

standards. They must give up their personal desires and live for the common good of the community. Hester strays from this conformity the first time when she has sexual relations with her minister, a major violation of community standards. She not only defiled herself, but she defiled the leader of the community, and therefore, the entire community. She does not conform again when she bears the scarlet letter A with pride and dignity. The community's intention for punishing Hester is to force her to fully repent. Hester seems to go through the motions of repentance. She stands on the scaffold, she wears the letter A, and she lives on the outskirts of town. However, Hester's "haughtiness," "pride," and "strong, calm, steadfastly enduring spirit" undermines the community's objective (Hawthorne, 213).

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Silhouetted Stereotypes in the Art of Kara Walker

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Kara Walker explores traditional narratives of race and gender power dynamics in her black and white silhouette installations. By presenting most figures in the same black color, racial and individual features are realized through detail. The theme of consumption is prevalent in Walker's work, such as the consumption of people as products in the slave trade as well as the consumption of breast milk in modern versions of the *Madonna lactans*. Walker's work draws on traditional intersections of race, class, and gender dynamics to create an original commentary on the cultural consumption of materials, beings, and art. Despite this commentary, Walker does not offer a clear stance on these issues and leaves the audience without a resolution to her shocking silhouettes.

Born in Stockton, California in 1969, Walker moved to Atlanta, Georgia, at the age of thirteen (Richardson 50). This move exposed Walker to the history of the "Old South" in comparison to her life in liberal California in the 1980s. Slave narratives are prevalent in Walker's work, and the stereotypes Walker draws on are typical of an Old South mentality, but

Walker insists that her work "mimics the past, but it's all about the present" (Tang 161). After her earning her B.F.A. at Atlanta College of Art and further study at the Rhode Island School of Design, Walker rose to prominence by winning the MacArthur Genius Grant in 1997 at the young age of 27 (Richardson 50). This prominent award poised Walker for great accomplishments, yet also exposed her to harsh criticism from fellow African American women artists, such as Betye Saar, who launched a critical letter-writing campaign to boycott Walker's work (Wall 277). Walker's critics are quick to demonize aspects of her personal life, like her marriage to a white European man, and even her mental state, accusing her of mental distress due to the graphic and troubling nature of her work (Wall 295).

Walker's silhouette installations involve black life-size silhouette figures on a white, often panoramic wall. Occasionally, colored lights are used to create an environment for the silhouettes, but most often the installations are strictly black and white. In this way, Walker explores stereotypes of race and gender, revealing individual and racial identities through details, yet forcing the viewer to acknowledge their complicity with stereotypes as the blank spaces of the installation are filled in with the viewer's own definitions of stereotypes, according to the social script. The black color of the silhouette figures is also the "color of all colors combined," commenting on the essential similarities between all human beings despite race and ethnicity. Walker states: "the silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as linked" (Kara Walker 1). Also, the shadows of the viewer interact with the silhouettes as each viewer closely examines the works, becoming part of the installation in a similar, black form and placing the viewer in direct conversation with the silhouette figures (Seidl). Walker's work questions binaristic social systems of black and white, male and female, light and dark, violent and delicate, and as such, contributes to the deconstructionist approach to feminist thought.

The use of silhouettes as a medium recalls the eighteenth and nineteenth century domestic tradition of silhouettes as female crafts. Similar to needlework and other craft mediums, silhouettes were used as a pastime for domestic women. Shadow silhouettes were particularly useful for women to record the figure of their lovers as keepsakes, as men travelled for business or military service. The ornamental style of silhouettes is

complicated by Walker's violent and socially charged subject matter, which transforms the traditionally meek and dainty medium and portrays harsh, ugly themes (Seidl). Vivien Green Fryd analyzes Walker's complication of the perception of silhouettes as "feminine, democratic, decorative, middle-class, Victorian art" by comparing the popularity of silhouettes to that of minstrel shows in which "white people rendered themselves black" (149). Phillipe Vergne, deputy director and chief curator of Walker's 2007-2008 exhibit *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, proposes that there is violence in making silhouettes, as "the initial gesture itself – cutting through the material, slashing the figures – cannot be an innocent one" (Kara Walker 14). Eighteenth and nineteenth century silhouettes were created originally in small scale, but Walker's works are life-size and sometimes larger than life size, dwarfing the viewer as the figures are displayed at various heights and positions on the occasionally panoramic walls. Fryd proposes that "by enlarging the scale of the silhouettes and employing them to create narratives, Walker works within and explodes the limits of the medium, creating a new type of history painting" (149). In this way, Walker reappropriates a traditional women's medium to challenge the limitations of women's art and updates an older medium with new subject matter and significance.

Common criticism of Walker's work concerns her use of racial and gendered stereotypes, as Walker rarely provides a concrete conclusion to the controversial images she portrays. A critic of Walker, Betye Saar maintains that Walker uses transgressive as opposed to progressive imagery, perpetuating stereotypes instead of offering a positive solution to harmful representations of African Americans, especially African American women (Wall 277). A recurring question in Walker's work is whether or not her representations reframe the stereotypical images to present an empowered and enlightened message, or if her work merely reappropriates harmful images from the past, reinforcing the negative power dynamics that subjugate women and minorities in dominant culture. Walker's ambiguous treatment of this question contributes to the theme of consumption, as it is difficult to gauge exactly what Walker views as "appropriate" consumption in terms of the slave trade, art, and breastfeeding. In his comparison of Walker to Andy Warhol, Vergne states that "if you penetrate [a philosophy] fully, even if by ruse, you might expose the weaknesses and contradictions of the structure you are

subverting from the inside. That structure, for Warhol, was consumption, fame, and history; for Walker, it is history, authority, and power" (Kara Walker 12). For Vergne, Walker's work can be read as subverting the power structures at play in her images, despite the stereotypical representation of her subject matter, as she continues Warhol's theme of consumption.

One of Walker's early works is *Safety Curtain 1*, displayed in 1998 at the Vienna State Opera House (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Kara Walker, *Safety Curtain 1*, 1998.

Walker was the first artist invited to create a safety curtain installation, the goal of which is to hide an installation of an artist of the Third Reich, Rudolf Eisenmenger. Instead of cleansing the theatre of Nazi history, the Opera House manager decided to invite artists to install different works to hide the original curtain during the year, revealing the Eisenmenger during the summer for tourists. In *Safety Curtain 1*, Walker uses Austrian stereotypes, such as *The Sound of Music* inspired mountain imagery and the image of an Austrian coffeehouse logo, the *Meinhl Moor*, but introduces an element of violence and minstrel musicians to complicate the accepted traditions of both Austrian and international reactions to uncomfortable subjects, like racism and Nazi Germany (Seidl). Walker's use of the African image in the coffeehouse logo explores the use of stereotypes of Africans for profit, much like Saar's manipulation of the Aunt Jemima character in her work. Walker's larger silhouette exhibitions explore slavery narratives at length, but this subtle detail of a specifically Austrian coffeehouse logo demonstrates that the manipulation and "consumption" (in terms of trade) of African images for profit remains an issue. Walker exposes the controversial history the Opera House managers sought to mask, as well as the "hidden" yet glaring racial stereotypes that exist worldwide, beyond the typical representations of the Old South. Walker's handling of the themes of race and power dynamics with violent imagery through a dainty medium is typical of her most well known work with

silhouettes.

Most recently, in early 2013, Walker's work provoked controversy in a Newark, NJ library. Her work, titled *The moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon curves around towards barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos* (Fig. 2), was originally hung in a Newark library but was soon covered with cloth after intense backlash from library patrons. The work, a black and white drawing that presents numerous scenes of violence and chaotic relationships, features a depiction of a white man forcing a black woman to perform oral sex in the bottom right corner, the center of the controversy.



Fig. 2: Kara Walker, *The moral arc of history ideally bends towards justice but just as soon as not curves back around toward barbarism, sadism, and unrestrained chaos*, 2012.

This sexually and racially charged detail is typical of Walker's work, which inspires a significant amount of controversy in the more abstract context of a museum, much less a public library. After much debate, the drawing was uncovered and displayed once more. Scott London, the art collector who loaned the piece to the library, said of the decision to uncover the work: Libraries have a view towards the future; their custodians recognize that ideas that may be unpopular today may have influence tomorrow. It is reassuring that the Newark Public Library chose to maintain and uphold this principal by unshrouding and continuing to showcase Ms. Walker's drawing. It was not the easy thing to do. (Carter)

London joins some critics in supporting Walker's work as progressive, in its inspiration of unpleasant but important discussions of racism, sexism, and privilege, yet the excessive use of violent and sexually aggressive imagery in Walker's work begs the question of whether Walker is continually capitalizing on these grotesque themes in a "torture porn" fashion, providing viewers a voyeuristic pleasure in the unconventional and shocking scene.

The most significant of Walker's works in

relation to the theme of consumption is the work *Consume* (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Kara Walker, *Consume*, 1998.

Consumption as a theme considers both the "consumption" of people as products in the slave trade as well as the consumption of breast milk in Walker's versions of the *Madonna lactans*. *Consume* depicts two figures, an ethnically featured female and a young boy with white features. The two figures face each other as the boy appears to suck on an object connected to the woman's skirt as the woman herself sucks from her upturned breast. The objects on the female figure's skirt are of a phallic shape, and could denote gender ambiguity. A complete reading of the objects as phallic appendages would infer that the young boy is performing a sexual act on the female figure, yet the objects encircle the woman's body as if part of a skirt, recalling images of Josephine Baker and her exotic costume.

Josephine Baker was an African American singer, dancer, and actress popular in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s and, as Vergne states, "[became] an incarnation of the European fascination with the sexualized Other" (Kara Walker 18). Baker's career capitalized on the gaze and desire of a white European audience to ogle the exotic other, decked in a banana skirt costume that further placed Baker in an exoticized context. The allusion to Baker in this work as well as the female figure's sucking on her own breast could be an indicator of the power found in using the limited agency available to women in order to provide for oneself. Baker profited from her manipulation of stereotypes, as the female figure in *Consume* provides for herself in her "self-nourishment" (Tang 158).

Consume places the figure of the white boy as one of less power than the female, as the boy is smaller in size. In a strangely pedophilic action, the boy is sucking on the female figure's phallic banana skirt. This action, taken in context with the entire work, could

propose that the boy's submission to the exoticized image of the Other is what allows the ethnic female to provide for herself. In a manipulation of the Madonna lactans, the boy figure is not breastfeeding, but sucking on the phallic shape that alludes to Baker. In this way, the boy's misplaced representation of the Madonna lactans could be a commentary on the Mammy stereotype of African American women as well as an allusion to Baker. As white children found maternal comfort in their black caregivers, they themselves were displaced from their mothers breast, and were unable to participate in a traditional representation of the Madonna lactans. Whether the female figure is a displaced Mammy, or jezebel figure after Baker's image, this reading of *Consume* still interrogates the problematic question of whether Walker's use of stereotypes is progressive. Regardless of the female figure's self-sufficiency, the stereotypes continue to exist, harming other women who lack the business savvy and opportunity to profit from the exotic, erotic representation of the Other. This relates to the theme of consumption, and the question of at what point does the white European audience stop consuming the exotic Other as a source of entertainment? Baker profited from stereotypes, and audiences "consumed" her performance as paying customers, just as Walker profits from her work as audiences view her works.

The title *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (Fig. 4), 1995, demonstrates Walker's direct manipulation of famous slavery narratives, especially the novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe.



Fig. 4: Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (Detail), 1995.

A white woman's story of slavery, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* frames slavery in the specific context of a white female perspective. Walker, a black woman, plays with this narrative in her exhibition with her own updated perspective on slavery narratives. In this particular detail

of the work, three adult women with ethnic features suck each other's breasts while a fourth figure, an infant, strains upwards to one of the female figure's breasts. Unlike *Consume*, this earlier work of Walker's explores breast-feeding as a female issue in the elimination of the male child figure. The infant figure's gender is ambiguous, but due to its age, breastfeeding would be a less controversial act as opposed to the older boy figure's action in *Consume*. In this image, the female figure to the right carries a watermelon, a food stereotypically linked to African Americans in dominant culture, as she suckles the breast of her fellow female figure. The figures are arranged in a pyramidal shape, and as Yasmil Raymond states: "[the women] thrust out their necks, [they] seem to be hurrying to satiate their thirst. The portrait is striking for its unsentimental tone and sense of urgency" (Kara Walker 366). This is different from *Consume*, as no sense of urgency exists there. When the appetite belongs to those in the minority, there is a sense of rushing and quickened time, whereas the work with the young white boy is more fixed, allowing both him and the female figure time to nourish themselves.

Walker's exhibit *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* was her first full-scale US museum survey in 2007-2008, combining elements of past exhibits and repeating themes shown together in a comprehensive exhibit (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5: Kara Walker, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, 2007-2008.

The exhibit traveled throughout cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Paris, and was presented in a slightly different way each time. The exhibit contains short films featuring silhouettes in motion, reinforcing the idea of movement in the panoramic installations of silhouette figures. In the gallery guide, the exhibition is divided into eight narrative themes, one to correspond to each of the eight exhibits within *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. The eight themes - *Silhouettes*, *An Historical Romance*, *Uncle Tom*,

Censorship?, Negress Notes, Retelling History, Endless Conundrum, and African America - are expressed in various mediums, including Walker's famous silhouettes, drawings, paintings, and videos (Gallery Guide).

While Walker's figures often carry a sense of movement, especially when set in a panoramic installation, her films feature the silhouettes actually in motion. One film in particular, *Eight Possible Beginnings: or, The Creation of an African-America, a Moving Picture* by Kara E. Walker explores the issue of consumption from an economical perspective. Part of the African America narrative of the aforementioned list of themes, this film is divided into eight chapters, some more connected in narrative than others. In her article, Fryd analyses the chapters of *Eight Possible Beginnings*, especially those concerning the character of a black girl situated in the Old South. Fryd states that the girl is positioned within the "Southern economy" and exists "not only in the realm of production but also within the realm of reproduction, nurturing and sex" (152). Fryd's analysis of the character, a recycled image of a young black silhouette girl, who experiences post-traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms following a rape, reinforces that in Walker's work, the theme of consumption is prevalent in terms of the slave trade, breastfeeding, and sexual imagery.

Consumption in terms of economics, nourishment, and sexual appetite occurs in most of Walker's exhibits, and in her work, Walker reveals the binary of consumer / consumed, but does not fully deconstruct this binary in the film or her figures. The power structure of the Old South gives the power of the consumer to dominant white male culture, while women, especially black slave women, are consumed for their work in the fields, as mothers, and as lovers. The women are consumed in Walker's work by both men and women, but consumption in itself implies a power dynamic of control in which black slave women are disenfranchised. Though Walker presents this binary and explores the relationships that exist as a result of the binary, there is no resolution for the young slave girl or the other silhouetted iterations of the character. In this lack of resolution, Walker recycles stereotypes and binaries, but fails to resolve the problematic issues raised by the binaries.

Walker's work explores controversial images from a highly charged historical tradition. These images reflect current social situations, such as the power dynamics of race, class, and gender that continue to

marginalize select groups and operate on a binaristic system. Walker's work manipulates these binaries and themes in panoramic installations of silhouette figures that overwhelm the viewer, but she does not offer a concrete solution. Her work remains ambiguously saturated with violence and repeated themes of subjugation, and her refusal to offer a resolution for these issues contributes to the passionate and consistent criticism of her work. The audience voyeuristically consumes the works, holding the gaze on the sexually explicit and disturbingly violent figures that consume and "devour" each other in sexual and violent acts of domination. Ultimately, Walker's work reveals the viewer's complicity with these figures, as our shadows contribute to the panorama, yet the viewer is made aware of the consequences of complicity in a patriarchal system due to the explicit, no holds barred nature of Walker's exhibitions.

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