

“SHOULD I NEVER BE HEARD FROM AGAIN?”:
THE CONTROVERSIAL RECEPTION OF KARA WALKER

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations	vi
Introduction	1
Contradictions: Woman, Work, And Community	5
Southern Trees Bear Strange Fruit: Public Condemnation Of Kara Walker	22
Should I Never Be Heard From Again?: Kara Walker's Response	40
Conclusion	54
Images	56
Bibliography	77
Vita	80
Abstract	81

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred B'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and her Heart*, 1994
2. Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (Detail)*, 1995
3. Kara Walker, *The Rich Soil Down There*, 2002
4. Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972
5. Betye Saar, *Dbl-Duty—I's Back Wid a Vengeance (front and back view)*, 1997
6. Howardena Pindell, *Columbus*, 1991-92
7. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
8. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
9. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
10. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
11. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
12. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
13. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
14. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
15. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
16. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
17. Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997
18. Kara Walker, *Cut*, 1998
19. Noe DeWitt, *Kara Walker*, 1998.
20. Kara Walker, *Hunting Scene*, 2001
21. Kara Walker, *Letter from a Black Girl*, 1998

Introduction

Racially and sexually inflammatory, Kara Walker's works are among the most controversial of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first. The dark narrative told through panoramic scenes of black cut-paper silhouettes, applied directly to the gallery wall, is charged with irony and a penetrating cynicism that deeply affects audiences of all races. Depicting graphic scenes that undermine the sanitized history of the antebellum South and the typical role of African Americans as victims of the institution of slavery, Walker's work outraged many in the African American community. Those who were particularly critical of the work belong to the generation that promoted Black Power and Black Arts, like seminal artist Betye Saar. Reactions to Walker by Saar and her contingency were immediate and powerful, compelling a national public debate in the 1990s. Artists, scholars, and prominent black intellectuals responded through articles, symposia, and boycott petitions. These intellectuals relied heavily on positive tropes of black representation as support for their objections. Walker's "display of black flesh" is considered pornographic and demeaning to some African Americans past and present.¹ Positive reception, primarily by a younger generation of artists and scholars, as well as the mainstream art public, only worsened the harsh and sometimes hateful criticisms of Walker.

Kara Walker's art reflected the newly politicized art world of the 1990s, with its changing attitudes about minority cultures. The Whitney Biennial of 1993 privileged identity politics in fine art. Artists of diverse ethnic backgrounds and genders were openly exploring issues of race, gender, and sexuality. They were grappling with social and political belonging through work that encouraged viewers to think about their own place and involvement in

¹ Sander L. Gilman, "Confessions of an Academic Pornographer," in *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, ed. Philippe Vergne (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007), 29.

these sensitive issues. The themes of the exhibition focused on “otherness and disenfranchisement,” with a political bent away from the exclusivity of the dominant art institution.² Artists like Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Pepón Osorio, and Byron Kim appeared in the Biennial. The admission button claiming “I CAN’T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE,” by Daniel J. Martinez, indicated that the exhibition would address racial tensions explicitly. Although, largely poorly received by critics, the 1993 Whitney Biennial nevertheless communicated a dominant theme in postmodern America: multiculturalism and identity politics would inform a new understanding of the issues important to America’s various ethnic groups. Artworks that emerge from this attitude communicate the importance of witnessing and listening.³

This Whitney Biennial signaled a change in the representation of cultural issues in art. The 1990s saw the “noise and discord of contemporary American society [brought] into the museum.”⁴ Multiculturalism was translated into identity politics, which in turn informed the creative endeavors of artists in the 1990s seeking to challenge the status quo, displayed at the Whitney Biennial in 1993.⁵ This set the political and artistic stage for the debut of Walker’s first silhouette scene the following year, which depicted exaggerated physical features of African Americans engaged in sexual misconduct. Her work forced audiences to digest the racist images that American “culture once gorged itself on,” and to confront a historical legacy that has yet to fully transpire.⁶

² Hilton Als, “Whitney You Better Work: 1993,” *Artforum* 31, no. 9 (May 1993): 7.

³ Bruce W. Ferguson, “Reading Rights and Writing Wrongs,” *Artforum* 31, no. 9 (May 1993): 9.

⁴ David Rimanelli, “All Talk No Action,” *Artforum* 31, no. 9 (May 1993): 9.

⁵ Identity politics is defined as political attitudes or positions that focus on concerns of social groups identified mainly on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

⁶ James Hannaham, “The Shadow Knows: An Hysterical Tragedy of One Young Negress and Her Art,” in *Modern Art in the USA: Issues and Controversies of the 20th Century*, ed. Patricia Hills (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2001), 396.

The public display of Walker's work in cultural institutions validates the importance of confronting and grappling with contemporary American problems like the persistence of racial stereotyping in popular culture and its relationship to our shared national history. Her tableaux provide an avenue for self-reflection by audiences of different races and genders. While I once believed, as a white female, that the issues raised by Kara Walker's work were uniquely African American, I came to realize that these are human issues and, because of the legacy of slavery, a distinctly American crisis. The investigation of historical and contemporary racism belongs to my history as well as it does to the African American community. The ongoing debate surrounding the (self)presentation and use of stereotypes of and by African Americans speaks to the prevalence of racial identity in American society and its importance to all Americans. This concept is not, however, appreciated by many of Walker's critics who are examined in this thesis.

"Should I Never Be Heard from Again: The Controversial Reception of Kara Walker" will examine the relationship between Walker and the black art community through the methodologies of social history and deconstruction. The first section of this thesis will contextualize and analyze the events and movements preceding Kara Walker's debut, revealing the artistic and historic foundations that Walker both embraces and undermines. The second section examines Walker's most outspoken opposition, that of Betye Saar, Howardena Pindell, the published responses in the *International Review of African American Art*, and the discussions that occurred at the Harvard symposium "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." The third section focuses on Kara Walker's response, supported by her drawings and watercolors from the series *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* (1997). The thesis will finally prove that Walker's working methodology was affected

by the critical bombardment she endured, particularly in 1997, but since then as well. The increasing sarcasm and violence of her drawings and silhouettes provide evidence of her evolution.

Contradictions: Woman, Work, and Community

I knew that if I was going to make work that had to deal with race issues, they were going to be full of contradictions. Because I always felt that it's really a love affair that we've got going in this country.

—Kara Walker

Kara Walker's tableaux have been attacked by the "African American cultural community" as reinforcing black stereotypes and racist imagery for the benefit of white audiences.⁷ "African American cultural community" refers to members of an older generation who contributed to the promotion of black pride and power. The members of this movement also contributed their voices to Walker's reception. To best understand the dichotomy between this generation and Walker's, this thesis investigates Kara Walker, her images, and their underlying meanings, as well as the community that responded to them.

Kara Walker (b. 1969) spent her early life in Stockton, California, where her father Larry Walker, a painter and an academic, chaired the art department at the University of the Pacific. Since her father had been well respected and admired by his colleagues in northern California, the young Kara Walker was unaccustomed to the idea of isolation and otherness. When she was thirteen, in 1983, her family moved to Stone Mountain, Georgia, a suburb of Atlanta, where her father accepted a position at Georgia State University. Walker then experienced her first encounter with white condescension and racism in the form of the diminishment of her father.⁸ In Georgia, she "became black in more senses than just the kind of multicultural acceptance that [she] grew up with in California," and becoming aware of an

⁷ Anne M. Wagner, "Kara Walker: The Black-White Relation," in *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, 92.

⁸ Walker shared a story with Hilton Als for *The New Yorker* about the welcoming reception for her father in Atlanta, stating "Mr. Patrician [was] talking down to [my father] in a way that I couldn't conceive of." Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act: Kara Walker's Vision," *The New Yorker*, October 8, 2007, 72.

otherness that would characterize her future artwork.⁹ Thus, at an early age, she was exposed to a radically different social hierarchy based on region. Her new understanding of white/black relationships in the South was amplified by the historic Klu Klux Klan activities linked to Stone Mountain.¹⁰ By the time she enrolled at the Atlanta College of Art (ACA), Walker had learned to negotiate an identity as a polite, even submissive, black woman, thus acknowledging the role that the South, its mythology and its legacy, forced her to play.¹¹

Subsequently, Walker's approach to art was guided by the desire to create "real" art, rather than work that addressed racial concerns of the "ethnic minority."¹² However, her notions of politeness came crashing down during her time at ACA. A paper responding to the work of Adrian Piper reveals Walker's changed attitude. Written at the age of nineteen, her paper reads like poetry, a lyrical inner dialogue, "I'm not an Other in some eyes/I think. . . . Am I ignorant of all strife?"¹³ Issues of race had become central to Walker's work. Further compounding the personal importance of race in the South for Walker was a complicated romantic/sexual relationship with a white man. Walker calls this time "experimental," when she was learning what it meant to be "a black woman—being objectified, being an object of white male desire."¹⁴ She openly discussed the psychological and physical effects of a relationship with a man she now calls "a sadist, a racist, a misogynist."¹⁵ She identified this

⁹ "Conversations with Contemporary Artists: Kara Walker," accessed March 21, 2013, www.moma.org/interactives/projects/1999/conversations/kw_f.html.

¹⁰ The modern Klan was revived in Stone Mountain in 1915 and continued to be the annual rally site for Klan members into the early 1980s. Stone Mountain was referenced in Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech including the statement "let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia."

¹¹ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 12; and Kara Walker, "Conversations with Contemporary Artists."

¹² Kara Walker quoted in Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act: Kara Walker's Vision," 73.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 74.

¹⁵ Ibid.

as a pivotal time, personally and professionally, which led directly to the creation of silhouettes.

Walker's silhouettes came to fruition at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), where she earned a master's degree in painting and printmaking. Free from the suffocation and polite veneer of the South, Walker pursued work that challenged stereotypes by appropriating their very language through the methodology of deconstruction. Deconstruction is defined as an approach to "the 'reading' of texts. . . in such a way as to foreground their internal self-contradictions and the gaps between intention and effect."¹⁶ The critique is subtle, requiring viewer interpretation. Walker's work *looks* racist and thereby draws attention to often unacknowledged assumptions about race. One way that she deconstructs stereotypes is by presenting figures with features immediately classifiable as black, like big lips, hair, and prominent foreheads. The viewer's ability to recognize race by these indicators reveals that the association between physiognomy and race is deeply ingrained in American society. Therefore, the work engages audiences critically. This differs from the transparent representation favored by an older generation of African American artists, in which image and meaning directly correspond, unlike deconstruction. Walker's methodology corresponds to her role as a postmodern artist. Each artwork is multifaceted and layered with many meanings and potential interpretations. In addition to visual imagery, Walker's supporting texts—also deconstructive—contribute to the multi-dimensional nature of her work by encouraging audiences to consider their critical meanings rather than what is depicted. Thus, Walker's work challenges Americans' presuppositions about race through the use of racist images.

¹⁶ Donald Preziosi, "Glossary," in *The Art History of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 574.

Before graduation from RISD in 1994, she received attention from curator Anne Philbin of the Drawing Center in New York. This led to Walker's debut tableau, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred B'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and Her Heart* (1994, Figure 1). *Gone* is a life-sized narrative constructed from cut black paper. The scene unfolds on a moonlit evening on the banks of a bayou in the antebellum South. Walker's characters, identifiably either white or black, are bizarre and fanciful with elongated features, over-emphasized genitalia, and strange bodies. The disjointed narrative moves without logical sequence from one scene to the next. The figures engage in acts of sexual deviance that sometimes appear comical. The gawky woman with a bony leg raised to give birth to mutilated children and a boy rising like a balloon by his enlarged genitalia exemplifies this. Since *Gone* appeared in Philbin's exhibition *Selections 1994*, Walker's career has been unstoppable.

Following success at the Drawing Center, she was invited to participate in a number of solo and group exhibitions, and soon joined Brent Sikkema Gallery, which continues to exclusively represent her work. In 1993, Walker met her future husband, Klaus Brgel, a white man and instructor at RISD, whom she married in 1996; they soon had a daughter Octavia; however, the couple later divorced in the mid 2000s. In 1997, Walker became the youngest artist to be awarded the prestigious MacArthur Foundation's "genius" grant. Established in 1981, the foundation awards \$500,000 grants to recipients of all disciplines to pursue creative activities. They provide funding to individuals who examine complex social issues and promote change. Prior fellows in the visual arts include Martin Puryear, Cindy Sherman, and Bill Viola. The announcement of Kara Walker's fellowship provoked the rage

of many mature African American artists, chief among them Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell.

In addition to her images, Walker's background and personal life have been the subject of close scrutiny. Her character, private choices, personal relationships, and public comments have fueled the fire of her critics. Walker's unabashed proclivity for discussion of the intimate details of her life and work in forthright language contributes to the crassness that critics have attributed to her and her art. Perhaps Walker's crude confessions lend legitimacy to their claims of vulgarity. Her link to the white community by a privileged upbringing and prestigious education, and a self-proclaimed separation from the African American experience—both in California and Atlanta—have also bolstered the arguments of Saar and Pindell.

Relatively biographical,¹⁷ Walker's work derives from her own experiences, among them the cross-country move to the South that forever changed her interactions, romantic involvement with an openly racist white man and her marriage to another white man, and the expectation that she work exclusively with ethnic issues in her art. Walker added, "my experience also includes a heavy dose of shame": shame of the South, shame of America's legacy of slavery, shame that as a black woman she is compelled, by the politics of American racism, to create work that so compulsively and caustically addresses the inhumanities of our past and present.¹⁸

Additionally, the semi-autobiographical, semi-fantasy narratives of her tableaux are presented through several personae. For example, a young Negress commonly appears in

¹⁷ Titles and narrative text for some of Walker's artworks include first person perspective and references to her past experiences.

¹⁸ Darius James, "I Hate Being Lion Fodder. An Interview/Conversation via Email between Darius James and Kara Walker," *Deutsche Bank Art Magazine* 2 (2002), accessed March 21, 2013, <http://db-artmag.de/archiv/02/e/magazin-interview-walker.html>.

scenes and drawings as a subversive figure; a slave woman often laments emotionally complicated relationships, expressing feelings of both love and rage; and Kara Walker, the contemporary African American artist, appears in the work. A fourth unidentified persona—in addition to the many other character types portrayed in the work—of Walker may appear. This could represent a private side of the artist that has not been revealed publicly through interviews or discussions of her artwork. The young Negress, one persona that often appears as a protagonist, first appears in *Gone*, engaging in oral sex with a white youth, possibly drawn from her relationship to a white master-figure in her own recent past.¹⁹ An archetype in Walker's work, both in visual and written form, the Negress represents the emotional layers that define black and white relationships as complicated and vulnerable. Although biography is too often used to explain an artist's work, Kara Walker's personal history adds another dimension to the panoramic scenes of racism in the antebellum South. Her biography is not only a source for her narratives, it is a basis of the attacks against her, which include accusations of catering to white communities via racist images, like those of women involved in degrading relationships with slave owners.

The contradiction expressed in Walker's work derives from her personal life. As a black woman raised in the West and the South, it is seemingly perverse to spend her career depicting the experiences of slaves, and their enjoyment of sexual encounters with masters. Walker's masters and slaves dialectic suggests a reciprocal emotional investment on the part of blacks and whites.

The contradictions of Kara Walker's personal experiences extend to the silhouettes she creates. Her works are based on the acknowledgement that racism continues to exist in

¹⁹ Recent past refers to the time of her relationship at Atlanta College of Art approximately 1987-1992 to the date of production for *Gone* in 1994. For more on Walker's college relationship see Als, "The Shadow Act."

the world, and particularly in the United States. The Civil Rights movement and the advent of an “identity-conscious age” did not offer resolution.²⁰ Kara Walker is often accused of representing disguised or “closet racism” that satisfies white (racist) audiences.²¹ However, Walker’s tableaux of black cut-paper silhouettes are ironic critiques of the American experience and social relationships between blacks and whites. “The violence of looking” in Walker’s work is a shared experience among racial groups, as opposed to alienating or indicting them.²² Walker’s work allows viewers to draw conclusions about the relationships between the silhouetted figures (who is powerful? who is victim? who is oppressor?) based on their own comprehension of historical and current social hierarchies.

Walker’s work includes thinly veiled criticism of contemporary society through the historical lens of the antebellum South. Presenting the human condition as experienced by masters and slaves, it depicts the emotional and physical entanglements between oppressed and oppressor. The antebellum age refers to the period prior to the Civil War and has become synonymous with sprawling plantations, Southern aristocrats, and the institution of slavery.²³ As a *mise-en-scène*, the antebellum period became a romanticized time in American culture, particularly in literature and films such as *Gone with the Wind*, perpetuating stereotypes associated with the era, like Uncle Tom and, later, Aunt Jemima. The Old South is glorified (or historicized) as a time of propriety, etiquette, and aristocratic gentility.²⁴ “It’s really a

²⁰ Mark Reinhardt, “The Art of Racial Profiling,” in *Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 110.

²¹ Betye Saar quoted in Juliette Harris, “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes. (Stereotypes Subverted? Or for Sale?)” *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997): 4.

²² David Wall, “Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker,” *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 296.

²³ Antebellum (from the Latin *ante* meaning “before” and *bellum* meaning “war”) refers to the period of American history following the Revolutionary War (1789) until the onset of the Civil War in 1861.

²⁴ *Gone with the Wind* is best known today as a period romance film released in 1939. The story was adapted from Margaret Mitchell’s award-winning 1936 novel of the same name. It continues to be a cult classic today. The Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom/Moses stereotypes can be seen in popular commercial products like the Mrs.

love affair we've got going in this country," Walker said of this period of history.²⁵ Her work describes the contradiction of our embrace of the romantic myth of Southern decorum and the reality of enslavement and violence against blacks.

Walker's use of silhouettes and grotesque imagery derives from social history and art history. Historically, the silhouette was considered a low form of art, an inexpensive medium of portraiture.²⁶ Silhouettes render the profile of a sitter's head in cut-out black paper on a white ground. The silhouette is connected to the black/white relationships of the past and an era that saw blacks treated as property for economic, personal, sexual, and political means. Walker introduces issues of gendered and racial access to artistic opportunity by use of the silhouette itself.²⁷ It also has significance for the silhouette as a shadow of the past, and the use of black to signify black bodies and voids in vivid contrast to white settings. White bodies are also rendered in black paper further emphasizing that physiognomy is the viewer's primary means to understanding race, as well as working to blur the boundaries between slaves and masters. Cut-paper silhouettes adhered to the wall create an ironic and literal sense that Walker is deliberately flattening a complicated history.

She rejects the tradition of silhouette as craft, instead her silhouettes engage with art history. Walker's formally elegant and sophisticated silhouettes elevate the medium to that of

Buttersworth syrup bottles reminiscent of a mammy-figure and Uncle Ben's ready rice featuring a benevolent slave-type.

²⁵ "Conversations with Contemporary Artists: Kara Walker."

²⁶ The silhouette was named for France's Minister of Finance Etenne de Silhouette, known for frugality, in the eighteenth century prior to the advent of photography. The silhouette was created by tracing and cutting the shadow of a sitter's profile onto black paper and was considered a cheaper form of portraiture than painting or sculpture.

²⁷ As a low form of art, women and blacks had greater opportunity to create silhouette portraits. The gendered and racial history of silhouette production is too large in scope for this thesis. For more on this subject see Monika Seidl, "Cutting Edge: About Silhouettes, Racial Stereotypes in Transition, and the art of Kara Walker," in *Transitions: Race, Culture, and the Dynamics of Change*, ed. Hanna Wallinger (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006); Emma Rutherford, "Shades of Life," and "Profiles in the New World: The American Silhouette," in *Silhouette: The Art of Shadow* (New York: Rizzoli, 2009); and Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft, 4th ed. (London, ca. 1844).

history painting with its dramatic quality and epic scale. She addresses slavery as an historic subject matter, and an important moment in America's narrative. Also, like traditional history painting, Walker's tableaux are multi-figured. By associating her work with history painting and rejecting silhouette as craft, Walker undermines the exclusion of women and African Americans from the artistic elite. Her treatment of the silhouette explores the use of mimetic shadow and black figures as representations of two races. Walker presents images that are seen, read, and immediately understood by the viewer as indicative of racial types. However, she complicates the silhouette by requiring audiences to look deeper into the work to interpret what they find.

Appropriating the genteel art form of the eighteenth-century medium not only questions notions of historical accuracy, mythology, and fictions by infusing it with contemporary hindsight, but also engages with past ideas about the silhouette. Derived from shadows, silhouettes have a mimetic quality by superficially and simplistically capturing the characteristics of the individuals portrayed. The shadow and silhouette are reductive in the same way that the stereotype simplifies physical traits. Typically, black paper silhouettes represent white bodies; in Walker's work they represent both whites and blacks, doubling the blackness of the latter, the bodies of slaves. Thus, the silhouette reinforces stereotypes as oversimplifications of physical traits and behavior and the blackness of those who suffer. On a deeper level, silhouettes created from black paper are also significant to the psychology of the bodies they represent, both black and white. They become a "physical displacement: the paradox of removing a form from a blank surface that in turn creates a black hole."²⁸ The medium addresses Walker's objectives completely: "blank/black, hole/whole,

²⁸ Walker quoted in Hilton Als, "The Shadow Act," 75.

shadow/substance.”²⁹ They are voids that create both positive and negative spaces to be read by the viewer. Importantly, viewers bring their own impressions and notions of body shape, hairstyles, posture, clothing and facial features in order to identify race and gender.

Walker’s art is beholden to art history and literature, by being academically sophisticated and replete with art historical references. The complicated appropriation of the silhouette identifies Walker’s work as analytical since it is rooted in postmodernism, creating multidimensional and thought provoking artworks. However, visually the work also references seminal artists of the past and recent past, like Francisco Goya, William Hogarth, Adrian Piper, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Colescott, Faith Ringgold, and Robert Mapplethorpe.³⁰ Particularly influential was Adrian Piper’s conceptual work concerning the ambiguities of race and the internalization of systematic social hierarchy.

Walker also incorporates aspects of art by African American artists who came before her, such as Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglas. Her use of narrative was influenced by the tradition of storytelling and its connection to history in Lawrence’s *Migration Series* (1940-41), sixty paintings on the African American diaspora. However, unlike Lawrence, she allows her images to stand alone, apart from verbal explanation or apology.³¹ Walker seeks to avoid an overbearing need for “everyone [to] understand,” which she perceives in

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeaking*, 14, 104. DuBois Shaw compares the flouting of social mores and grotesqueries in Kara Walker’s work to the carnival-like scenes of upper and middle class misbehaviors explored by Hieronymous Bosch in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Francisco Goya in *Los Caprichos*, and William Hogarth in *Marriage à-la-Mode*. Adrian Piper, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Robert Colescott are documented influences on Walker’s work. Mapplethorpe’s use of the black body, nudity, and homosexuality addressed timely political and social issues. The artists mentioned above create work that engages critically with society, however, Walker’s work is connected to many other artists as well like Charles Wilson Peale, Moses Williams, and other silhouette artists. The history of African American production, including work by black artists like Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas, and Betye Saar, also factors into her work. The Whitney Biennale in 1993, featuring artists Gary Simmons, Glenn Ligon, and Lorna Simpson, was also influential, as were her contemporaries Renée Cox and William Kentridge.

³¹ “Conversations with Contemporary Artists: Kara Walker.”

Lawrence's work.³² The written language accompanying some of her images often complicates rather than clarifies. Aaron Douglas's use of silhouettes and the simple graphic quality of black and white or monochrome also inspired Walker, although their treatments of the figure, levels of abstraction, and the literal and metaphorical balance of black to white differ. The paintings by Douglas are grounded in the African American experience, while Kara Walker's work intimately involves interracial experiences. Her approach is an important break from past African American artists who were primarily concerned with ethnic issues. Focus on the complicated white-black relationship has never before been explored so intensely as in Walker's silhouettes.

Common motifs appear in Walker's body of work that are steeped in sometimes esoteric images and literature of the past and present. She cites several personal influences like bell hooks, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Toni Morrison, Michele Wallace, and Octavia Butler. In addition to being drawn from her own life experiences, Walker's narratives are often derived from primary sources and uncommon fields of study, such as records of slave sales, minstrel shows, and nineteenth-century erotic literature.³³ These unfamiliar sources subtly appear in Walker's work often and are only decoded by academics and historians analyzing it. Some citations are readily discernable to modern audiences, such as Uncle Tom and Little Eva in *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995, Figure 2). Although audiences may not have read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), most Americans are familiar with the story and its implications. Yet, Walker hideously distorts the characters in this scene. Eva is wielding an ax over the head of a small child, while Tom raises his hands in prayer. A child attached by an umbilical cord dangles from his rear as he

³² Ibid.

³³ Walker has cited the pornographic novel "*A Master's Revenge*," in Darius James, "I Hate Being Lion Fodder."

prays. Nearby, a peg-legged man sodomizes one child while stabbing another. Walker's Negress youth appears to leave a trail of excrement as she passes through the scene. Walker transformed a classic piece of American literature into a brutal and scatological caricature of atrocities in the Old South.

Both allegorical and modern character-types occur throughout Walker's scenes, which convey the spaces and times of her narratives. Such figures rely on stereotypical physical and character traits, along with fashions and hairstyles developed during the antebellum period or following the Civil War. These include the benevolent black slave with soft, drooping features that signify intellectual deficits; the overly large mammy figure with heavy breasts and hips, a large smile, jovial countenance, and a headscarf covering her hair; and impish or defiant black children. Also included are character-types of a more sinister nature—hyper-sexualized black males with large genitalia who chase white women and sexualized black women with exposed breasts—that are threatening to white women. White stereotyped figures are also employed. The Southern belle, for example, is sometimes portrayed sweetly and other times menacingly. In Walker's scenes plantation owners in crisp clothing and white rubes engage in cruel activities with pleasure. Other figures are less readable to viewers, such as those with mixed racial physiognomy, blended human and monstrous features, or those drenched in excrement. Walker's early tableaux delineate race more exaggeratedly than later works like *The Rich Soil Down There* (2002, Figure 3), which exemplifies the racial ambiguities in her work. The use of both black and white paper silhouettes creates confusion, forcing the viewer to scrutinize every detail of the composition. Additionally, the combination of stereotypical physical characteristics also hinders the viewer's comprehension. For example, in *The Rich Soil Down There* the hoisted white-paper

silhouette depicting a black hair style and thicker lips, which in Walker's work usually indicates black bodies, is conflated with the stiff posture and fashionable costume typically signifying white bodies. Finally, two central figures are covered with feces, presumably from the bird flying above, adding an enigmatic note to what was already an ambiguous narrative. This creates tension for viewers and disrupts their experience with the work, underscoring the fictional nature of Walker's tableau—which is intended. Walker states, “the truth of the piece is as clear as a Rorschach test.”³⁴ Walker's silhouettes are an intellectual tour de force rich with symbolism and double entendres.

In addition to being visually confounding, Walker's work is rooted in critical theory, and therefore less accessible to audiences without knowledge of contemporary methodologies. Walker's underlying methodologies are as important as the visual references. She employs the method of deconstruction by appropriating negative black stereotypes in order to expose contemporary and historic racisms: how quickly, for example, we are able to identify a figure's race. Plantation scenes of the Old South, associated with beneficent gentlemen and contented slaves, are the vehicles to communicate this idea. Walker's fictional narratives are grounded in mythology and the inaccuracies of our own histories, passed down from the hegemonic white majority. Her work probes the complexity of that ongoing situation. She also operates on the basis of the colonial “Other,” as an African American, and the “other” of the “Other,” as a black female artist. By working within this schema rather than against it, Walker problematizes the “Other” and the “other” of the “Other.” She is also visually describing the relationships of black to white that are fundamental to colonialism—the idea that “[the black man] must be black in relation to the white man,” with the

³⁴ Kara Walker quoted in English Darby, “This is not about the Past: Silhouettes in the Work of Kara Walker,” in *Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 158.

understanding that black is the other of white.³⁵ As described by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the experiences of a black man living in a white world, aware of his otherness, are alienating and painful. This is further emphasized by the notion of a “positive white-self,” juxtaposed to the “negative black other.”³⁶

She grounds the notion of black alienation in the setting of the antebellum South, the epitome of the disenfranchised black, while also weaving a contemporary thread through each composition. Her work addresses the unresolved social code of inequality existing between blacks and whites. It is an ongoing violation of one another that is exposed through her graphic scenes of human-on-human crime. The depiction of such images in her silhouettes elicited condemnation by some influential African American intellectuals. Reception from the white community was—and continues to be—positive, often resulting in high dollar commissions and exhibitions, fueling the outrage of her critics. White audiences, and primarily the white art establishment, lauded Walker’s ironic, theory-based artwork for addressing problematic areas of American culture, while some black critics feel betrayed and undercut.³⁷

African American artists and scholars have responded to Walker’s work in a variety of ways, ranging from the vociferous outrage of artists Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell to the enthusiastic defense of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. The award of a “genius” fellowship by the MacArthur Foundation in 1997, only three years after Walker’s first exhibited work, caused a caustic response by a small group of individuals belonging to an older generation promoting black affirmation and empowerment. Their response was immediate—articles were

³⁵ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 11.

³⁶ Olubukola Gbadegisin, “A ‘Rooted’ Reading of Race in the History of Art,” *H-AfrArts* (June 2006), accessed March 21, 2013, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11934>.

³⁷ Paraphrased from quotations by Betye Saar in Juliette Harris, “Extreme Times,” 4.

published, letters distributed, boycotts proclaimed, and symposia called for. Her opponents were outspokenly critical of Walker—her work, particularly the silhouettes, her person, and her successes. Although she is not universally accepted by younger audiences, those who have voiced the greatest concern matured in their own careers in the 1960s and 1970s.³⁸

Saar and Pindell belong to an artistic tradition dedicated to developing and building up the African American community,³⁹ in line with W. E. B. Dubois's thoughts that "art [should be] a tool for racial uplift" and empowerment.⁴⁰ What began with a focus on black literature, art, music, and poetry during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance continued with artists like Saar who sought to enhance positive representations with images expressing Black Power. Building on the "mature tradition" developed by Alain Locke and Aaron Douglas during the 1920s and 1930s, African American artists continued to pursue artistic independence from the mainstream art establishment.⁴¹ The Black Power movement, and its artistic branch Black Arts movement (BAM), emerged in the 1960s. Concerned with cultural equality and in some cases an emphatic desire for radical black separatism, BAM promoted confrontation with the dominant white community and power structure.⁴² The movement developed out of the need to resolve and communicate a "double consciousness" felt by

³⁸ The belief that debate over Kara Walker's work is generational has been openly discussed. Juliette Harris recognizes the division on generational lines in "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," 3, a publication condemning Walker, as does Saar in an interview with the same author. Pindell, however, has refuted this distinction as white condescension. See Howardena Pindell's introduction to *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, vi – vii, and Kathy Halbreich's comments in the October 8, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*.

³⁹ Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell do not constitute the entirety of the generation of African American artists who responded negatively to Walker's work. However, as the most outspoken critics this study focuses primarily on their work and the artistic tradition that helped shape them.

⁴⁰ DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 28.

⁴¹ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and The Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 17. For more information on Alain Locke's contributions to the development of African American art as a tradition see chapter 2 "The Pulse of the Negro World," and Alain Locke's essay "The New Negro" published by Albert and Charles Boni in December, 1925.

⁴² Paraphrased from Olubukola Gbadegisin, "A 'Rooted' Reading."

African Americans.⁴³ As part of the Black Power movement, BAM was hostile and “militant;” the artists involved, like Betye Saar, were committed to the liberation and reclamation of black images.⁴⁴ BAM artists sought to promote the interests and values of black people. Although the movement declined in the mid-1970s, Saar and others continue to feel that representations of African American people and culture should be characteristically strong and positive images, as well as confrontational and political in nature.

As part of BAM, Saar attempted to address the damaging effects of lingering stereotypes. Through amalgamations, she sought to liberate the black community from stereotypical imagery created and perpetuated by whites by reclaiming Aunt Jemima and the generic mammy. Her work is illustrative by “recontextualizing [Jemima] rather than visually transforming it,” and using the tenets of Black Power to focus on self-determination.⁴⁵ Saar’s best known work, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972, Figure 4), reveals the militancy of her position. The oversized fist symbolizing Black Power, the pistol holstered on Jemima’s hip, and the rifle in her hand leave no doubt that this mammy is in control. *Dbl-Duty—I’s Back Wid a Vengeance* (Figure 5) created in 1997, perhaps in response to the work of Kara Walker, indicates that twenty-five years later Saar’s position had not changed.⁴⁶ Howardena Pindell also explicitly engages in racial politics and the separation of African Americans from the primarily white art establishment. Furthermore, she addresses issues of colonialism

⁴³ Hannaham, “The Shadow Knows,” 398.

⁴⁴ Kaluma ya Salaam, “Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement,” in the *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States*, ed. Cathy N. Davidson and Linda Wagner-Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 120.

⁴⁵ Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 118.

⁴⁶ Michael D. Harris implies that *Dbl-Duty* was created in response to Walker. His specific statements indicate that generally there is a continued interest by African American artists’ and collectors in stereotypical imagery. However, he does not specifically name Walker as Saar’s source. *Colored Pictures*, 120-121. Juliette Harris states that Saar began a series in response to Walker, but does not mention *Dbl-Duty* specifically in “Extreme Times,” 4.

and the international as well as historical creation of an “Other”; her work *Columbus* serves as an example (1991-92, Figure 6). Many of those who condemned Walker were working from the perspective of BAM and the use of negative stereotypes as a means to challenge racism overtly, rather than Walker’s method that requires more consideration of a work’s meaning.

Younger generations of African American artists and Kara Walker’s contemporaries generally make use of black imagery, culture, stereotypes, and words in pursuit of producing work that is politically relevant. Michael Ray Charles, Glenn Ligon, Carrie Mae Weems, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Renée Green, Alison Saar, and Renée Cox are among many who have produced work in this manner. The reaction from Walker’s immediate artistic community, including from Alison Saar, daughter of Betye Saar, has been supportive. Yet, several young African Americans have expressed disapproval of Walker’s work.⁴⁷

Gaining an understanding of Kara Walker’s personal and artistic background contextualizes the panoramic silhouettes that have characterized her career. Contextualizing the community from which Walker’s chief critics emerged is also important to understand their claims against her—both rooted in historical race relations and personal experiences. This study will examine the writings and statements of these critics in the following section.

⁴⁷ The limitations of this thesis do not allow for more expansive investigation into the disapproval by a younger generation of African American intellectuals. The same is true for those belonging to the older generation who approve of Walker’s work, like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Toni Morrison. Despite collaboration on *Five Poems* Morrison’s support for Walker has not been outright. For more on the origins of the project see Stephanie Li, “The Gospel According to Toni Morrison FIVE POEMS,” *Callaloo* 34, no. 2 (2011) 899.

Southern Trees Bear Strange Fruit: Public Condemnation of Kara Walker

“Southern trees bear strange fruit/Blood on the trees and blood at the root.”

—Abel Meeropol, “Bitter Fruit,” 1937

Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell would have embraced the Civil Rights song, “Strange Fruit,” based on the poem “Bitter Fruit” as illustrative of the oppression endured by African Americans.⁴⁸ The lyrics are a critique of the bloody roots of a corrupt political institution that endorsed Jim Crow laws. The lyrics are meant to ennoble those who suffered from racism. To her critics, Kara Walker represents the institution, repeating horrific imagery, bearing strange fruit through a twisted displacement of her own heritage, and presenting it to the white community, in artwork that only encourages romanticized notions of the “glorious” antebellum South.

Walker’s emphatic contrast of black and white is polemical. Across the walls of galleries and museums she lays before her audience the tensions of race. Starkly revealed through black figures set in a white landscape, or the walls of the institution, her work is a visual metaphor for the white world that blacks occupy. However, it is not simply black and white. Despite “graphic clarity,” her work “neither illustrates nor simplifies.”⁴⁹ She reveals the complexity and complicity of antebellum white/black relationships. Walker depicts shared desires and emotions couched in fictional narratives. Her art does not typically distinguish victims or villains nor does it vilify whites alone. This sets her apart from

⁴⁸ “Strange Fruit,” written by Abel Meeropol began as a poem about American racism and protest against lynching. It was originally published in 1937 under the name “Bitter Fruit” in the union magazine *The New York Teacher*. In 1939 it was recorded by Billie Holiday and is thought to be the first song of the Civil Rights Movement. See David Margolick, *Strange Fruit: Biography of a Song* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001) for more.

⁴⁹ Wagner, “The Black-White Relation,” 91.

contemporaries like Michael Ray Charles who, by twisting the historical use of racist imagery, implies that whites are the perpetrators of black stereotypes.

Recruiting others to participate in the conversation about black representation, Saar and Pindell instigated a national discussion on Walker and her work. Through their independent but similarly driven efforts, the voices opposed to Walker quickly became a “critical chorus.”⁵⁰ Opposition to Walker promptly diverged from professional critiques to personal attacks. Several contributors questioned the artist’s motives in her relationships with white men, like her former husband. How Walker relates to her biracial daughter was also questioned, likely due to Walker’s self-proclaimed separateness from African American experiences.⁵¹ Gilda Snowden, an African American artist who shares similar experiences to Walker, such as marriage to a white man and raising a biracial child, condemns Walker’s artwork as irresponsible to future generations.⁵² Clarence D. White’s incendiary essay “Kara Walker’s New Black Bottom” calls Walker an opportunist eager to “ingratiate herself with a white liberal art establishment.”⁵³ He considers her personal choices to support his accusation. Critics return to the idea that Walker panders to a white audience again and again when discussing her work.⁵⁴ This is perceived as irrevocably damaging to the African American community, and should not be endorsed, particularly by African Americans.

It is not that Walker’s black critics do not understand deconstruction as an ironic critique of racism. In fact, Walker’s representation of slave ancestors as human beings—

⁵⁰ Ibid, 93.

⁵¹ See Hilton Als, “The Shadow Act,” 74.

⁵² Gilda Snowden, “Who is the Audience,” in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, ed. Howardena Pindell (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 88-91.

⁵³ Clarence D. White, “Kara Walker’s New Black Bottom from Hottentot Venus to Negress Silhouette,” in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, 109-116.

⁵⁴ See Harris, “Extreme Times;” Howardena Pindell, “Introduction,” in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*; “*Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke*,” DVD-ROM (Harvard, 1998). Accessed June 21-22, 2012; DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 114-116; Najjar Abdul Msawwir, “Kara Walker: Celebrating 21st Century Primitivism,” in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*.

rather than martyrs and victims—sometimes betrayed by their emotions is well understood by the opposition, many of whom write about it with clarity. Instead, these intellectuals prefer to discuss racism and stereotypes in terms of cultural cause and effect, and their impact on African American’s sense of self rather than the deconstruction of stereotypes, which may not be accessible to all audiences. Their arguments are multifaceted, yet the heart of the matter is the personal and collective pain Walker’s work causes to their community. This study will explore the arguments of Kara Walker’s major critics, beginning with her two greatest opponents, Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell, followed by the early published responses in the *International Review of African American Art*, and, finally, the proceedings of the Harvard symposium “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.”⁵⁵

Betye Saar was the most significant early opponent to Walker’s work. Her chief objection to Walker’s work is the artist’s complicity with her white viewers who may find pleasure in the visualization of black bodies engaged in demeaning hypersexual and socially unacceptable behavior. Saar’s viewpoint is summarized by Juliette Harris: “They [Saar and others] feel that the artists [Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles] are making their reputations and large sums of money off of their own people’s suffering,” and “are catering to the most base interests of white curators and collectors.”⁵⁶ In Saar’s words, “I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative. . . and that it was basically for the

⁵⁵ This study does not include all opponents to Walker’s work, instead highlighting pertinent and highly visible sources. Others who object to her work include: Michael D. Harris, Kirsten Pai Buick, Najjar Abdul Musawwir, Betty Blanton Taylor, Camille Ann Brewer, Gregory Coates, Camille Billops, Bob Dillworth, Gloria Dunlan-Wilson, Cay Fatima, Theodore A. Harris, Sonji Hunt, Rashidi Ishmali, F. Geoffery Johnson, Ben Jones, Charolotte Ka, Karsten Kredel, Howard McCaleb, Dindga McCannon, Tad Mike, Helen Evans Ramsaran, Senghor Reid, Gilda Snowden, Ed Spriggs, Shirley Woodson, Clarence D. White, Harry J. Weil, and Cynthia Navaretta (who in conjunction with Howardena Pindell was responsible for a collection of essays condemning Walker). These names represent various artists, educators, critics, journalists, and scholars engaged in the general artistic community. This study also does not include white sources, but focuses exclusively on African American responses.

⁵⁶ Harris, “Extreme Times,” 3.

amusement and investment of the white art establishment.”⁵⁷ African American suffering results from the perpetuation of stereotypes in Walker’s work. Although grossly over-generalizing the contemporary art community as uninterested in positive representations of African American art, Saar’s concerns are not unfounded. Historically, whites have taken pleasure in the “degradation experienced by suffering black people,” finding both erotic and sensational thrills in literature, imagery, or actual events.⁵⁸ However, this is an historic issue, which raises the question: how relevant is this belief for most contemporary audiences?

Upon the announcement of Walker’s receipt of the prestigious MacArthur Fellowship in June 1997, Saar initiated a round-robin letter writing campaign seeking censorship of Walker’s work. Addressed to over 200 African American colleagues, the letter began, “I am writing you, seeking your help, to spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African American artist, Kara Walker.”⁵⁹ Saar sent packets that included the letter, flyers, and Walker’s offensive images to artists, politicians, and journalists, who were encouraged to boycott exhibitions of Walker’s work in their own cities. Saar’s heraldic call for censorship solicited petitions to cultural institutions and requests to the MacArthur Foundation to revoke Walker’s award.

Intellectually, Saar grasps the concepts of postmodernism and deconstruction in Kara Walker’s work. She, however, considers recognizing past struggles and presenting positive images of African Americans to be more relevant to self-identity than the use of deconstructed, racially charged imagery. Saar insists that Walker’s work requires too much

⁵⁷ Betye Saar quoted from *I’ll Make Me a World*, directed by Betty Ciccarelli (1999; Blackside Inc, in collaboration with PBS, online video), accessed April 10, 2013, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/provocations/kara/3.html>.

⁵⁸ Reinhardt, “The Act of Racial Profiling,” 122. For more on white pleasure in black suffering, see Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing Our Attention to Suffering* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997) and Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ Harris, “Extreme Times,” 4.

decoding, believing the image should be a straightforward representation of Walker's real meaning. Confident that other African Americans share her opinion, Saar "favors the truth of personal memory over cultural theory."⁶⁰ Walker's immediate success and international recognition led Saar to wonder, "How do young persons just a few years out of school get a show at a major museum?" adding that Walker "is young and foolish."⁶¹ Saar implies that the white establishment was using a young (ignorant) black artist such as Walker for menacing purposes like financial gain or as a token outsider raised up as an example of how the liberal the art world is. Thereby, a generation of artists has been intentionally excluded, and despite decades of production has not achieved mainstream success.

Saar's public condemnation of Walker was significant. As a seminal African American artist, she is influential within the community of artists and intellectuals. Additionally, her beliefs have been validated by the support of many in the black cultural community. The art establishment, however, continues to support Walker unflinchingly. This division of beliefs reveals a greater debate about race and self-representation—what is now a decades-old conversation among African Americans. Her comments have prompted black intellectuals to consider how they present their community to a wider audience, particularly the white majority (the historical perpetrators of negative images of blacks). She feared that Walker's works could "malign the history of a people," namely, black people.⁶² Beyond her intellectual argument, Saar's comments are pernicious. She attacks the integrity of the artist, characterizing Walker as greedy for money, fame, and white approval.⁶³ Such statements ad hominem do not contribute to a productive conversation about race and representation in

⁶⁰ Ibid, 3.

⁶¹ Ibid, 3,4.

⁶² "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," DVD-ROM (Harvard, 1998). Accessed June 21-22, 2012.

⁶³ For more on Saar's comments read Harris, "Extreme Times."

contemporary society. Saar's rage is not universal, as she believes, but extremely personal in nature. She has made her pain evident; in 1998 she stated, "[Walker] is cutting the hearts and souls of black people," and she seemingly only cuts blacks.⁶⁴ Despite the highly personal pain she feels, Saar's experiences *are* relevant and shared by others. Saar stands out as the major voice for a group of African Americans vehemently opposed to Walker's work.

Howardena Pindell emerged as a secondary force of opposition to Walker in the later part of 1997. Since giving a paper entitled "Diaspora/Strategies/Realities" that condemned the use of both negative and positive stereotypes, at the Second Johannesburg Biennale in 1997, Pindell has been openly critical of Kara Walker.⁶⁵ Independently of Saar, Pindell pursued a campaign to censor Walker's existing work and prevent her future exhibitions. She states, "I tried to encourage dialogue about Kara Walker's work in 1997." Pindell's "dialogue" centered around accusations that her supporters were intent on "strong-arming" outspoken African Americans with a "manic intensity."⁶⁶ Like Saar, Pindell felt the young artist's success was bolstered by an art world that encourages the use of racist imagery. Feeling that her own early efforts as an artist had not achieved adequate attention, she refused to be silenced.⁶⁷

Subsequently, Pindell collaborated with MidMarch Press to create an anthology of short essays that reject the premise of Walker's artwork.⁶⁸ Twenty-eight artists, writers, and scholars actively engaged in the art community responded to Pindell's call. The resulting

⁶⁴ "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," DVD-ROM

⁶⁵ Positive stereotyping is the belief that African American artists are expected to create works that reflect their ethnicity. Therefore, such artists are barred access from contemporary or historical issues that are not relevant to African Americans, excluding them from the mainstream. This contributes to the idea of neo-colonialism and the perpetual "Other." See Howardena Pindell in Rasheed Araeen, "The Art of Benevolent Racism," *Third Text* 14, no. 51 (Summer 2000): 57 – 64.

⁶⁶ Howardena Pindell, "Introduction," in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, v.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ The project for *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?* began in 2007, ten years following the initial controversy, and came to fruition in 2009.

anthology, *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, claims to address Walker's work from multiple perspectives, but is dominated by Pindell and like minded intellectuals' distaste for Walker. Only a small section of disjointed excerpts from articles and reviews is devoted to the "yes" and "?" sections of the book. Pindell claims in the introduction that many were afraid to participate for fear of backlash from the dominant white art world. Pindell and the black contingent sharing her views concur with many of Saar's feelings and opinions, despite her conspicuous absence from the anthology. They reject Walker's tableaux on the basis of the consequences of negative stereotypes for the African American community. Pindell and others see Walker as an unwelcome representative of an entire race—often reduced to a single monolithic culture. In an updated version of her Johannesburg paper, Pindell expanded the list of artists, in addition to Walker, who appeal to white audiences by reinforcing "negative stereotypes" of blacks. Those who do not employ their methodology, Pindell claimed, are many, but they are routinely denied success or even access to the art world. Among her most controversial accusations is the equation of "negative stereotypes" in the world of black artists with propaganda of Nazi officials.⁶⁹ The publication of "Diaspora/Realities/Strategies," like *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, reflects Pindell's personal interest in exposing the dominantly white art world as prejudiced toward African Americans, artists of other ethnicities, and women. In opposition to Walker, Pindell believes her own work involves a critique of the institution rather than a complicit acceptance of it.

In addition to the book, Pindell created a blog, www.karawalker-no-yes.blogspot.com, to promote open discussion among disenfranchised voices those who,

⁶⁹ Pindell, "Introduction," in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, vii, x.

Pindell believes, do not have the opportunity to criticize Walker by any other means.⁷⁰

Pindell's internet presence indicates her ongoing opposition to Kara Walker's art.⁷¹ Despite Pindell's academic background and esteemed reputation, her personal comments and those of Betye Saar, which are filled with rage, work to their disadvantage. Emotional statements with no objective basis undermine the clarity and authority of their own arguments.

Saar and Pindell are among the critics asking a tough question about the work of young African American artists: Why is it accepted now? They want to know why a white establishment previously generally uninterested in African American art lauds Walker so lavishly. Perhaps the answer lies in the changing political atmosphere and a newfound interest in multiculturalism. Perhaps the answer is more sinister. Walker's critics believe the latter. Many point to the white media and establishment as the chief enemies, implying, and sometimes outright stating, that Walker greedily services them in exchange for fame and fortune. Such critics maintain that positive images of African Americans represent progress in a multicultural society. Therefore, Kara Walker's work is subversive. Pindell's anthology reveals that there is not an answer to the question "why now;" yet contributors readily ascribed blame to Walker and artists like her. Although Pindell's voice followed Saar's in 1997, she has outlasted all others as a staunch critic of Walker.

In addition to Saar and Pindell, the journal *International Review of African American Art (IRAAA)* became a major arena for early discussion of Kara Walker's artwork. Responses appeared almost immediately following Saar's letter writing campaign. In 1997, a fourteen-page anonymous condemnation of Walker entitled "Extreme Times Call for Extreme

⁷⁰ Pindell's Kara Walker blog has been unsuccessful. The last active post by Pindell on this blogspot site was in 2009, with a user comment in 2011. However, the page is still functional and those subscribing to it may add comments at any time.

⁷¹ Howardena Pindell continues to write about the work of Kara Walker. In 2011, again with MidMarch Press, she published *Kara Walker: Evasion, Denial, Privilege*.

Heroes” appeared in a special issue of *IRAAA* dedicated to the use of negative stereotypes in African American art.⁷² Later, the editor of the journal, Juliette Harris, revealed herself as the author of “Extreme Times” in a follow-up article “Editor’s Response” in 1998.

In “Extreme Times,” Harris targeted Walker’s personal life and the presumed agenda of her work within the context of a generalized African American experience. Harris advocates, in the same vein as Saar and Pindell, for images that clearly depict African Americans in a positive manner. She claims to understand the methodology employed by Walker as a postmodern critique and its value to some viewers. Harris writes, “Walker courageously explode[s] the stereotype, challenging the viewer to confront the nature and history of racism on its own raw terms—and confront it not only as an external phenomenon but also as the content of their own individual consciousness.”⁷³ She simply does not believe that Walker has achieved that.

Harris’ “Extreme Times” aimed to bolster Saar’s arguments. Including excerpts from an interview with Saar, Harris claims Walker does not support the cultural autonomy from the white establishment that is desired by African Americans, effectively writing as if blacks were a monolithic culture. Harris attempts to psychoanalyze Walker’s background, personal experiences, public statements, and even physical appearance in an effort to strengthen her argument.⁷⁴ Tempering the tone of the essay, Harris writes of a hope that Walker will one day evolve into a great artist who rises to the challenge of producing art that reflects the

⁷² Juliette Harris’s “Extreme Times Calls for Extreme Heroes” was published in a special issue of *IRAAA* called “Stereotypes Subverted? Or for Sale?,” 1997.

⁷³ Harris, “Extreme Times,” 3.

⁷⁴ Harris comments on Walker’s “waist-length, auburn braid extensions,” as a “fabricated “live in persona,” “Extreme Times,” 7.

experience of African Americans—i.e. race-affirming artwork—rather than continue to be “redundant.”⁷⁵

Before the author of “Extreme Times Calls for Extreme Heroes” was revealed, Walker responded to the criticism that her use of negative stereotypes demeaned blacks. “Kara Walker’s Response” was published in the following volume of *IRAAA* in 1998. She writes, “had positive imaging of the black body to date solved the problem of representing blackness and power, thereby ceasing the need for further discussion of the issue, the ‘black’ and ‘white’ bodies in my work would be virtually silent.”⁷⁶ Walker, who very rarely responds so directly to critics, published a short essay in which she rejects the interpretation of either negative or positive absolutes in her work. She argued that both create romanticized histories and impossible expectations for artists and the cultures they represent. Walker provided her own interpretation of history—a mixture of truths and fictions—that seeks to eradicate a dominant viewpoint, a postmodern perspective itself. Walker’s written response was calm and intelligent. She explained that her subversive use of “racist icons” was intended to provoke discussion about contemporary racism by both blacks and whites.⁷⁷ Walker defended her work as an investigation into how racial currency is still exchanged between blacks and whites in America.

Walker was clearly perturbed by liberties taken by the author of “Extreme Times.” She disparaged Harris for blatant disregard for context, gross generalizations about the artist’s intent and nature of her work, and diminishing the scholarly forum through personal attacks about her hairstyle and husband. Harris, protected by anonymity, could comfortably

⁷⁵ Ibid, 8, 15.

⁷⁶ Kara Walker, “Kara Walker’s Response,” *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 2 (1998): 48.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 49.

make such accusations. The dense, two-page response deflects Harris's arguments as opinion rather than legitimate artistic critique.

Harris wrote an "Editor's Response" that appeared in the same issue as "Kara Walker's Response." She insisted a strong reaction was "demanded by you [Walker] . . . Is not a critique a strong reaction?"⁷⁸ Harris scolded Walker for failing to evolve as an artist and to receive criticism properly. She defends her comments on Walker's personal choices based on the autobiographical nature of Walker's writings and scenes,⁷⁹ but also claims her motives were that of a "big sister," seeking to mentor a young artist.⁸⁰ From this perspective Harris implores Walker to use more direct means of communication that clearly, rather than theoretically, state her claims concerning contemporary racism. The patronizing tone of Harris's commentary plainly revealed the generational split between those supporting Walker's art and those opposing it.

Significantly, Harris felt compelled to discuss hair in both her articles published in *IRAAA*. Her comments about Walker's hairstyle tap into a broader argument about black beauty and authenticity.⁸¹ Harris challenged Walker's legitimacy as an artist representing African Americans due to her extensions, which mimic white hairstyles, rather than wearing an authentic black style. Her relationships with white men and prominent place in the white art establishment also contribute to this idea. Walker calls this "embarrassing," and "obtuse"

⁷⁸ Juliette Bowles (Harris), "Editor's Response," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 2 (1998), 50.

⁷⁹ Harris writes in "Extreme Times" that questioning Walker's hair and husband is justified because the artist's work is self-professed "autobiographical," 7 and again in "Editor's Response," 51.

⁸⁰ Harris, "Editor's Response," 51.

⁸¹ The issue of black hair and "good hair" is a complicated subject for African American women. Silky straight hair, commonly associated with white women has long been desired over the tight coils of a natural hairstyle. Many African American women pay a tremendous amount of money and endure time and pain to achieve a straighter look. The issue of black hair is complicated by issues of black self-hatred, standards of beauty (white), and expectations of black women. For a good introduction to this topic see Catherine Saint Louis, "Skin Deep: Black Hair Still Tangled in Politics," *New York Times*, August 26, 2009.

in a later discussion of the *IRAAA* articles.⁸² However, it is a significant concern for many of Walker's critics.

The final article appearing in *IRAAA*'s two special issues dedicated to stereotypes that addressed Walker's art summarized and concluded the journal's coverage of the debate. Authored by Kelefa Senneh and entitled "The Debate Continues: Much Ado," the essay summarily reviews the positive and negative aspects of Walker's artwork. He notes that her silhouettes provoke dialogue about race relations and make an effort to break down barriers. In the context of the philosophical question about why skin color is meaningful, Senneh observed the contradiction between the work's seductive formal qualities and jarring content, which reflects an "endless obsession with sex and violence."⁸³ Most notably, Senneh was troubled by the taste for black bodies expressed by Walker's white audiences and collecting elite, like interracial couple Peter and Eileen Norton. Despite his statement, "the intent is not to attack. [We are] just asking questions," Senneh's article devolved into the same repetitive critiques and questions raised by Saar, Pindell, and Harris.⁸⁴ The same questions go round and round. Walker's critics are simply not satisfied with the answer: Walker's methodology of deconstruction addresses contemporary American problems critically, and aesthetically, during an era witnessing the controversial emergence of multiculturalism.

A symposium titled "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" was held at Harvard University in March of 1998, generated by the criticism of Walker's work, especially that of the *International Review of African American Art* and Saar and Pindell.⁸⁵ The university,

⁸² Darius James, "I Hate Being Lion Fodder."

⁸³ Kelefa Senneh, "The Debate Continues: MUCH ADO," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 2 (1998): 45.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁵ The limitations of this thesis do not allow for discussion of other symposia on this subject, such as "Stereotypes About Us By Us," hosted by Hammonds House Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia, at the 1998 National Black Arts Festival.

hosting an exhibition of Walker's silhouettes at the time, invited panelists from various perspectives to participate. Walker was conspicuously absent from the symposium. In a later interview with Darius James, Walker stated that other obligations prevented her attendance, insisting that she had a plan of action in response to Saar and other critics.⁸⁶ However, Walker's absence appears to be a shrewd statement in itself. By disengaging from her critics, she allowed the characters that occupy her artwork, and particularly the young Negress narrator, to speak in her stead. Although the response to her silhouettes motivated the symposium, the core of the discussion was centered on the use of, reason for, and effects of African American stereotypes in artwork.

The symposium was divided into four panels: "Rough Trade: Collecting and Exhibiting Black Memorabilia," "Black Like Who?: A Discussion of the Current Debate on the Recycling of Racist Imagery," "Something Old, Something New: The Use of Black Stereotypes in the Work of Contemporary Artists," and "Shadow and Substance: Representatives of Blackness in Film and Theater."⁸⁷ James Cuno, director of the Harvard Sackler Museum collections, opened the first panel, "Rough Trade," with a statement concerning white—including his own—ignorance about the crisis of representation for blacks. He said, "White folks [are] unaware of a debate raging among African American artists over what some saw and see as Kara's insulting and degrading recycling of black stereotypes" from America's racist past and present.⁸⁸ Cuno's statement could be understood as apologetic or, conversely, that African American problems should remain in the domain of

⁸⁶ Darius James, "I Hate Being Lion Fodder."

⁸⁷ The limitations of this thesis do not allow for a discussion of Walker's use of film as an artistic medium. Thus, this section will focus on the first three panels of the symposium.

⁸⁸ All quotes are derived from the author's review of the video documentation of the symposium. "*Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke*," DVD-ROM (Harvard, 1998). Accessed June 21-22, 2012.

African Americans, potentially admonishing Walker for betraying black issues to a broader (white) audience.

“Rough Trade” challenged the recycling of racist imagery within and outside the black community. The panel sought to address questions about this phenomenon. Why are African Americans drawn to these images and objects, often collecting historical symbols of racism that are so obviously degrading? What are the implications for collecting and exhibiting them within their own community and in the larger society? Members of the panel—Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Kenneth Goings, Lowery Stokes-Simms, Steven Beyer, David Levinthal, and Julian Bond—presented arguments in favor or opposed to the use of stereotypes in art and in personal collections.⁸⁹ The extant collections of the panelists indicate that conversations about black stereotypes were occurring long before Walker’s debut. Her public success acted as the catalyst to bring the argument to a peak at the symposium. Kenneth Goings and Julian Bond provided their insights on collecting philosophies. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reprised his former statements of support for Walker and was joined by David Levinthal. The arguments oscillated between the use of historical stereotypes in a contemporary fashion to create new meanings, the possession of images as metaphorical means of personal control, and the detriment of perpetually reintroducing stereotypes to society.

Representing the two most extreme perspectives on the use of stereotypes in art, “Black Like Who?” was the most emotional and hotly debated panel during the symposium.

⁸⁹ At the time of this panel: Henry Louis Gates, Jr.: literary critic and educator in Afro American Studies at Yale; Kenneth Goings: professor of history at the University of Memphis; Lowery Stokes-Simms: curator of 20th century art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; Steven Beyer: director of public programs at the Fabric Museum in Philadelphia (presented a paper on the stereotypical representations of African Americans in art at CAA in 1995); Julian Bond: Georgia State Assembly, 1998 Chairman of NAACP; David Levinthal: contemporary photographer using racist images.

Panelists were Ellen Phelan, Barry Gaither, Michael Ray Charles, Carrie Mae Weems, David Levinthal, Lowery Stokes-Simms, Michael D. Harris, Florence Ladd, Karen Dalton, and Betye Saar.⁹⁰ Although panelists concurred that racism permeates society as a whole, half the participants were diametrically opposed to the other.

Saar provided a voice to her infamous letter during her presentation. The panel derived its name from prose she wrote, “Black Like Who?”⁹¹ The piece describes her experiences with the derogatory images perpetuated by Walker. Her lyrical presentation was filled with angst and questions: “What’s the joke?” she asked, in reference to the symposium title. Rejecting the claim that she was “eating the young” by criticizing Walker, she would nevertheless not allow artists to “reduce [African Americans] to objects again.” Her views were shared by Barry Gaither, Michael D. Harris, and Florence Ladd, who also presented impassioned arguments against the appropriation of stereotypes in art. They claimed that racial discourse is hierarchical, working in the favor of whites, while marginalizing blacks. Walker’s exhibition was the “dog and pony show” that illustrated this arrangement. Saar, Ladd, Gaither, and Harris vehemently condemned this trend in art,⁹² and asserted that artists should represent positive imagery rather than the painful reality of contemporary life.

Michael Ray Charles, Carrie Mae Weems, David Levinthal, and Ellen Phelan defended the use of stereotypes in art. Their deconstruction of confrontational stereotypes

⁹⁰ At the time of this panel: Ellen Phelan: director of Carpenter Center for Visual Arts, Harvard; Barry Gaither: Director of African American Museum of Art, Boston; Michael Ray Charles: contemporary of Walker, young black artist using negative stereotypes in artwork; Carrie Mae Weems: African American photographer using stereotypes in work; Michael D. Harris: professor of art history and African American studies at Emory University, Atlanta; Florence Ladd: award winning author for *Sarah’s Pslam* about the Civil Rights movement; Karen Dalton: editor for the W. E. B. DuBois Institute for African and American Research.

⁹¹ In 1997 Rinaldo Walcott published a book entitled *Black Like Who?* which derived from his PhD dissertation focusing on black rap music and culture. The book focuses on contemporary black experiences in Canada and celebrity figures that endorse stereotypes about black experiences. It is likely that the title of Saar’s prose was derived from Walcott’s material. Rinaldo Walcott, *Black Like Who?* (Toronto: Insomniac Press, 1997).

⁹² Despite appropriate time to present their arguments Michael Harris felt compelled to publish an article “Playing Against a Stacked Deck,” *Third Text* 12, no. 44 (October 1998) 25 – 42. Harris’s claim was the symposium was “stacked” with Walker’s supporters, thereby making it unfair to those opposed to Walker.

reveals the constructed nature of the images, in hopes that Americans can overcome ingrained racism. Weems, speaking generally about working with racist images, argued for the use of negative stereotypes as a sardonic social critique, not a concession to the (white) art world for mainstream success. Weems expressed disappointment with the symposium's singular subject, the silhouettes of Kara Walker, which resulted in a too narrow platform for productive discussion about African American self-presentation. According to Weems, this decade-old issue, locked in an endless cycle, had been needlessly reduced to Kara Walker's imagery.

Karen Dalton and Lowery Stokes-Sims provided more neutral commentary. Quoting Alain Locke's 1925 manifesto for black self-promotion from the Harlem Renaissance and the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art in 1968, Karen Dalton read, "Black art should be concerned with the African heritage as much as our contemporary reality." Her statement provided the panelists and audience members with the benefit of historical statements to reassess their present situation, as well as the progress and history of black art and politics in America. Lowery Stokes-Sims called for compromise by asking each to "respect the points of view of an older generation that lived through what these stereotypes meant while also allowing young people the freedom to get beyond them."

The third and final panel this thesis will address is "Something Old, Something New," which concentrated on the work of contemporary artists. Glenn Ligon, Nayland Blake, Phyllis Kind, Lorna Simpson, Thelma Golden, Lewis Manilow, Alison Saar, W. T. Lhamon, Jr., and Peter Schjedahl served as panelists for this session.⁹³ Ellen Phelan's introduction

⁹³ Glenn Ligon: contemporary artist dealing with race, gender, and sexuality; Nayland Blake: a provocative contemporary artist exploring American political and social issues; Phyllis Kind: operates a contemporary art gallery representing Robert Colescott and Alison Saar; Lorna Simpson: contemporary artist known as inspiration to Kara Walker; Thelma Golden: curator at the Whitney museum, known for the term "post-black"

asked what is community: a monolith, an array of affinities and associations? And what is the artist's relationship to the community: individual, collective, or segregated by race, sex, or gender? The panelists agreed that each community struggles with its use of identity-specific imagery. Although the African American community may or may not share concerns about (self)presentation, it is not an exclusively black issue. Nayland Blake expressed a belief that stereotypes are part of the human experience. "Society insists we represent ourselves to everyone else, we are stuck with stereotypes because they become the measure of representation—either close to it or distant from it." Supporting the premise of contemporary use of stereotypes in art the panelists encouraged the presentation of controversial images as a means to promote constructive dialogue. By using negative stereotypes in order to subvert them, Walker, Ligon, Charles, and Weems try to be responsible artists by presenting culturally significant material that provokes critical thinking. The discussion and dissent is meaningful, timely, and relevant. These issues serve as painful reminders of the turbulent history of race relations in this country. "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" offered little in terms of solutions to the major problems of representation for African Americans, while promising discussion that will continue for many more decades.

The generational divide in the African American art community was first manifested in Saar's response to Walker's MacArthur Fellowship, perpetuated by Pindell's publications, and more thoroughly and thoughtfully examined by the Harvard symposium. The rejection of Walker's work by an older generation of activist African Americans was based on the belief that negative stereotypes are damaging to the African American collective unconscious by obscuring an important cultural history that she should honor rather than disparage. They also

and progressive exhibitions dealing with race; Alison Saar: contemporary artist and Betye Saar's daughter; Lewis Manilow: collector and patron to Kara Walker, donated to symposium; Peter Schjedahl: author and art critic; W.T. Lhamon, Jr.: English professor at the University of Florida.

object to her use of theory rather than mimetic representation to appeal to white audiences. However, they cannot see—Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw would say they refuse to see—Walker’s work as multi-dimensional or speaking to any audience but self-serving white viewers and curators.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Najjar Abdul Musawwir, an artist and professor of studio art at Southern Illinois University, even claims that Walker’s work is made for and “empower[s] white supremacy.” Musawwir, “Celebrating 21st Century Primitivism,,” in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, 3.

Should I Never Be Heard From Again?: Kara Walker's Response

Should I never be heard from again, follow the Route of my forbearers and quietly,
GO, or shall I seek to kill you?

—Kara Walker, *Letter from a Black Girl*

I am not the slave of the Slavery that dehumanized my ancestors.

—Frantz Fanon

Kara Walker has consistently presented intellectually and personally complex works for public consumption. Her drawings and silhouettes are multivalent, offering a variety of meanings that are significant on historical, contemporary, personal, and collective levels. The multiple autobiographical and historical personae in her tableaux exemplify postmodern works that may be variously interpreted. Thus, the viewer may engage with Walker's scenes from multiple perspectives as well. Despite this freedom of interpretation and various entry points, omnipresent in the work is the historical legacy of slavery and its continued presence in American society. Further, personal and community issues, revolving around the reception of Walker's artwork, are evident in several scenes. Therefore, viewers must continually navigate the process of understanding and finding meaning in Walker's scenes.

Walker's series of drawings *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk* (1997), and silhouettes *Cut* (1998) and *Hunting Scene* (2001) respond to the contingency of black intellectuals opposed to Walker. In the drawings Howardena Pindell and Betye Saar are caricatures. Several references are directly illustrative, calling Howardena Pindell and Betye Saar out by name and using referential images. Others are more indirect,

presenting ever more controversial material, to the dismay of critics, many of whom had hoped that her work would soften with maturity, experience, and motherhood.⁹⁵

Kara Walker avoids responding directly to critics. As early as 1997 she was accused of having “no defense” for her choices of subject matter.⁹⁶ A short published response in the *International Review of African American Art* and a few barbed statements in the course of interviews are the extent of Walker’s comments to her opposition. Rather, the artist continues to behave in a manner that “infuriates [her] critics,” and creates work that represent multiple personae.⁹⁷ However, Walker’s response has been implied in the increasingly acidic and inflammatory nature of her artwork. While she continues to work in cut-paper silhouettes featuring complex scenes of slavery in the antebellum South, she has also expanded into drawings, both serial and individual. Although many drawings are large, it is through the small-scale, sketch-like renditions that Walker has revealed an inner turmoil and rage, as well as allowed moments of immature self-indulgence to vent frustrations and injustices. These diary-like works are cathartic and diverge from her typical methodology of deconstruction. Several series of drawings, watercolors, and short written narratives speak directly to the controversy that arose from her success and awards. The series of sixty-six drawings and watercolors titled *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk* openly address her critics both through visual representation and handwritten entries. Walker has been working with a combination of text and images since graduate school at RISD.⁹⁸ However, in the years following her condemnation by other African American artists, and particularly female African American artists, the texts written by Walker, paired with images,

⁹⁵ Harris, “Extreme Times,” 7-8.

⁹⁶ Tina Dunkley quoted in “Extreme Times,” 10.

⁹⁷ Harris, “Extreme Times,” 8.

⁹⁸ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 13.

have become increasingly derogatory and violent. Although the grotesque and controversial were evident in her work prior to 1997—obviously, as it provoked the entire debate—those produced since are ever more aggressive.

Sixty-six untitled drawings, watercolors, graphite, and textual works comprise the collection *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* Thematically, the works mock the discourse surrounding the African American artistic tradition and the major players involved in the controversy, Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell. Walker focuses almost exclusively on the multifaceted relationships between herself and other African American female artists. These include artist to artist, artist to critic, female to female, young to old, and black to black. She explores these motifs throughout the series in multiple dimensions—sarcasm, irony, stream of consciousness for example—to develop narrative that is both straightforward and derisively masked. She undercuts the experience of black womanhood as bound to “positively affirmative portrayal[s],” and the “tradition of the black arts movement” (Figure 7). The written texts in the drawing acknowledge that her own words are “bullshit,” a sarcastic reminder that she does not accept the conditions of expression outlined by the older generation of African American artists.⁹⁹ Works like these are not one-dimensional responses to her opposition, but address the larger social issues experienced by African Americans. The small partial-figure in the top right corner of a young black woman labeled as a “bad girl” reflects the experience of black females daring to challenge the expectations set out for them by both the dominantly white society and by black society. Figure 7 is an appropriate introduction to the series’ challenge to the validity of positive representation (Figures 8, 9) and leads to an ironic, mocking conclusion that blacks should engage in vengeful stereotyping of whites (Figure 10).

⁹⁹ For quotations from artworks see Figures 7 – 17. All capitalizations and punctuations by the artist.

The drawings in this series are increasingly disturbing and undoubtedly autobiographical in comparison to previous artworks. In one drawing (Figure 11), a young woman, identifiable as Walker, is sexually joined to a mammy figure. Thick lipped, wrapped in a characteristic head-scarf, with heavy breasts and fat rolls, the mammy resembles Betye Saar, who is best known for depictions of the mammy and Aunt Jemima in her artwork. Walker and Saar are nude, with muted expressions and backsides covered in excrement. Walker creates a visual metaphor for the link that exists between herself and Saar: both intimately and perversely connected to one another by their experiences as black women artists, but diametrically opposed to one another philosophically. The drawing harkens back to an image Saar explicitly criticized in the tableau *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* in which a sadistic white man sexually abuses a child while piercing another with a sword (Figure 3, bottom). Saar mentioned this detail in the packets of information she disseminated in 1997. Reusing this specific imagery of sodomy points to the moment when Saar and Walker became linked, but it also asks the viewer who is the victim and who is the victimizer? The victimizer is clearly delineated in *The End of Uncle Tom*, but those roles are unclear in the drawing. Walker and the mammy, presumably Saar, are back to back, neither assuming the role of perpetrator and neither taking pleasure in the act. The source of their link is disturbing, a black, phallic object that is not clearly articulated. Yet, the unbroken connection between the two is a metaphor for the discourse surrounding African American representation as a spectrum with ideas oscillating between the two extremes the artists represent. Yet, in a literal reading, the kind preferred by Saar, the image is a demeaning portrait of the older artist. She is naked and defenseless to Walker's

humiliating rendering of her figure. However, it is also a demeaning representation of the artist, perhaps indicative of her humiliation by Saar.

Although Figure 11 does not specify Walker as a victim or a villain, there are several images that do testify to Walker's innocence. A woman, pregnant with raw, bloodied skin, is suspended from a rope like a party piñata (Figure 12). The woman, reaching out for help, is subjected to a beating by a primitive looking African American child. The drawing can be interpreted as referring to Walker's pregnancy in 1997 and its prominence to her critics, which was discussed by Juliette Harris. The work is an accusation of Saar, Pindell, Michael Harris, Barry Gaither, and Juliette Harris, among others, as childish. According to the drawing, their words and actions were as sickening as the image of an abused woman. Despite the woman's extended arm and bloodied form, the child still appears as if he will beat her again. This he takes pleasure in the brutality of the act, seeing the suspended woman as a play toy and game. The child's brutality evokes the black community that publically dismantled every aspect of Walker's personal and professional life. The pleasure-seeking white audience to which Walker presumably pandered to is replaced by that of a pleasure-seeking black audience.

Walker's anger about attacks on her personal life is expressed in a drawing combining writing with images that refer to her own family, which includes her white husband and biracial child (Figure 14). Although the white and black adults are only outlined, their exaggerated facial features provide clues to their race. The child, however, is identifiably biracial due to the ochre coloration of the skin, a meaningful detail. The image is also a bit sinister. The white man wears a costume possibly from the nineteenth century, and could be interpreted as a master holding an illegitimate child by the slave woman lurking in

the corner (which could also mean the crude drawing is Walker herself). Walker has no fear of portraying herself in a variety of ways. In a written work in the series, the autobiographical text, beginning with “back to basics,” includes her name and the MacArthur grant that began the controversy (Figure 13). She identifies herself as a powerful black woman, a public figure who is “a medium for translating Black Culture/conflict.” Yet she devalues herself as a “stinky. . . black pussy.” These extremes summarize the African American community’s condemnation of her as young, inexperienced, and too naïve to understand the implications of her own artwork. With apparent frustration, Walker confesses “the impossibility of communicating to you,” the irony of her work. The “you” in this piece directly addresses her contingency of critics. The context of the work and the words themselves lend support to this conclusion. In another work (Figure 14), she sarcastically stated, “Your certainty about ~~what~~/Who I am and What I represent that is **ABOVE** reproach.” These statements reflect the assertions made decrying the propriety of Walker’s work as a black woman.

Walker also portrays Howardena Pindell, calling her a “finger pointing matron,” in a drawing of two heads, one older than the other (Figure 15). The “Whites Only” sign hanging above the heads alludes to Pindell’s identification of the art world as a white establishment that excludes minorities and women. The women are presumably Pindell and Walker; however, they could also more generally reference the conflict as generational—something denied by Pindell, yet broadly accepted by most others. The drawing recalls the cover of the May 1997 issue of *Art News* entitled “Women and Art: We’ve Come A Long Way.” Pindell and Walker appeared together on the cover of the magazine, pitted against one another from the start on opposite sides of the page.¹⁰⁰ Pindell’s subsequent campaign against Walker led to what Walker calls in the drawing, “The spectacle of a Black Girl Catfight.” The drawing

¹⁰⁰ Referenced in Harris, “Extreme Times,” 12.

depicts their faceoff—a hostile affair in which each woman has a furrowed brow, flared nostrils, and curled lips—what she labels “black on black crime.” The drawing also suggests that petty arguments weaken the greater debate about the more important issue of representation. Black intellectuals’ stooping to name-calling and insults undermines a productive discussion of racism and stereotyping. The work, therefore, makes a claim that the discord in African American discourse empowers the dominant white culture Pindell fights so adamantly against.

Pindell is identified by name in a textual work (Figure 16). The artist questions Pindell’s critical capacity by asking if “art’s function to Black people [is] to VERIFY the TRUTH all the time and to express collective experience (that grows increasingly fractured)”? The piece, written quickly like a journal entry, expresses Walker’s dismay at the narrow-minded and literal interpretations of representation in art as objective and truthful. The work questions what truth means, and how it differs among African Americans who “appreciate the facts,” only to “muddle those same facts (DAILY).” In another drawing, an image of the stereotypical mammy appears as a ballooned bozo doll swaying stupidly on a white background (Figure 17). This could represent the white world with which Saar and Pindell—now associated with the mammy elsewhere in the series—are obsessed. Rooted in the whiteness of America and the injustice of that, they move forward only to swing back again. On a “repeat, repeat, repeat” cycle. Walker thus accuses the older artists of losing their dignity, no longer confrontational or avant-garde, simply bozos. A secondary interpretation of the drawing is provided by the text, which reads, “demeaning portraits should be seen not heard.” Her statement implies that depicting racism is more effective than demeaning comments made by the matrons of African American art.

Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk? is full of derisive imagery that subtly and directly attacks those at the center of the crisis in 1997. The drawings are not only defensive, but are filled with bitterness, expressed in the humiliation of Saar and Pindell. Walker's drawings appear to be more explicitly cathartic and illustrative rather than theory-driven like her silhouette works. By creating more literal representations Walker has ascribed to one of the demands of her critics—to depict meaning clearly. Yet, Walker's work and its distinct lack of race-affirming imagery has continued to provoke campaigns against her by critics like Howardena Pindell.

Walker's drawings represent a particularly cathartic moment. Having endured public humiliation and insult, the artist drew on that experience to fuel her subsequent work, including *Cut* (1998) and *Hunting Scene* (2001). The silhouettes that she produced since that time are no less controversial than the drawings. Walker's silhouette tableaux after 1997 are characterized by a greater sense of menace and indictment than earlier ones. *Cut*, a silhouette derived from a 1998 photograph of Walker, and *Hunting Scene* of 2001, are particularly poignant examples (Figures 18 and 20).

The large silhouette of a hoop-skirted woman in *Cut* is initially deceptive. The figure seems to be jumping merrily, with heels clicking together, arms thrown back and chest thrust forward. Upon closer inspection it becomes apparent that the figure's blood pours from her cut wrists. She holds a straight-razor in one hand while the other wrist has been deeply slashed. She seems to be strangely suspended, rather than leaping. The thrust of her chest and pressed-together heels become a signifier of pain instead of bliss.

Cut is based on a photograph of Kara Walker taken by Noe DeWit for *Interview* magazine (1998, Figure 19).¹⁰¹ The silhouette is in sharp contrast to the smiling face and carefree attitude of Walker in the photo. However, while Walker presents a smiling face in the published photograph, the silhouette betrays a deeper pain. Walker felt the photograph, according to a conversation between Kara Walker and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw in 1998, “masked the difficulties of her situation as an African American woman artist, the way it conveyed much of the pleasure and little of the pain of her professional life.”¹⁰² The pose and braids of *Cut* resemble those in the photograph. The silhouette may represent—because of the frequency that Kara Walker relies on her own experiences in art—contemplation of suicide, although there is no evidence that this is the case. The work is multivalent, however, and, based on the figure’s costume, also represents a nineteenth-century woman. The braided hairstyle indicates the woman could be black and potentially a slave. Viewers witness a private moment of self-violence.

A link also exists between *Cut* and the events of 1997. Walker claimed, “without hitting a couple of dark milestones in my sense of self, I wouldn’t have started making the silhouettes.”¹⁰³ If the silhouette was born from the pain experienced as a black woman, it was reinforced by her personal struggles as an African American female artist, which she discussed with DuBois Shaw, and the criticisms by Saar, Pindell, and other outspoken opposition. *Cut* is an example of Walker’s increasing depiction of especially harmful acts—and this case violence against oneself. The viewer witnesses the silhouetted woman in an act of cruelty against herself for unknown motives. *Cut* may be interpreted many ways, including

¹⁰¹ DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable*, 127.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Als, “The Shadow Act,” 74.

as an antebellum slave woman, a depiction of the artist's fantasies, or a metaphor for the inner turmoil experienced by contemporary African American female artists.

The increasing violence in Walker's work also occurs in *Hunting Scene* in 2001. The silhouette reveals two camps of hunters, white and black. The white men are identifiable by their facial features, particularly prominent noses, chins, and fashionable hairstyles. The black figures are most recognizable by large lips and natural hair. The scene depicts white men roasting the heads of black men and women over an open flame. Opposite the white camp, a lone black man lofts white heads on pikes into the trees. Each camp faces the other, as if to show off their kills. This scene is possibly rooted in the antebellum South, perhaps a depiction of plantation owners hunting runaway slaves. It could also reflect the deep racism of colonial Africa. The scene is reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, a horrific tale revealing humankind's capacity for violence and darkness. The white figures do not have typical features or wear dress distinctive to the American South. Rather, their prominent noses and garb are more representative of Europeans on a colonial expedition. The black man is also redolent of stereotypes of primitive aboriginal people. Walker's connection between the image and *Heart of Darkness* only serves to enhance the horror of the tableau. *Hunting Scene* is metaphorically contemporary. It reveals the deep ongoing divide between black and white—economically (the black man is in rags, or possibly naked, while the white men wear hunting costumes), socially (laws made to protect white men), and visually (the black man is marginalized at the edge of the scene while the white men are privileged by large size and nearly central positioning, as African Americans are often reduced to stereotypical sound-bites in contemporary media). Superficially, Walker has made the victims clear in this scene. The white men look on gleefully as the heads of blacks burn before them, including one of a

child. The black man, however, appears mournful and exhausted, standing with slumped shoulders and blood dripping down his leg.

The sadistic behavior of the white men, the dominant and powerful group, exhibits a perverse pleasure in the pain of others. Yet, both camps are horrifically violent. There are more heads, or trophies, thus, more murders, attributed to the African's. In fact, there are nearly three times more murdered people in the black camp than in the white. Walker juxtaposes two places and times; the antebellum South—or potentially colonial Africa—when blacks were identified as property and potentially dangerous perpetrators, to contemporary society, in which blacks are both historically seen as victims and simultaneously profiled as violent criminals. The scene exaggerates the stereotypical association of violence and black men. Walker displays the horror of the slave experience in the nineteenth century and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in contemporary society. She has amplified the violence of previous tableaux, creating work that is incredibly graphic and the antithesis of positive representation.

The most poignant and summarizing work since 1997 is *Letter from a Black Girl* (1998). A typed narrative in the form of a letter, a large wall-text featured on the gallery wall in the exhibition *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. The text begins, “Dear you hypocritical fucking twerp” (Figure 21). The work is apparently authored by the persona of the Negress slave who is emotionally and physically complicit with her white master. The text is imperfect prose. The misspellings, broken English, and grammatical errors indicate the education of the narrator, while the language and subject contradict that of a nineteenth-century slave. Throughout the text is a sense of hatred, but there is also an undercurrent of self-loathing. The viewer speculates that the identity of the narrator is a slave

writing to reconcile her own emotional conundrum, although the language suggests a more contemporary author.

Letter from a Black Girl, typical of Walker's works, can be interpreted many ways. The text can be taken literally as representing the dichotomy between a sexually abused—and perhaps emotionally invested—black woman at the whims of her master. The work undoes the myth of the antebellum South as the age of mannered gentlemen and, instead, reveals the base sexual reality of master and slave relationships. As is typical in Walker's oeuvre, she complicates these relationships by breaking down contemporary notions of how slaves should have responded to their subjugators.

The work also semantically indicts the viewer. Not unlike Barbara Kruger's textual pieces that charge subject pronouns "I" and "YOU" with political meaning, *Letter from a Black Girl*'s "you" becomes accusatory. Therefore, the viewer is suddenly harnessed with responsibility—historically complicit by one's skin color. Walker indicts every viewer, making a claim that the legacy of slavery does not belong exclusively to either African Americans or whites, but is a shared American burden. The viewers are the "hypocritical fucking Twerp[s]," content with the status quo in which automatic racism continues to be acceptable. Kruger acknowledges Walker's work as meaningful and critical of society. She writes, "Walker has produced a compelling reckoning with the twisted trajectories of race in America."¹⁰⁴

Following on the heels of *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* from 1997, the work continues to draw from her experiences with and responses to her critics. The Negress narrator laments, "I am left here alone to recreate my WHOLE

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Kruger quoted in Lucy McKeon, "The Controversies of Kara Walker," *Hyperallergic* online magazine (2013), accessed April 10, 2013, <http://hyperallergic.com/67125/the-controversies-of-kara-walker/>.

HISTORY without benefit of you.” Yet, the Negress is an altar ego of Walker. Named in the exhibition title her complement, her enemies, her oppressors, and her lovers are those diametrically opposed to her work. Without support from an older generation, she is alone. The generational conflict is fundamental to the reception and production of Walker’s work. She references it in the drawing series: her connection to the mammy/Saar in Figure 11, the suffering inflicted in Figure 12, the text “I am your love inside (deep deep)” in Figure 13. Therefore, the “you” of Walker’s letter may also be interpreted as a direct address to her critics, most likely Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell, as the most aggressive and outspoken commentators.

The work becomes a metaphor for her relationship to her detractors. Several lines in particular stand out, “What you proceeded to do to me—what rather I proceeded to do to you,” refers to the mutual impact of one generation on the next. “That peculiar institution we engaged in because there was no foreseeable alternative,” evokes the discourse which pitted black woman against black woman. Walker’s deviation from the proscribed course for African American artists laid out by Saar is the subject of “Before, when there was a before, an upon a time I was a blank space defined in contrast to your POSITIVE, concrete avowal.” “You duplicitous, idiot, worm,” may refer to Saar’s confrontational rather than “negative” use of the stereotypical mammy in her own work. The mammy’s raised fist for the Black Power Salute are conjured by “why you raised your pious fist to the sky,” which also dismisses Saar’s criticism as “pious” (Figures 4 and 21). The work ends with a question: “Should I never be heard from again, follow the Route of my forebears and quietly, GO, or shall I seek to kill you?” This rhetorical question addresses her critics confidently: she will not go.

In her article “Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes,” Juliette Harris could not have known how right she was when she wrote “[Walker’s] evolution as an artist could be aided by the developing debate.”¹⁰⁵ Kara Walker’s evolution as an artist was not only influenced by the criticism surrounding her work in the late nineties, but also provoked to greater extremes. *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, as well as silhouettes like *Cut* and *Hunting Scene*, reveal this direction in her work which continued into the twenty-first century. In 2001, Walker mounted a solo exhibition, entitled *American Primitivism* at Brent Sikkema’s gallery, as another response to her critics. The premise of the show critiques the belief that African art is primitive and relevant only as an ethnic style. Walker was undoubtedly affected by the events of 1997, the results of which appear over and over again in her artwork. Yet, it is multivalent, continuing to address major problems concerning race relations and representations in contemporary American culture.

¹⁰⁵ Harris, “Extreme Times,” 8.

Conclusion

From 1997 to 2002, the exhibition catalogue *Kara Walker*, published by the Renaissance Society in Chicago, was the only major scholarly work on the artist's art and writings.¹⁰⁶ Recent years have witnessed an explosion of literature denouncing as well as supporting Walker's position. The title of the 1998 *International Review of African American Art* article "The Debate Continues: Much Ado," was more accurate than its author Kelefa Sanneh could have known. Howardena Pindell's blog (karawalker-no-yes.blogspot) continues to be active on the internet.¹⁰⁷ Her anthology of the same title was published in 2009 and her more recently published work *Kara Walker: Evasion, Denial, Privilege* (2011), demonstrate the persistence of Walker's critics to defame and censor her. Kara Walker has become the poster child for negative stereotypes and race betrayal for some and a theoretical genius to others. Her artwork is polarizing. Interviews and statements reveal that the public condemnation she has endured and the attempted censorship of her silhouettes have affected her work. Comments made to Darius James and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw speak of both nonchalance and bitterness. This, too, is reflected in her art through the Negress persona often pictured in silhouetted scenes. Walker did reply formally, critiquing the critiquers.¹⁰⁸ Yet, the real power of her response lies in her works. Acidic narratives, pointed drawings, salacious and grotesque images of her opponents, and indirect and direct references to them are strewn across the pages of the series *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?. Cut* suggests extreme personal pain and conflict, and the violence of *Hunting Scene* is profound.

¹⁰⁶ DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakeable*, 15.

¹⁰⁷ Sanneh, "The Debate Continues: Much Ado," 44-47; Pindell, *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?*, 2009.

¹⁰⁸ Walker, "Kara Walker's Response," 48-49; James, "I Hate Being Lion Fodder;" DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakeable*.

Walker's work continues to depict the institution of slavery and its inherent atrocities, as well as the complicated emotional and physical relationships between victim and perpetrator. She continues to employ negative stereotypes, sometimes caricatures, to communicate race and its meaning in contemporary culture. Although many of Walker's practices have not changed, such as the medium of silhouette, the elevated violence of her work following 1997 reveals that the content of her art was impacted by the critical onslaught led by Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell. Yet, Walker continues to thrive, presenting thought provoking artwork that challenges racism in a contemporary context.

Walker is still at the center of hot debate wherever it is exhibited. Her images are inflammatory and caustic. They provoke viewers to consider contemporary racism and its relationship to American history. Walker's images ask viewers, both black and white, to consider their own complicity. Her work touches African Americans intimately. In 2004, ten years after her debut, Walker was invited to exhibit at an African American venue, the Studio Museum in Harlem, for the first time.¹⁰⁹ What does this say about African Americans' experience of Walker's work? Perhaps the black community was not prepared for this type of relationship with a harmful past until then.¹¹⁰ Instead, they desperately seek to grow their life's work, rather than see it undone by life-size derogatory images plastered across America's cultural institutions.

¹⁰⁹ Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakeable*, 123.

¹¹⁰ Lowery Stokes-Sims paraphrased from "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," DVD-ROM.

FIGURE 1:

Walker, Kara, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred B'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Negress and her Heart*, 1994, cut-paper and adhesive on wall, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Reproduced from *Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003).



FIGURE 2:

Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (detail of *Eva* above, detail of *Uncle Tom* below), 1995, cut-paper and adhesive on wall, Collection of Jeffery Deitch, New York. (Originally installed for *La Belle et La Bête*. Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France, 1995). Reproduced from Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007).



FIGURE 3:

Kara Walker, *The Rich Soil Down There*, 2002, cut-paper and adhesive on painted wall, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced from Darby English *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*.

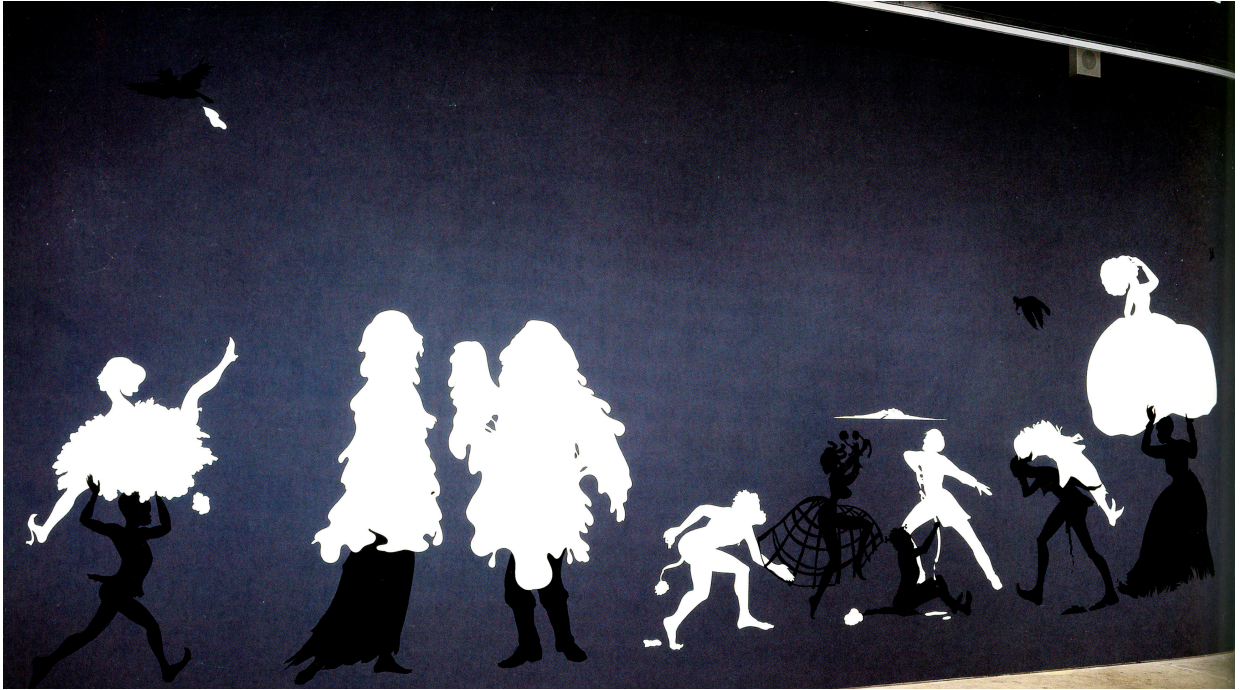


FIGURE 4:

Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, mixed media, University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley. Reproduced from Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).



FIGURE 5:

Betye Saar, *Dbl-Duty—I's Back Wid a Vengeance*, (front and back view), 1997, mixed media on vintage washboard, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York. Reproduced from Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*.



FIGURE 6:

Howardena Pindell, *Columbus*, 1991-1992, mixed media, Brooklyn Museum, New York. Reproduced from the Brooklyn Museum, "Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Feminist Art Base: Howardena Pindell," accessed February 15, 2013, http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/howardena_pindell.php?i=1074.



FIGURE 7:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, exhibition catalog, edited by Philippe Vergne (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2007).

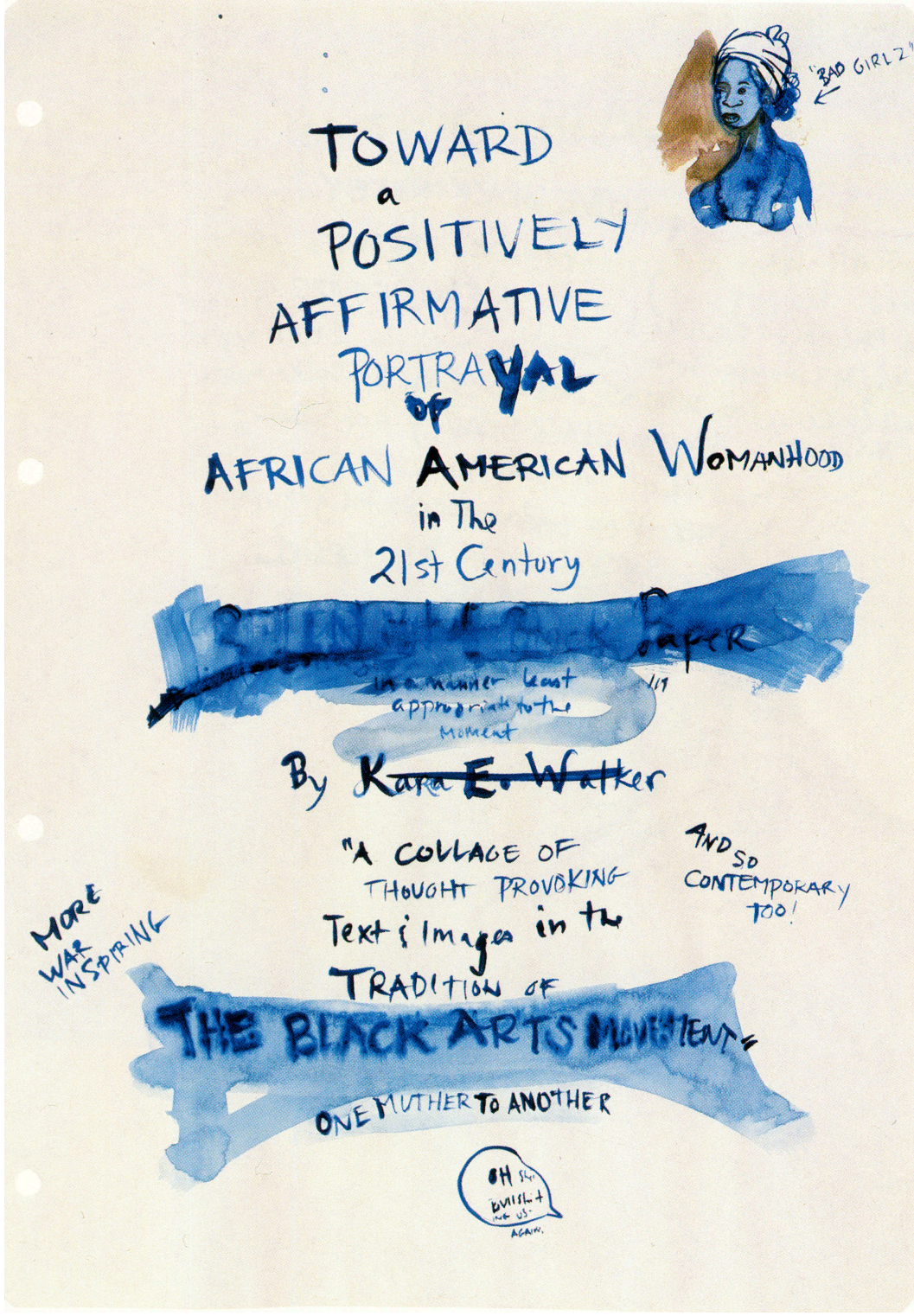


FIGURE 8:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

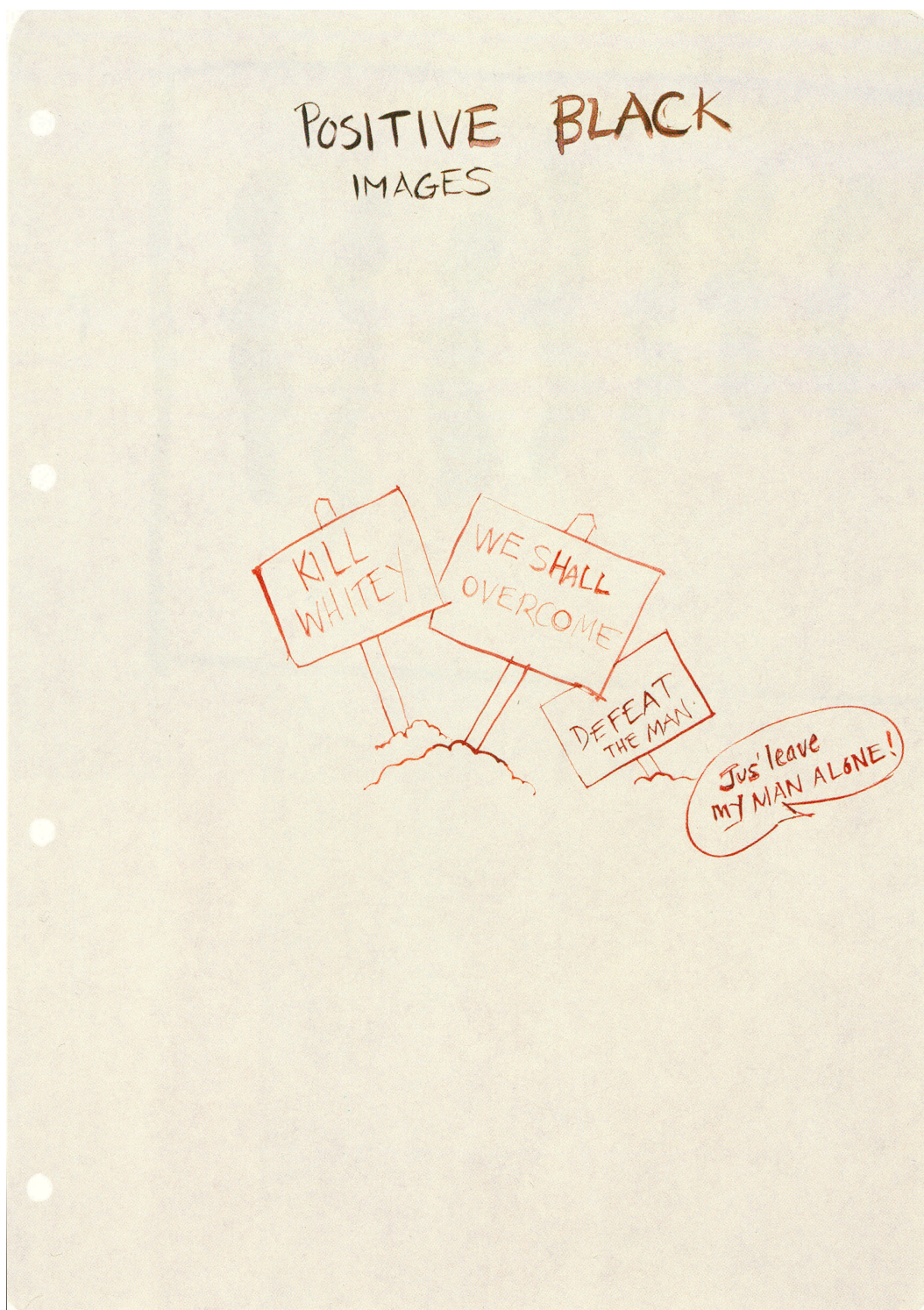


FIGURE 9:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

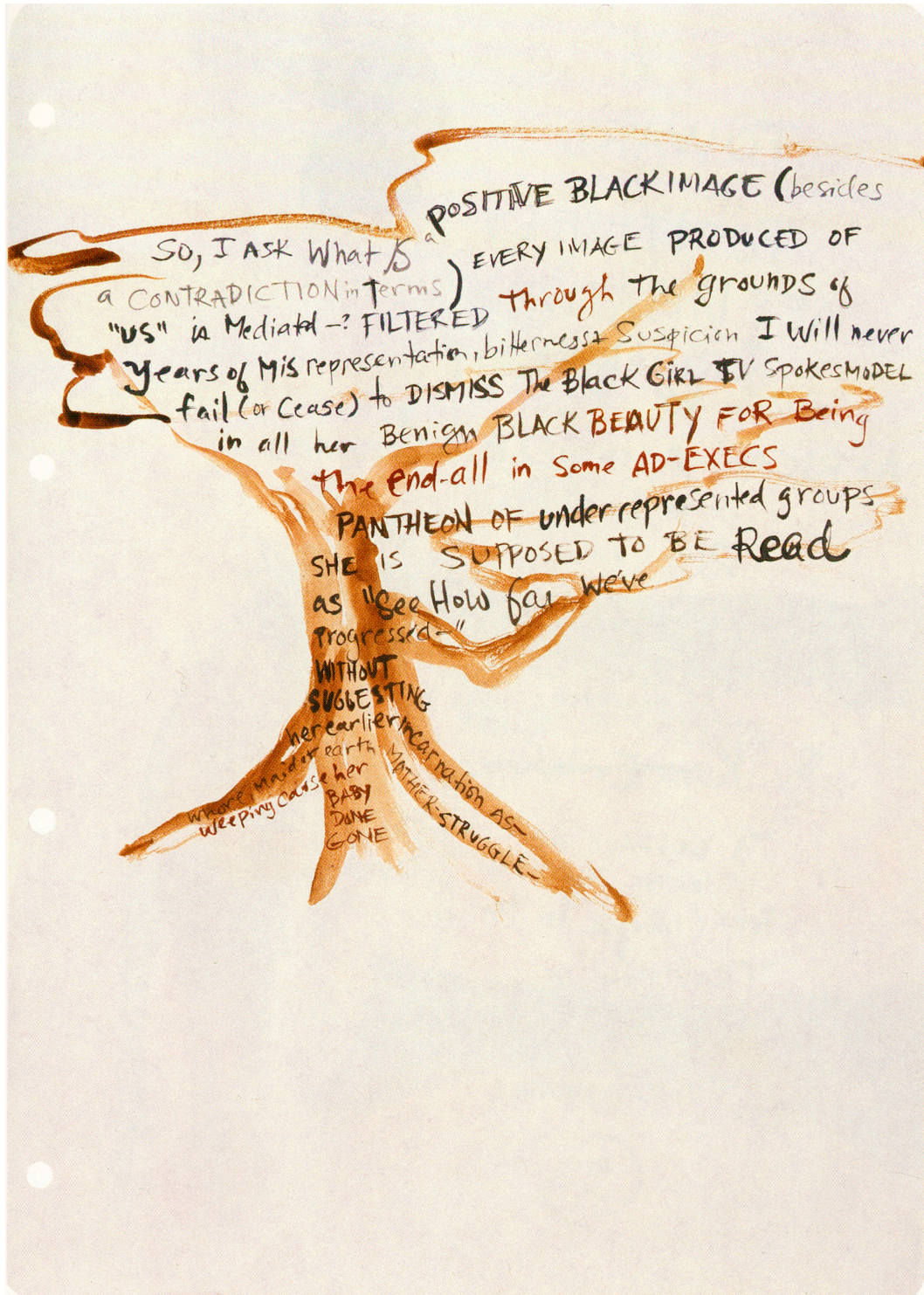


FIGURE 10:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

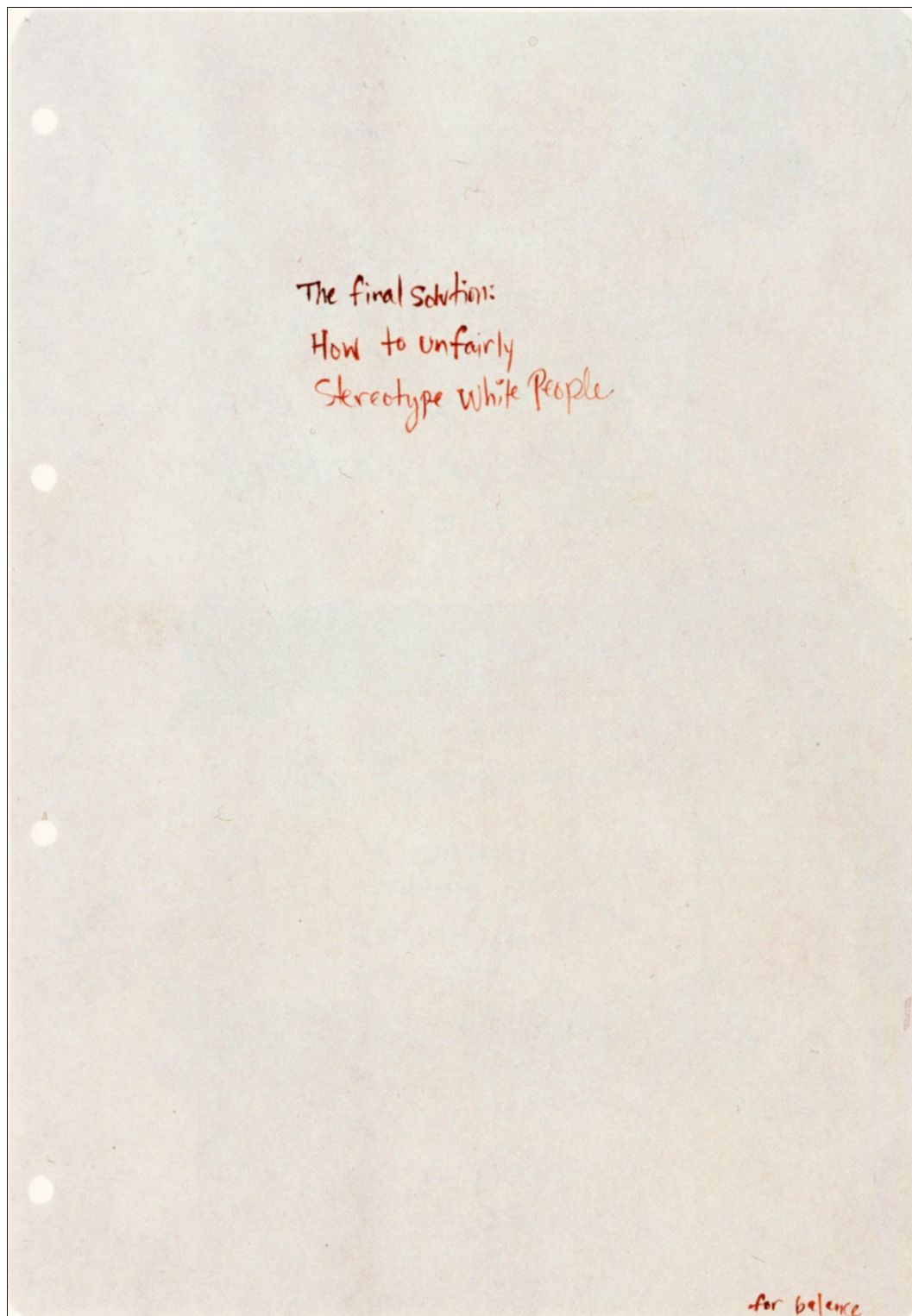


FIGURE 11:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.



FIGURE 12:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

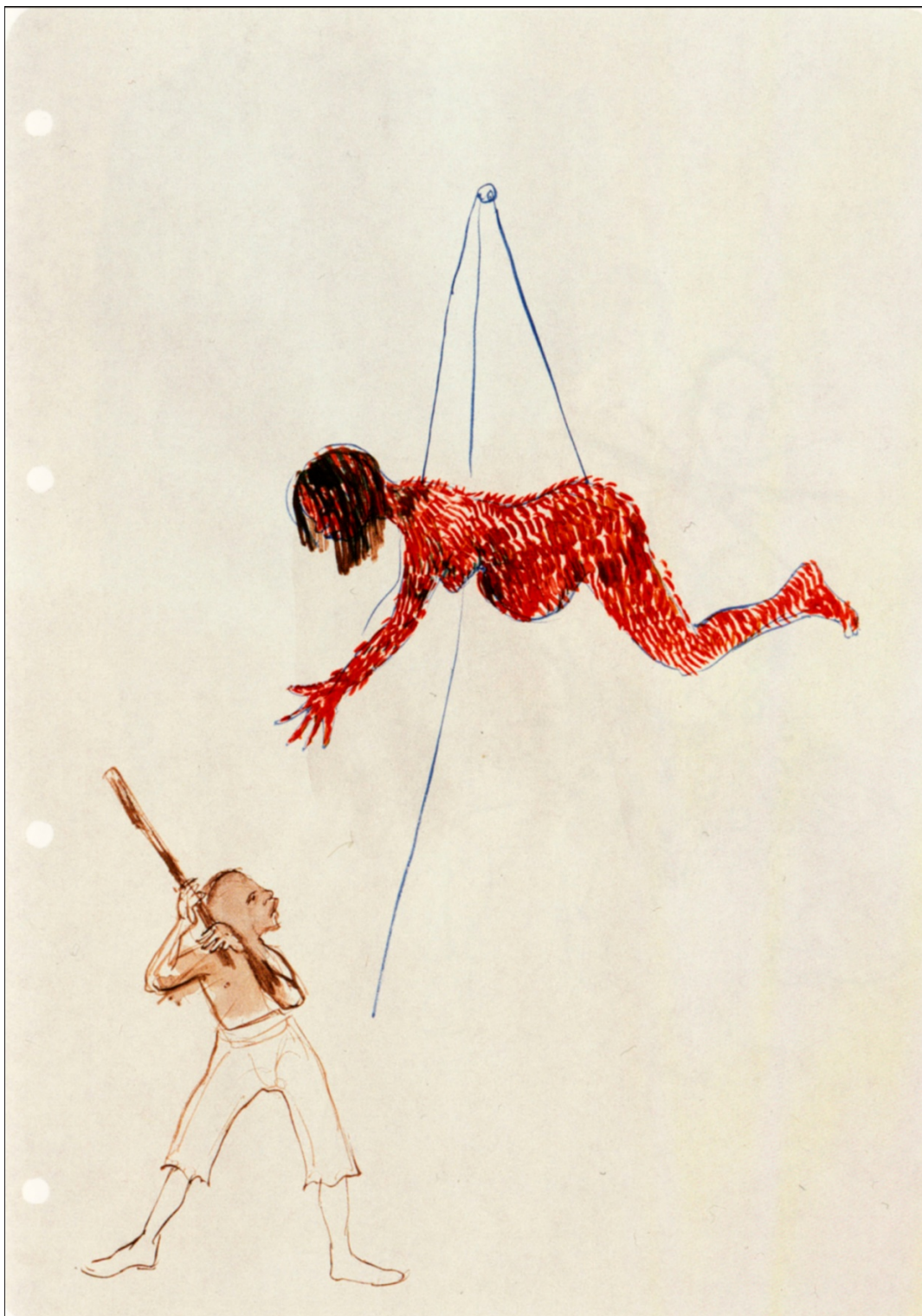


FIGURE 13:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

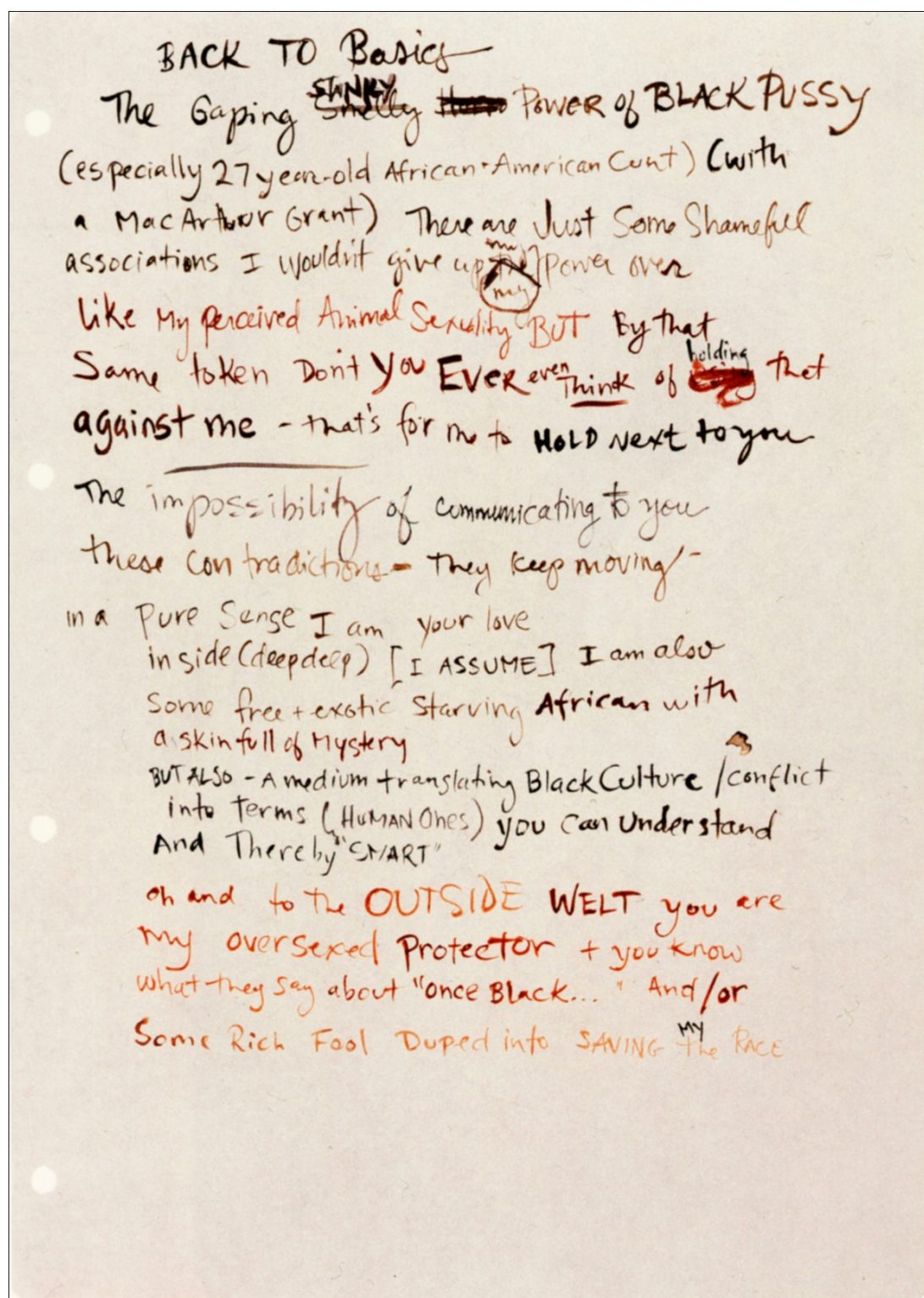


FIGURE 14:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

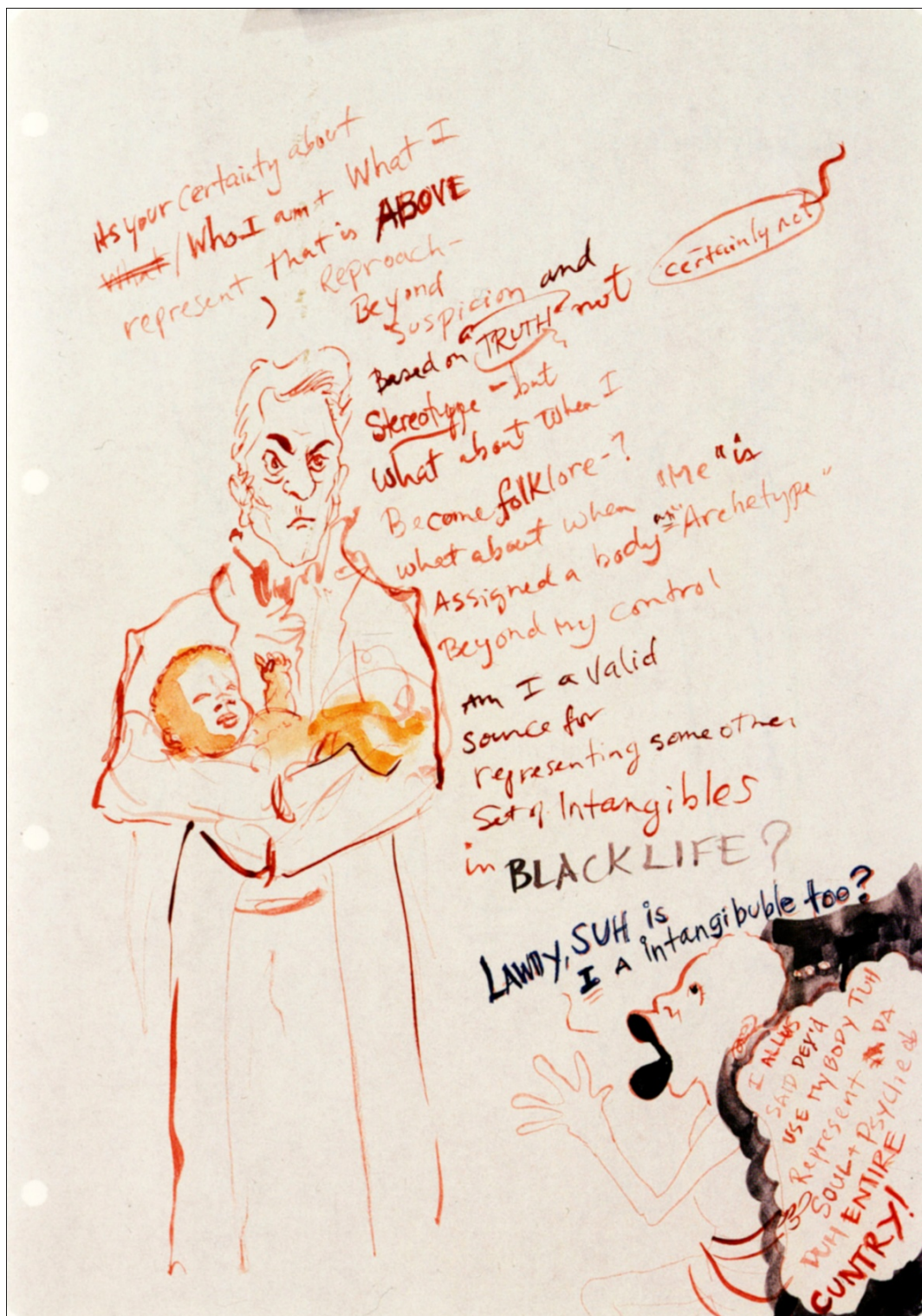


FIGURE 15:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

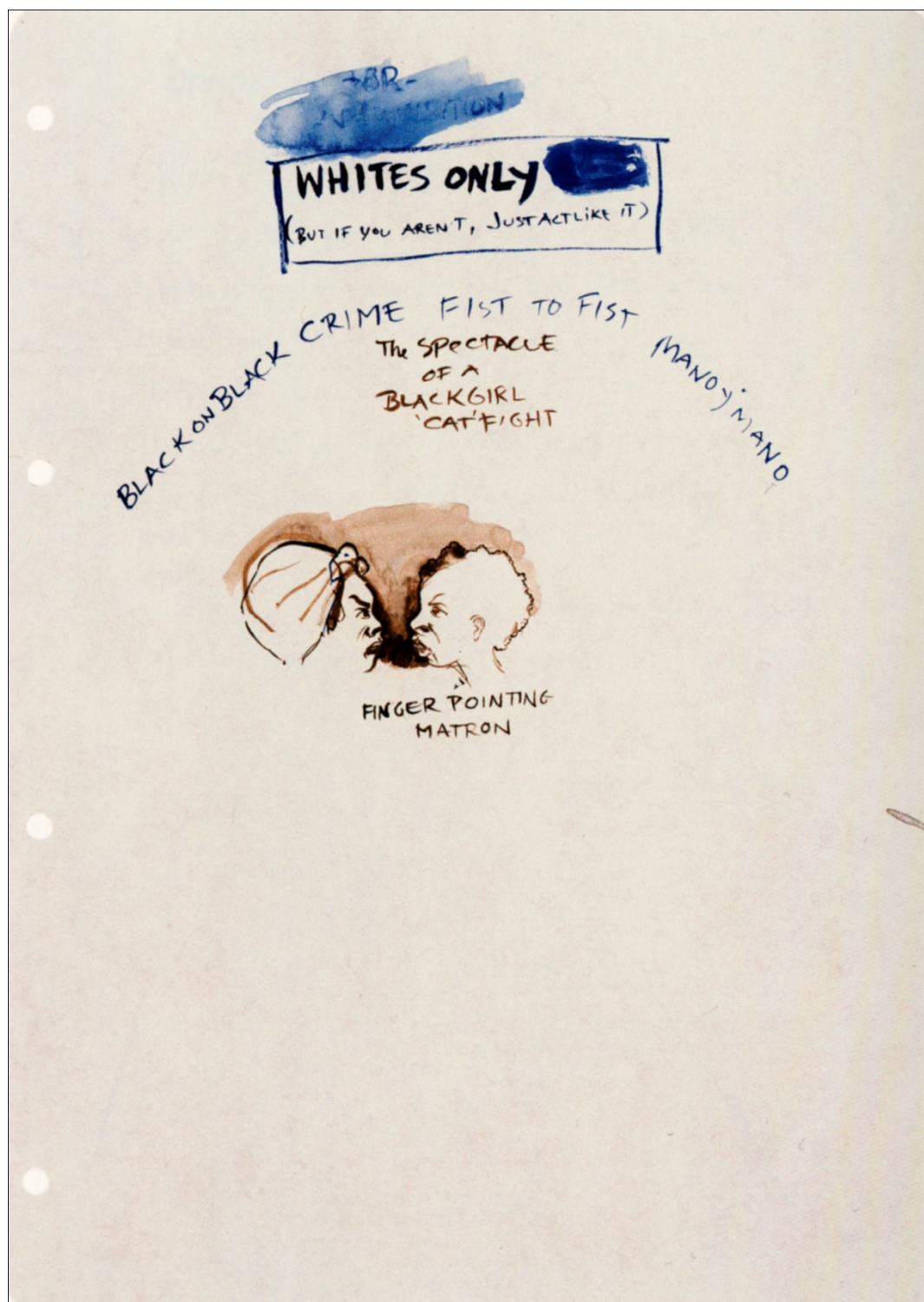


FIGURE 16:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.

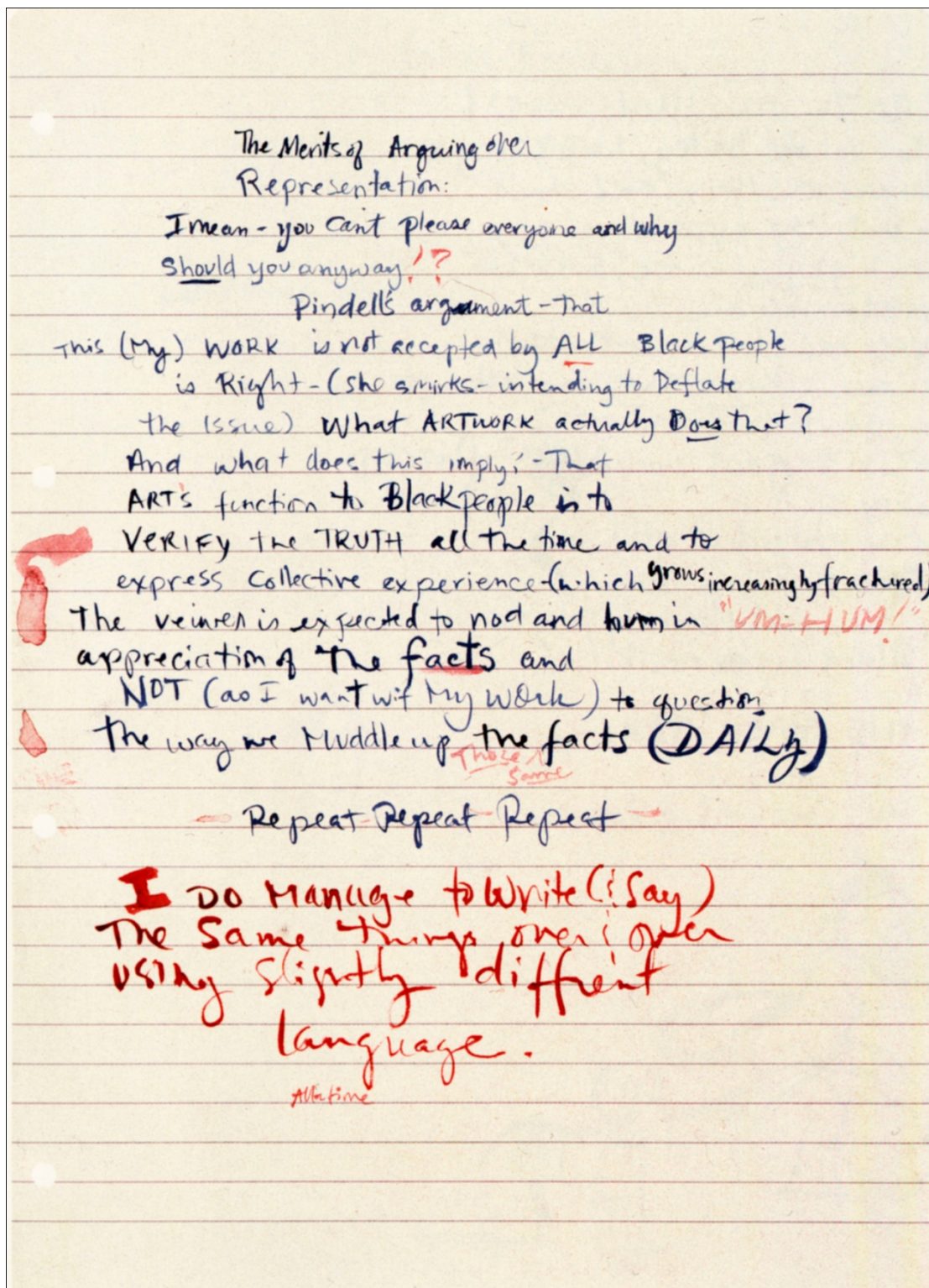


FIGURE 17:

Kara Walker, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?*, 1997, watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper, Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Reproduced from *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*.



FIGURE 18:

Kara Walker, *Cut*, 1998, cut-paper on wall, Collection Donna and Cargill MacMillan. Reproduced from Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).



FIGURE 19:

Noe DeWitt, *Kara Walker*, reproduced in *Interview*, (November 1998): 115. Reproduced from Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*.



FIGURE 20:

Kara Walker, *Hunting Scene*, 2001, cut paper and adhesive on wall, collection of Centro Nazionale, per le Arti Contemporanee, Rome. Reproduced from *Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry.

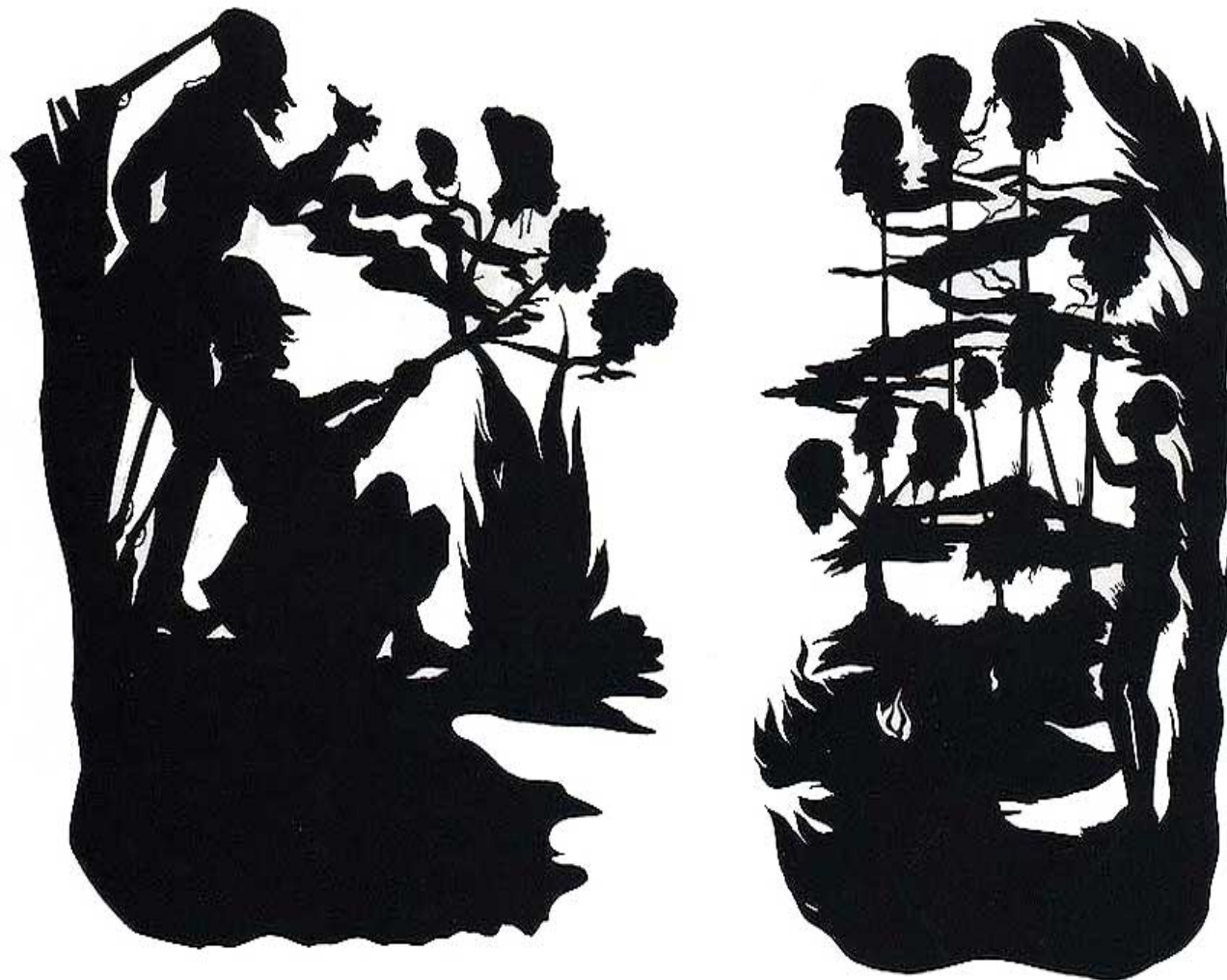


FIGURE 21:

Kara Walker, *Letter from a Black Girl*, 1998. Reproduced from *Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry.

Dear you hypocritical fucking Twerp,

Id just like to thank you for taking hold of the last four years of my life and raising my hopes for the future. Id like to thank you for giving me clothes when I needed them and food when I needed it and for fucking my brains out when my brains needed fucking. I hope that the time we spent in the Quarters with my family sleeping nearby quietly ignoring what you proceeded to do to me- what, rather I proceeded to do to you- ws worthwhile for you, that you got the stimulation you so needed, Because now That Im Free of that poison you call Life, that stringy, sour, white strand you called Sacred and me savior, that peculiar institution we engaged in because there was no other forseable alternative, I am LOST.

Before, when there was a before, an upon a time I was a blank space defined in contrast to your POSITIVE, concrete avowal. now, a blank space in the void and I have to thank you for forgetting to stick your neck out for me after I craned my neck so often in your arms.

Dear you duplicitous, idiot, Worm,

NOW that youve forgotten how you like your coffee and why you raised your pious fist to the sky, and the reason for your stunning African Art collection, and the war we fought together, and the promises you made and the laws we rewrote, I am left here alone to recreate My WHOLE HISTORY without benefit of you, my compliment, my enemy, my oppressor, my Love

Should i never be heard from again, follow the Route of my forebears and quietly, GO, or shall I seek to kill you, burning the last of the fuel you gave me and expected of me?

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ABSTRACT

Kara Walker's life-size cut-paper silhouettes, applied directly to the gallery wall, depict narratives of antebellum plantation life. Her artwork reveals contemporary racism via the historic lens of the Old South and a postmodern methodology of deconstruction. Walker's first silhouette debuted at The Drawing Center in 1994. Walker's work was poorly received by several prominent members of the African American community, namely black females. By 1997 she was at the center of a heated discussion about black representation and self-presentation that motivated a series of published articles, distributed letters and pamphlets, several symposia, and boycotts. Walker's critics vehemently attacked both her artwork and her person, calling her "a weapon against the Black community."¹¹¹ The early responses to Walker by the African American community by her most outspoken critics, Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell, as well as the written forum and symposium "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" are explored. This thesis analyzes Walker's subsequent response through her artwork, by focusing on: *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* (1997) a series of over sixty drawings, watercolors, and writings, *Cut* (1999), and *Hunting Scene* (2001).

¹¹¹ Howardena Pindell, "Disapora/Realities/Strategies," in *Kara Walker-No/Kara Walker-Yes/Kara Walker-?* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2009), 65.