). The mural, which spans some sixty feet, depicts various scenes of torture and subversion

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 contrast with the innocence and imbedded symbolism of children playing dress-up in the earlier examples. Furthermore, here the boots—a complete pair, even if slightly oversized—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.



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

This correlation between shoes and autonomy/mobility becomes more apparent in the 1997 mural *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole" (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause* (page 260 foldout). Consisting of more than twenty figures rendered slightly larger than life-size, this monumental piece, measuring 12 by 85 feet, is installed in a circular room that recalls historical cycloramas. The title is infused with Walker's sense of irony, and the imagery explicitly quotes scenes from Johnson's pastoral painting *Old Kentucky Home* (fig. 1). An example of antebellum genre painting, *Old Kentucky Home* is an ambiguous depiction of idleness and interracial interactions in which a white mistress enters the yard of the slave quarters and finds a slave man playing the banjo while a slave child dances with his mother. In Walker's version, the picturesque scene of afternoon leisure is rendered as a carnivalesque nightscape in which unsettling events take place under a crescent moon. The composition is divided into three vignettes: around the fountain, under the moon, and outside the slave quarters. In the latter, the majority of the adult slaves are depicted in motion—some are

walking, others dancing—and all of them, with the exception of one, are wearing shoes that, even in their various states of wear and tear, enable mobility and hence the possibility of escape (fig. 6). Starting at the right, a male slave wearing a pair of torn old ankle boots bends down cautiously to hide from someone. Nearby, a quartet of figures dances to the rhythm of a drum while a decapitated boy, holding tightly with both hands the severed head of a chicken, strides along in oversized pointed-toe shoes. Ahead of him, an older man prepares his family to escape by hiding the children inside a wagon filled with hay. Holding a pitchfork, he seems to have pitched the boy who flies above, dropping his makeshift bag. Leading the procession is a young woman eating an apple and carrying an infant strapped to her back. Though

her path is blocked by a pile of feces, her ankle boots 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 allegorical 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—hoop skirts, footwear, utensils, brooms, weapons, cotton balls—to signify power dynamics within ethical, sexual, and fetishistic scenarios.

## KNIVES, RAZOR BLADES, AND ROPES

Mutilations, 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



— FIG. 7 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, ca. 1620, oil on canvas, 6 ft. 6 in. x 5 ft. 4 in. (2 x 1.6 m), Collection Uffizi Gallery, Florence

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 Obligated Her* (page 271).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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).<sup>11</sup> 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,"<sup>12</sup> 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,



— FIG. 8 Detail of *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!*, 1995



— FIG. 9 Detail of *The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire—A Reconstruction*, 1995, cut paper on wall, 13 x 30 ft. (4 x 9.1 m), private collection



— FIG. 10 *Burn*, 1998, cut paper on canvas, 92 x 48 in. (233.7 x 121.9 cm), The Speyer Family Collection, New York

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.<sup>13</sup> This model of representation based on dominance and human bestiality is, above all, a caricature of power.

The objectification of power is the rhetorical position informing all of Walker's characters as the plantation master and the slave are equally capable of inflicting corporal violence on the other. Suicide in

these scenarios is 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 shameless gesture of bliss and defiance, which suggests that her suicide stands as an act of transgression and empowerment.<sup>14</sup>

In *Burn*, a prepubescent girl tosses to the ground the tin can that held the starter fluid. Her eyes are closed and she holds her arms out in a wide-open gesture as large flames rise up around her, transforming her skirt into a burning bush. To her left we see a large cloud of smoke, which along one side outlines the profile of a woman, a Latin cross, and a cemetery filled with obelisks and tombstones. What is initially striking about this piece is the stoicism of the young woman who, in her determination not to endure a life of captivity, is compelled to bear one final pain. The youthful promise of the girl's body is at odds with her disheartened detachment from life and affirms her absolute rebellion against those who hold power over her body and life. Both *Cut* and *Burn* resonate with a passage in Butler's novel *Kindred* in which the suicide of the slave girl Alice articulates this question of autonomy for the protagonist, Dana, who has returned, for one last time, to the Weylin plantation:

[Rufus] stopped at the barn door and pushed me through it. He didn't follow me in.

I looked around, seeing very little at first as my eyes became accustomed to the dimmer light. I turned to the place where I had been strung up and whipped—and jumped back in surprise when I saw that someone was hanging there. Hanging by the neck. A woman.

Alice.

I stared at her not believing, not wanting to believe.... I touched her and her flesh was cold and hard. The dead gray face was ugly in death as it had never been in life. The mouth was open. The eyes were open and staring. Her head was bare and her hair loose and short like mine. She had never liked to tie it up the way other women did. It was one of the things that had made us look even more alike—the only two consistently bareheaded women on the place. Her dress was

dark red and her apron clean and white. She wore shoes that Rufus had had made specifically for her, not the rough heavy shoes or boots other slaves wore. It was as though she had dressed up and combed her hair and then ...

I wanted her down.<sup>15</sup>

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 pantomimes 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, which Fanon poignantly described in the following paradox: "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."<sup>16</sup>

## 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 Negress and Her Heart*, which includes the image of a



— FIG. 11 Detail of *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994 (page 116 foldout)

ghostly half-woman, half-boat figure drifting across a body of water, literally embodying the arduous journey of Middle Passage (fig. 11).

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 "ethnic absolutism that currently dominates black political culture," sociologist Paul Gilroy, in his influential work on the Atlantic slave trade, daringly considers the history of the slave routes as a network of reciprocal influences and hybridization among Europe, Africa, and the Americas.<sup>18</sup> Questioning the very notion of racial purity, Gilroy 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."<sup>19</sup> 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.



— FIG. 12 Detail of *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*, 2001 (page 300 foldout)

*Endless Conundrum, an African Anonymous Adventuress* (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



— FIG. 13 Detail of *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*, 2001

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 studios of modernist artists such as Brancusi, Matisse, and Picasso, who imitated 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 exorcize 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 *Grub for Sharks: A Concession to the Negro Populace* (fig. 14), made in 2004, which shows a naked woman drinking water that drips from a fantasy-induced cloud. With knees bent and head tilted back, the figure reaches with caution toward a single drop of water melting from a group of nebulous forms above her head, where a coastal scene of a village floats in the distance. The object of desire, the water, contains the memory of that distant landscape—a fetishized memory that transmutes into a drop of water intended to satiate the character's immeasurable longing for her place of origin. The figure's protruding backside echoes the physiognomy of Saartje Baartman, a Khoisan woman from South Africa who was brought to Europe in



— 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



— FIG. 15 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture* by Kara E. Walker, 2005 (page 345)

the nineteenth century as a colonial curiosity for her steatopygia, or voluptuousness of buttocks. Also known as the “Hottentot Venus,” she was the victim of the colonial drive for racial superiority that designated black females as subhuman.<sup>20</sup> Walker’s Baartman is a visual trap, revealing a double image in which she is both an archetype of the original mother and a grotesque Other, both a symbol of authenticity thirsty for her origins and a fetishized being. Most recently, Walker returns to this dual figure in the 2005 film animation *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture* by Kara E. Walker (fig. 15), in which a giant, black, female sea creature consumes the floating dead bodies of the slaves thrown overboard from the slave ships during the transatlantic journey only to excrete them into a formless mass from which a male figure is born. In this sense, the Middle Passage in Walker’s work becomes a birthplace where modernity comes into existence and where the concepts of Africa and America merge.

## BIRTH



— FIG. 16 *Untitled*, 1994–1995, cut paper on canvas, 48 x 54 in. (121.9 x 137.2 cm), Collection Bruce and Barbara Berger

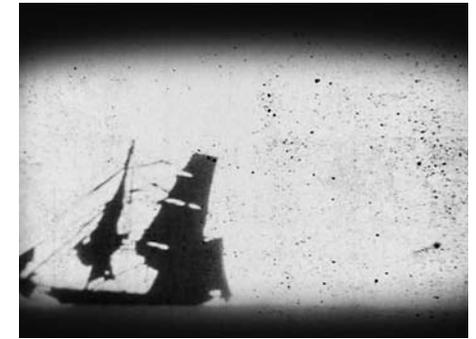
Infants and toddlers appear in a variety of vulnerable situations in Walker’s work: falling lifeless to the ground, dangling from delicate umbilical cords, or clinging to a mother’s breast. A fetus hanging from an umbilical cord underneath the skirt of a female figure was the subject of one of the artist’s earliest cut-paper silhouettes on canvas, an untitled work made in 1994–1995 (fig. 16). Birth is also the central theme of her most recent animated film, *8 Possible Beginnings or: The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture* by Kara E. Walker (figs. 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24).<sup>21</sup> 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, *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions* (page 344).<sup>22</sup> 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.”<sup>23</sup>

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’ book *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881). In Walker’s version, however, there is no 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*.<sup>24</sup> 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 intertitles foretell 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 segues into 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. In 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’ original characters. The segment opens with L’il 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-dee-doo-dah,” the lyrics of which intoxicate 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 anguish. She grants 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. Like Uncle Remus, her role is that of a trickster who occasionally pulls the weak strings that awaken the despair of our collective memory and mute 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.<sup>25</sup> It is no accident that images of childbirth and of infants in Walker’s work epitomize the suffering and sacrifice of slaves while simultaneously alluding to 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:



— FIG. 17 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “Along a Watery Road”



— FIG. 18 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “Motherland”



— FIG. 19 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “The New World”



— FIG. 20 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “Interlude”



— FIG. 21 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “New Labors”



— FIG. 22 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “A Darkey Hymn: ‘All I Want’”



— FIG. 23 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “Plantin’ Time”



— FIG. 24 Still from *8 Possible Beginnings*, 2005, “The Story of Br’er Rabbit, Br’er Fox, and How Briar Patch County Come to Be Called That”

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 sawdust; 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 collars the way he liked besides having at least ten breeding years left. But now she’d gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who’d overbeat her and made her cut and run.<sup>26</sup>

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 receding from his bald head, his arms raised to the sky in a gesture of clemency, his pants pulled 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 cuddly, 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 Adventuress*, 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, making the association between excrement and enslavement explicit (see also *Feces and Semen*). Indeed, there is an unsettling lifelessness 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.



— FIG. 25 Detail of *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress*, 2001 (page 300 foldout)

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 those 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. 26), 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



— FIG. 26 Adrian Piper, *Cornered*, 1988, video installation with birth certificates, color video, monitor, table, and ten chairs, dimensions variable, Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Bernice and Kenneth Newberger Fund

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. Like 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). Oblivious 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.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on the vicious humor of racial stereotypes, Walker finds in such imagery the potential to disrupt and challenge dehumanizing depictions of the black body, the very kind at play in the unruly 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 bawdy/body associations extremely important, though. I relate through it as well ... this black body ... jiggling around and representing everything but itself.”<sup>28</sup>

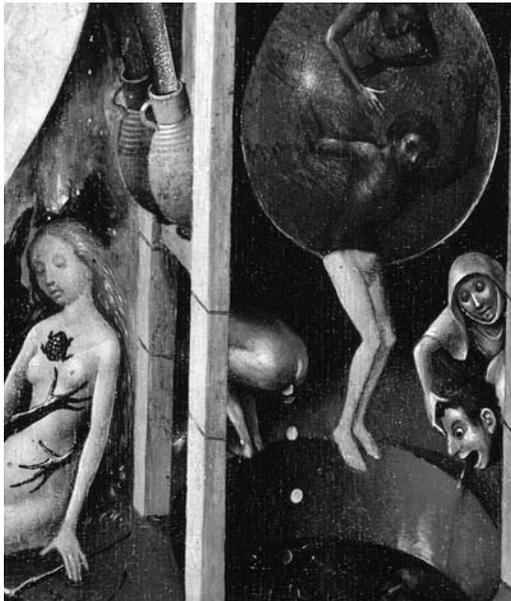
Like many scenarios in Walker’s art that suggest infantile lack of restraint, the images of figures defecating are encoded with messages about obscenity, disobedience, and defiance. In *World’s Exposition* (fig. 27), a silhouette mural from 1997, a half-human, half-monkey figure hangs by her tail from 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 Jeanne 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.”<sup>29</sup> 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 sensual 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 (fig. 28). “We know



— FIG. 28 Hieronymus Bosch, *Hell*, detail of right panel of *Garden of Earthly Delights*, ca. 1504, triptych plus shutters, oil on panel, 86 5/8 x 38 in. (220 x 97 cm), Collection Museo del Prado, Madrid

that the gold which the devil gives his paramours turns into excrement after his departure,” Freud wrote in “Character and Anal Eroticism,” adding that “the devil is certainly nothing else than the personification of the repressed unconscious instinctual life.”<sup>30</sup> In his discussion of the child’s erotic interest in defecation, Freud concludes by noting that this original excitation is destined to be extinguished in later years only to be replaced by a new interest in material possessions and money. Walker plays off these associations between material possessions and fecal matter in *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the*

*South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K. E. B. Walker, Colored* (fig. 29), from 1997, which shows a naked slave woman defecating on top of a pile of more excrement. Buried up to her knees, she reaches out to eat from the mound. Nearby, a suspicious-looking male figure, wearing a broad hat and long jacket and carrying a large bag, bends down to take some of the soft material. The juxtaposition of the clothed and the naked emphasizes the divergence of their desires: whereas 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<sup>31</sup>; 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 evoke the amorphous nature of moral authority, or, to borrow a phrase from theorist Achille Mbembé, “the banality of power,” where neither oppressor nor oppressed are ethically superior.<sup>32</sup> Like Mbembé, 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.



— FIG. 29 Detail of *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored*, 1997, cut paper on wall, 13 x 150 ft. (4 x 45.7 m), Collection Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; gift of Susan and Lewis Manilow



— FIG. 30 Still from *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, 2004 (page 344)



— FIG. 31 Still from *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, 2004



— FIG. 32 Still from *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, 2004



— FIG. 33 Still from *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, 2004

The artist’s first film, *Testimony: Narrative of a Negress Burdened by Good Intentions*, from 2004, is a black-and-white silent puppet animation that tells the story of the lynching of a plantation master by his slave lover (figs. 30, 31, 32, 33). For this piece, Walker created small-scale renditions of her most famous characters: the Auntie, the master, the master’s son, and the Negress mistress.<sup>33</sup> The story takes place on a cotton plantation and is narrated through a series of intertitles that recount how the men, in their “longing for fulfillment,” temporarily relinquished their bodies to the slave women. Of course, the problem is that power has no conscience, and as viewers are quickly told, the women refused “to revert to the old order” and instead they “rounded ‘em up” and murdered their masters/lovers. Driven by opposing passions, the young antiheroine of the story is shown in the last scene sucking the penis of her dead lover and getting her face splashed with an enormous amount of semen in what can be interpreted as the one last gesture of her power, which is also her weakness: her affection, which is also her selfishness; her pride, which is also her shame; and her sublimation, which is also her freedom. A tragicomedy, Walker’s fable, presented in the spirit of slave testimonials, delves into the flaws of assigning any kind of moral superiority in the realm of human emotions. As in her life-size silhouettes, the characters in Walker’s animation—both masters and slaves—cannot be viewed through a moral lens, as it is precisely the impossibility of escaping an immoral and corrupt system that leaves no room for benevolence from either side. In *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs describes this conundrum:

You may believe what I say; for I write only that whereof I know. I was twenty-one years in that cage of obscene birds. I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched. And as for the colored race, it needs an abler pen than mine to describe the extremity of their sufferings, the depth of the degradation.<sup>34</sup>

## MOTHER’S MILK

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 nursemaids 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



— FIG. 34 Detail of *A Means to an End ... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, 1995, hard-ground etching and aquatint on Somerset Satin paper sheet, 27 x 19 in. (68.6 x 48.3 cm), Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1996

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 meaning as the child reaches impatiently with both hands and mouth for her mother's nipple while the women, as they thrust out their necks, seem to be

hurrying to satiate their thirst. The portrait is striking for its unsentimental tone and sense of urgency. The women seem to be seeking from one another the nourishment not of milk but of a richer nectar that affirms their shared heritage. Stripped of its biological function, the maternal act of lactation is rendered as an oral transfusion that is simultaneously sensual and repulsive, empowering and repressive, whereby ancestral lineage is both dished out and consumed by so many nameless mothers, sisters, daughters, and granddaughters.

Ancestry is the fluid that flows in Walker's breastfeeding imagery. Under slavery, the denial of birthright served to support the master's totalitarian rule. As Patterson points out in his introduction to *Slavery and Social Death*, "Not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations but, by extension, all such claims and obligations on his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors."<sup>35</sup> In this scene of uninterrupted milking, the women in Walker's quartet, so mythical in their weightless bodies, reclaim their birthright not only by drawing in the nourishment of their ancestors but also by drawing out the venom of slavery.

Intimate scenes of breastfeeding appear sporadically in Walker's work, alternating between genders. In an early watercolor drawing from *Negress 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.<sup>36</sup>

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



— FIG. 35 Detail of *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995 (page 172 foldout)

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 "fetishism" originates from their enslaved condition.<sup>37</sup> 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 *Consume* (fig. 36), a cut-paper piece from 1998 in which a bare-chested, pubescent girl wearing oversized high-heeled shoes and a banana-leaf skirt sucks on her own



— FIG. 36 *Consume*, 1998, cut paper on wall, 69 x 32 in. (175.3 x 81.3 cm), Collection Jean Crutchfield and Robert Hobbs

breast while a toddler boy, most likely the master's son, mimics her by sucking 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 needs and desires while the infant, too young for self-recognition, pacifies his desire with a surrogate nipple.

Milk as a euphemism appears in a suite of sixty-six works on paper titled *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* (pages 196–259, 266–67), from 1997. These drawings, made with diaristic spontaneity in response to the letter-writing campaigns organized against her and her work by a handful of artists and critics in 1997, record a private universe inhabited by subjects real and imagined, occasionally accompanied by sour observations on xenophobia. Both the images and the text are infused with satire, occasional comic twists, and explicit sadistic sexual drama. The double rhetorical question of the work's title carries a double meaning, quoting, as the artist has explained, the well-known American joke that begins with the statement "I like my coffee like I like my women" and to which is added "any number of combinations, 'hot, black and sweet,' 'Black with a

touch of cream,' etc."<sup>38</sup> Playing off sexual innuendos, Walker alludes explicitly to the unspoken word in the racial conflict in America: miscegenation. For not only is she underlining the "inner plantation" that perpetuates racial segregation some fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the 1954 Supreme Court decision dismantling segregation in public schools; she is also alluding to Fanon's "infernal circle" of race: "When people like me, they tell me it is in spite of my color. When they dislike me, they point out that it is not because of my color."<sup>39</sup>



— FIG. 37 Robert Colescott, *Rejected Idea for a Drostes Chocolate Advertisement*, 1974, acrylic on canvas, 80 x 59 1/2 in. (203 x 151 cm), private

Precedents for Walker's bold interracial commentaries had been set by artists such as Adrian Piper and Robert Colescott, both great influences in her work. Colescott's sense of irony is evident in *Rejected Idea for a Drostes Chocolate Advertisement* (fig. 37), from 1974, which depicts a couple ice-skating hand in hand. The woman, who is black, wears a traditional Dutch white nurse's bonnet; her white lover, who is tall and blond, looks at her lustily, as evidenced by his exposed erection. Like Walker's double question, Colescott's pun is two-tiered, referring both to the legendary weakness among the Dutch for the exotic drink of the Olmecs and to the country's infamous colonial past. The black female body as both subject and repository of sexual fantasies, phobias, and taboos prevails as the locus of a major portion of Walker's work, exposing age-old maladies, analyzing their roots and effects, and possibly, in the process, diminishing their menacing power.

## NOTES

- 1 Marcus Wood, *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America, 1780–1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 7.
- 2 Walker quoted in David D'Arcy, "The Eye of the Storm," *Modern Painters* (April 2006): 59.
- 3 In Europe, J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon Coming On*, also known as *The Slave Ship*, is probably the best-known work of art devoted to the subject of slavery, but it is a rare example. For an extended account of this work, see Wood, *Blind Memory*.
- 4 See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), 483.
- 5 This work was shown in the 1994 group exhibition *Selections 1994* at the Drawing Center, New York.
- 6 Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 27.
- 7 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (1952; New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967), 93.
- 8 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 177.
- 9 This light installation was exhibited for the first time in 2000 at the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva along with three other light pieces: *Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On)*; *Why I Like White Boys. An Illustrated Novel. By Kara E. Walker, Negress*; and *Emancipated, and On Tour*. In these works, Walker combined, for the first time, cut-paper silhouettes and overhead light projections.
- 10 Steel rods were welded onto punishment collars to enforce a submissive posture and bells were hung to prevent slaves from running away. For further analysis of the representation of torture and other methods of punishment, see Marcus Wood, "Representing Pain and Describing Torture: Slavery, Punishment and Martyrology," in his *Blind Memory*, 215–91.
- 11 Both of these murals were part of an installation that included *The End of Uncle Tom* and *the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, also from 1995, as part of Walker's solo exhibition *From the Bowels to the Bosom* at Wooster Gardens/Brent Sikkema, New York, in 1996.
- 12 Walker interviewed by Susan Sollins in the video documentary *Art:21—Art in the Twenty-first Century*, Season 2, VHS and DVD (New York: PBS, 2003).
- 13 Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, vol. 3, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: New Press, 1994), 326–48.
- 14 For further analysis of this work, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "Final Cut," in her *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 125–51, and Darby English, "This Is Not about the Past: Silhouettes in the Work of Kara Walker," in Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, and Mark Reinhardt, eds., *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press in association with the Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College and Williams College Museum of Art, 2003), 140–67.
- 15 Butler, *Kindred*, 248.
- 16 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 231.
- 17 See Orlando Patterson, "The Transatlantic Trade," in his *Slavery and Social Death*, 159–64.
- 18 Paul Gilroy, "The Black Atlantic as a Counterculture of Modernity," in his *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 5.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 17.

- 20 See Sander L. Gilman, "The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality," in Kymberly N. Pinder, ed., *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 119–38.
- 21 This work was created after her 2005 solo exhibition *Kara E. Walker's Song of the South* at REDCAT, Los Angeles, which consisted of three film animations projected onto cut plywood silhouettes of trees and two live performances staged by the artist at the opening and closing of the show. Afterward, in her studio, Walker revised and restaged sections of the initial animations and performance and conceived a new storyboard for *8 Possible Beginnings*, which premiered in her spring 2006 solo exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.
- 22 Walker's first use of video and performance in her work took place during her 2004 solo exhibition *Fibbergibbet and Mumbo Jumbo: Kara E. Walker in Two Acts* at the Fabric Workshop and Museum, Philadelphia.
- 23 From Walker's introductory panel to her 2006 solo exhibition *Kara Walker at the Met: After the Deluge* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
- 24 Walker's piece is the antithesis of Griffith's malicious attempt to provide historical justification for segregation. Griffith's 1915 film was inspired by Thomas Dixon's racist novel *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, published in 1905.
- 25 For more on this topic, see Orlando Patterson, "Enslavement by Birth," in his *Slavery and Social Death*, 132–35.
- 26 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume Trade-mark, 1987), 149.
- 27 See P. J. Gibbs, *Black Collectibles: Sold in America* (Paducah, Ky.: Collector Books, 1987).
- 28 Walker quoted in Alexander Alberro, "Kara Walker," *Index 1*, no. 1 (February 1996): 27.
- 29 bell hooks, "Selling Hot Pussy," in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 62.
- 30 Sigmund Freud, "Character and Anal Eroticism," (1908) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. J. Strachey with A. Freud, A. Strachey, and A. Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1955–1974), vol. 9, 174.
- 31 See Wood, *Blind Memory*, 226.
- 32 See Achille Mbembé, "The Aesthetic of Vulgarity," in his *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 102–41.
- 33 *Testimony* is reminiscent in form and technique of Lotte Reiniger's fantastical animation *Adventures of Prince Achmed*, from 1926. In her second animation, *8 Possible Beginnings*, Walker names Reiniger in her list of acknowledgments.
- 34 Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861; New York: Dover Publications, 2001), 46.
- 35 Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 5.
- 36 On the "failed patriarch," see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, "The Lactation of John Brown," in her *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 67–101. Shaw presents an incisive study of this particular work.
- 37 See W. J. T. Mitchell, "Drawing Desire," in his *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 57–75. Mitchell offers insightful examination of Freud's theories of the pleasure principle and the death drive and how they are manifested in images.
- 38 Walker interviewed by Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "All Cut from Black Paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker..." in Johannes Schlebrügge, ed., *Safety Curtain 1: Kara Walker*, exh. cat. (Vienna: Museum in Progress in cooperation with Vienna State Opera House and P & S Wien, 2000), 15.
- 39 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 116.

