

# Misremembering Racial Histories: The Role of the Viewer in Kara Walker's *The Emancipation Approximation*

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The silhouette art by African-American artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) persistently (re)emerges in the problematic discourse surrounding intentionality and its attempt to establish meaning within a given text or image. Given the tendency for art historians and critics to focus on Walker's biography, race and presumed intentionality, a paucity of scholarship examining alternative analyses has greatly diminished any re-reading of her silhouettes. This inability, perhaps failure, for current discourse to acknowledge Walker as only one component (and not the *solitary* component) in artistic interpretation has thus hindered contemporary scholarship on her works while propagating the need to reconcile the ambiguity of her satirical silhouettes. As such, a critical analysis of the artist's work beyond her personal perspective is necessary to the conceptualization and understanding of her engaging artwork.

This study<sup>1</sup> will principally acknowledge viewer responses to signs, or "Walker signs," as they will be identified within this paper. Building upon literary and feminist responses to viewer intentionality, this examination will illustrate how concepts of *history* and *memory* have become misappropriated within the iconography of Walker's silhouette art. To facilitate this argument, we will examine portions of her life-sized, multi-paneled piece *The Emancipation Approximation* (Figure 8), which will serve as a synecdoche for the artist's collective works. Due to its heightened sense of deliberate ambiguity, this piece will effectively illustrate how Walker's oeuvre, in its entirety, requires this vital re-reading of her signs.

The task of the reader, a notion introduced by Roland Barthes, is perhaps the most significant aspect of Walker's oeuvre requiring further analysis in order to conceptualize history and memory within her silhouettes.<sup>2</sup> When establishing primacy, Barthes theorized that the role of the viewer is

more important in establishing meaning within a given text/image when compared to the role of the artist as creator of the specific work.<sup>3</sup> In other words, this analysis removes the artist as the principal focus in the creative process and places greater emphasis on the viewer as a significant creator of meaning. This is not to say, however, that Walker's intentionality is arbitrary when considering meaning in her signs, or that viewer intentionality should be the overwhelming catalyst in her work. On the contrary, Walker's intentionality seems to validate the notion that her experiential art is deliberately ambiguous in order to elicit viewer responses to her work.

Walker has admitted, "there's a way in which I'm more interested in what viewers bring to this iconography than I'm constantly dredging out of my own subconscious."<sup>4</sup> Moreover, "working with such loaded material as race, gender, sex, it's easy for it to become ugly...I really wanted to find a way to make work that could lure viewers out of themselves and into th[e] fantasy."<sup>5</sup> Thus, in striving for, and incorporating ambiguity into her silhouettes, she is constructing very specific socio-semiotic relationships between art and viewer, while simultaneously accounting for racial and cultural differences. This notwithstanding, the result of this argument presents a larger undertaking—the task of establishing how the alternative agent (the viewer) creates meaning from perceptions of history and memory and how these societal conjectures contribute to the contemporary scholarship surrounding Kara Walker's art. Thus, a semiotic analysis is crucial when conducting a viable exegesis of her silhouettes in order to establish intentionality beyond Walker's personal (artistic) perspective.

Visible in an early untitled piece from 1996 (Figure 1), Walker was principally working with black paper on a white

<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to the following individuals and organizations who aided in the various stages of this paper. My gratitude is owed to the art history faculty at Florida State University for their many insights and ideas, with particular thanks due to Dr. Karen A. Bearor and Dr. Tatiana Flores for their support and direction. I owe an equal debt of gratitude to the University of Chicago Minority Graduate Student Association, as well as the Cleveland Museum of Art/ Department of Art History at Case Western Reserve University for allowing me to present my ideas at their invaluable graduate symposia.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977) 142-48. See also Robert Hobbs, "Kara Walker: White Shadows in Blackface," *Kara Walker*, ed. Stephan Berg (Freiburg: modo Kunstverein Hannover, 2002) 83. Applying Barthes'

theory to Kara Walker's work, art historian Robert Hobbs equally asserts, "looking at the artist's act of creation from her perspective is only one component of a far more complex interpretive process. A crucial second state involves an analysis of the ways that works of art and distinct styles galvanize historic discourses of which the artist [Walker] may or may not have been consciously aware when creating them."

<sup>3</sup> Barthes 142-48.

<sup>4</sup> Kara Walker, "Kara Walker," *Art 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century 2*, ed. Susan Sollins (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003) 71.

<sup>5</sup> Hilarie M. Sheets, "Cut It Out!" *ARTnews* 101.4 (April 2002): 129.

background and interested in how this dichotomy created an appropriate vehicle for depicting racial stereotypes.<sup>6</sup> In this image, we can discern an African-American woman, perhaps a slave or Negress, holding a black child from the tip of a pigtail. As inferred from the animalistic feet and elongated tail, the child has morphed into a reptilian-like creature, while a black dandy (bowing submissively in the background) remains isolated from the other figures. In a more recent work entitled *Darkytown Rebellion* (Figure 2), Walker explored the integration of projected light and paper-cut silhouettes on a blank wall. *Darkytown Rebellion* signals a shift away from her early black-on-white iconography by utilizing overhead projectors to cast colored light onto her silhouetted figures, thus implementing (as well as implicating) viewer shadows within the work's ephemeral narrative.<sup>7</sup> This conception of "viewer participation" is yet a further step in legitimizing viewer intentionality in the artist's work.

In a clever and paradoxical approach, Walker utilizes the antiquated practice of silhouetting to execute her contemporary, stereotyped signs. Popular in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, American silhouetting was predominantly associated with female artisans (both Caucasian as well as African-American), but largely patronized by white male plantation owners in the antebellum South.<sup>8</sup> By utilizing this particular medium, which evolved from shadow portraiture and physiognomy studies, Walker physically cuts her racial figures from large pieces of black and white paper.<sup>9</sup> This pronounced distinction between white and black can further be interpreted as *positive* and *negative* renderings of stereotypical racial attributes—again commenting on the complex and varied connotations inherent in "Walker signs." In so doing, Walker altogether manipulates the original conceptualization of silhouetting (i.e. portraying the "black/negative" of the human profile) by resurrecting this antiquated medium into her work.

Within Figure 7 from *The Emancipation Approximation*,<sup>10</sup> the black silhouettes of an ax and a young cotillion-clad Caucasian woman (whose race is "discernable" solely through her cultural attributes—i.e. hairstyle and clothing) rest indifferently against a large tree stump. Bodiless heads depicting stereotypical African-American physiognomies are scattered haphazardly along the foreground beneath the woman and the stump. This juxtaposition of forms may suggest that the young woman and the ax are responsible for the presumed act of decapitation and subsequent severed heads. Moving back along

the visual plane in Figure 6, the viewer confronts the dark outline of a crouching black woman struggling with a white swan. In Figure 5, the swan displays an expression of ambiguity—perhaps a squeal of titillation or a cry of horror. Within Figures 3 and 4 additional swans, whose heads have been replaced with the heads of African-Americans, glide upon a body of water scattered with black and white lily pads—elements, perhaps, which allude to the physical mixing of races and the uneasy *gray* area surrounding American racial discourses. Accordingly, the piece seems to read as a life-size shadow drama, a stage set with ambiguous actors, a backdrop laden with black and white figures dispelling their disturbing (and provocative) narrative.

Evident in Figure 6, a white swan is coupled with an African-American woman. Speaking in connotative terms, the white swan symbolizes (whether appropriately or inaccurately) *white* beauty and power, while the young woman very directly represents a *black* slave (a connotation deduced from the tableaux's antebellum subject matter). Since the figures are visually engaged in a sexual confrontation, it is inferred that these forms embody white-on-black miscegenation and cease to represent their perfunctory identities as *swan* and *slave*. This maneuver physically conceptualizes white-black, master-slave miscegenation in the antebellum South and could easily reference the classical misogyny/bestiality of Leda's swan-god, particularly when one notes the progeny of egg-like heads produced from their sexual union in Figures 6 and 7.

By manipulating this misogynist-construct, one will notice that the slave *woman*—and the *black* figure of the pair—is in fact committing the offense. She, the presumed victim, becomes the perpetrator as she molests the swan. This concurrence of forms seems to confirm racial stereotypes prevalent in the antebellum era, namely the notion that African slaves were base, bestial and sexually deviant commodities to their white owners. If this conception holds true, then the white swan is paradoxically objectified and miscegenized by black female desire and exploitation—a notion that radically challenges our contemporary understanding of historical master-slave relations. As such, Walker's art forces the viewer to create a succession of signified meanings for her signs and thus supports the notion that *created* meaning is decisive in explaining our understanding of the world.<sup>11</sup> The functioning of these signs allows us to comprehend why a viable component of Walker's art is not concerned with the artist's transmit-

<sup>6</sup> Walker 60-64.

<sup>7</sup> Walker 71. See also Mark Reinhardt, "The Art of Racial Profiling" *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003) 119.

<sup>8</sup> R. L. Mégroz, *Profile Art Through the Ages: a study of the use and significance of profile and silhouette from the stone age to puppet films*, first ed. (London: The Art Trade Press Ltd, 1948) 59, 87. See also Anne M. Wagner, "The Black-White Relation" *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003) 91-101.

<sup>9</sup> Edna Moshenson, "The Emancipation Approximation" *Kara Walker* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Bank AG, 2002) 55.

<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that *The Emancipation Approximation* is a multi-paneled piece of *circa* 150 scenes, of which only five are considered for this study.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2001) 14.

tance of *contained* information, but interested instead in her audience's constructed perspectives.

Semiotician Daniel Chandler further examines how meaning becomes applicable to our understanding of signs by asserting that signs are both *disguised* and serve *ideological functions*.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, "Walker signs" do in fact disguise the viewer's initial understanding of their meaning by offering a cursory (albeit problematic) reading that situates the silhouettes between clear-cut forms and ambiguous implications (i.e. silhouettes that belie their deeper social implications). From this assertion, one may question how these cuts in paper actually derive meaning from societal conjectures. To explicate possible solutions to this query, we will turn our attention to Chandler's second element of signs: ideological function.

Art historian Robert Hobbs recognizes this relationship in Walker's work and presumes that the artist's primary subject is not the iconic silhouette form, but *ideological stereotypes* of black and white individuals.<sup>13</sup> Hobbs believes that Walker creates these ideological stereotypes as a means of invoking audience conjecture about her work and argues that these stereotypes strive to reconcile conflicting viewer-responses promulgated by a 1960s generation of civil-rights era artists and a younger generation of postmodernists.<sup>14</sup> He suggests that Walker is attempting to debunk racial stereotypes by physically representing them, that is, she hopes to illustrate just how appealing the romanticizing of slavery has become—among Caucasians as well as African-Americans.<sup>15</sup> This speculation suggests that by examining Figures 3-7 under the guise of romantic and ideological stereotypes, the viewer can begin to recognize how these ideologies are quite pervasive in "coloring" the modern viewer's perception of racial histories.

As a synecdoche, the slave woman can be viewed as a stereotype of innumerable slaves within the larger institution of slavery. This stereotype, which nonetheless holds a learned and recognized meaning, heralds back to antebellum and post-antebellum minstrel-shows, as well as slave narratives and novels like *Gone with the Wind*, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As such, it attempts to situate itself within a collective American memory—

a concept that we will momentarily explore under the guise of literary criticism. Furthermore, the antiquated practice of silhouetting relied entirely upon caricature, just as Walker's work utilizes racially coded physiognomies to discriminate between various figures.<sup>16</sup> This decisive use of stereotype illustrates the fact that her viewers are at once capable of distinguishing between races based merely (or precisely) on exaggerated profiles. As such, it would appear that Walker is exposing the fact that these ideological stereotypes are neither originated, nor manipulated by the artist, but inhabit the cultural fabric of society and reside in her viewers' pre-conditioned perceptions of race.

With regard to history, literary critic Robert F. Reid-Pharr suggests that critics have spent copious amounts of time trying to decode how Walker's art reconstructs American history. In his opinion, her work has nothing to do with the historical past.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary, Reid-Pharr deduces that Walker is primarily concerned with the current state of American racism and suggests that she uses these ideological stereotypes to illuminate the "humanity" of blacks, rather than classify them under the discrediting and overly-sentimental stigma of the slave narrative.<sup>18</sup> And while Walker and her critics readily admit the importance of history to her work, this study contends that scholars misappropriate the idea that her silhouettes attempt to reconstruct a "factual" history—a concept that is problematic in and of itself. Reid-Pharr believes that

what we currently lack within the cottage industry that has grown-up around Walker is a full understanding that her primary focus is neither the history of American race relations nor the physical and psychological damage that has been visited upon (Black) American people, but...the retraining of her audiences.<sup>19</sup>

While it may be difficult to divorce the history of physical and psychological damage of African-Americans from Walker's work, it seems likely that Walker attempts to retrain her audiences in order to expose the myth of our past and how it incorrectly informs our current perceptions of slavery and racial histories. In other words, it would appear that Walker's work

<sup>12</sup> Chandler 14-15. Chandler believes that "through the study of semiotics, we become aware that these signs and codes are normally transparent and disguise our task in "reading" them. Living in a world of increasingly visual signs, we need to learn that even the most realistic signs are not what they appear to be...In defining realities, signs serve ideological functions. Deconstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal *whose* realities are privileged and whose are suppressed.... To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit."

<sup>13</sup> "Kara Walker at the São Paulo Biennial: A Conversation with Robert Hobbs," *Art Papers Magazine* 26.2 (March/April 2002): 12-13.

<sup>14</sup> "Kara Walker at the São Paulo Biennial: A Conversation with Robert Hobbs" 12-13. For a similar argument, see Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke UP, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> "Kara Walker at the São Paulo Biennial: A Conversation with Robert Hobbs" 13.

<sup>16</sup> Annette Dixon, ed., *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Art Museum, 2002) 11-24.

<sup>17</sup> Robert F. Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost," *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time*, ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Art Museum, 2002) 27-41. See also Darby English, "This is not about the Past," *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*, ed. Ian Berry (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003) 141-167. Like Reid-Pharr, art historian Darby English contends that Walker's silhouettes are more concerned with contemporary racial discourses rather than actual events in our historical past.

<sup>18</sup> Reid-Pharr 28.

<sup>19</sup> Reid-Pharr 28.

is concerned with the present and not the past.

Akin to Kara Walker, 1960s-era African-American artists Robert Colescott, Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar have challenged their notions of black history by addressing their contemporary contexts through racial iconographies. With this in mind, it is all the more surprising that Saar has openly attacked Walker's attempt to represent the notion of history in her silhouettes, claiming that Walker is too young and foolish to understand (from a first-hand account) the plight of African-Americans during the struggle for emancipation and civil rights.<sup>20</sup> From this assertion, Saar assumes rather falsely that Walker is concerned with transmitting a "factual" history of slavery and therefore mishandles the discourse. Moreover, when critics acknowledge that works by Saar and other 1960s-era artists were concerned with *their* social contexts, they inconsistently strive to reconstruct the past in Walker's art—thus denying its ability to be grounded in, and likewise critique, contemporary racial scholarship. It appears that scholars have become intellectually stuck in what they "see" on a cursory level and perceive these forms as reconstructions of an actual American past. In fact, a much larger notion is at hand here. If neither Walker, nor Saar, nor any viewer is capable of *directly* knowing any full, deep, or real history of slavery, then what the viewer presumes to be history, is conceivably only the memory of slavery and the reconciliation of an African-American past.<sup>21</sup>

Like history, the concept of memory presents problems to the current discourse and raises questions of its own. If we were to solely address Walker's notion of memory, we would neglect her audience's collective memory, or at least the possibility of its theoretical existence. Author Toni Morrison offers further erudition concerning the notions of history and memory and how these concepts might manifest themselves in Kara Walker's silhouettes. In her novel *Beloved*, Morrison principally explores the notion of an omniscient slave *rememory*—or the collective cultural memory of slavery in the African-American past. This assertion does not imply that Morrison's work should be stripped of its historical connotations, but rather, that she (like Walker) is interested in exploring the past institution in order to explore the present implications of slavery. If this idea of a fuzzy and malleable memory is at work within Walker's silhouettes, then Morrison's literary-construct helps to elucidate the multifaceted nature of memory in American racial discourses.

Analogous to the notion that Walker's work confronts responses raised from two separate generations, the novel's prin-

cipal characters, Sethe and her daughter Denver, parallel these generational differences. While Sethe is consumed by the rememory of slavery, Denver (who was neither born into, nor ever "participated" in slavery) is not interested in re-hashing the past, but in the consuming questions about the present, the now.<sup>22</sup> Like 1960s-era artists, Sethe is inescapably affected by the struggle for emancipation, while Denver, representative of the postmodern generation, struggles to make sense of the collective history of an unknown, unfelt, second-hand memory. However, unlike Sethe, Saar and other African-American artists of her generation were affected by the aftermath of American slavery and not the first-hand physicality of its atrocities. In this regard, each grouping of artists (i.e. the 1960s-era and the postmodern generation) were, and are, solely influenced by the memory of slavery and not the *rememory* of its presence. As such, Walker's audience, which accounts for both generations, offers conjectures that have been filtered through second and third-hand memories (i.e. perceptions) of slavery in the American past.

Historian and memory theoretician Paul A. Shackel further explores how "memory and racism on the American landscape has changed over the past century" by exploring the idea of a national collective memory and the struggle for African-Americans to find their place in this socio-political construct.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, Shackel theorizes that memory is invented, created and manipulated by society for its own ideological gains.<sup>24</sup> In this respect, memory (like a "Walker sign") is merely a representation of some aspect of reality, though this reality may not be tangible or unbiased. Central to this concept is the idea that collective memory is a construct of current discourse. Thus, by establishing that Walker's art draws on a collective African-American memory, we can acknowledge the aforementioned assertion that her silhouettes seek to engage current discourse surrounding history, memory and the past.

According to Morrison and Shackel, we, Walker's contemporary viewers, unavoidably run the risk of assigning our own perceptions of the past in dealing with the topic of slavery. With this in mind, contemporary misconceptions are, in effect, by-products of a current dialogue regarding American racism and contested histories. As a result, this is where Walker's work faces its greatest obstacle and at the same time, its precise goal. By directly engaging the modern viewer, her racialized silhouettes become endemic to the *mismemories* of a widely-varied, multicultural and multifaceted audience, thus generating a plethora of conjectures from their ambiguous narratives. As such, Walker's work specifically elicits a multi-

<sup>20</sup> Reid-Pharr 38. See also Reinhardt 119-120. Mark Reinhardt equally discusses Saar's open criticism of Walker's work and the ongoing debate over the use of racial stereotypes in socially-provocative artwork.

<sup>21</sup> Reid-Pharr 37.

<sup>22</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987; New York: Plume, 1998) 119. In her novel *Corregidora* (1975; Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), Gayl Jones equally explores (re)memories of slavery within the numerous generations of the Corregidora women. Fashioned from first-hand accounts of master-slave

miscegenation, these memories become consistent reminders that the histories of slavery should never be forgotten by the present generation.

<sup>23</sup> Paul A. Shackel, *Memory in Black and White: Race, Commemoration, and the Post-Bellum Landscape* (Walnut Creek: Altamira, 2003) 1.

<sup>24</sup> Shackel 11. For further reading on the construction of memory, as well as its cultural/collective formation, see Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003).



plicity of responses in order to perpetuate this ongoing dialogue. Consequently, a vital and inescapable intentionality lies not so much with Walker's ability to transmit her own perceptions of history and memory, but with her audience's active responses to these prevalent conceptions. By harnessing this intentionality, Walker effectively captures her viewer's attention, forcing him or her to engage in a dialogue with her work's

unconventional narratives. Through this exploration, the viewer can begin to understand the complexity of signs within her silhouettes—signs that represent concepts much deeper than cuts in paper and allude to the fervent re-evaluation of racial, social and gender-specific implications in our contemporary society.

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Figure 1. Kara Walker, *Untitled*, 1996, cut paper, watercolor and graphite on paper, 177 x 168 cm. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.





Figure 2. Kara Walker, *Darkytown Rebellion*, 2001, installation view at Brent Sikkema, New York. Projection, cut paper and adhesive on wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.



Figure 3. Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* (detail), 1999-2000, cut paper and adhesive on painted wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.



Figure 4. Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* (detail), 1999-2000, cut paper and adhesive on painted wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.



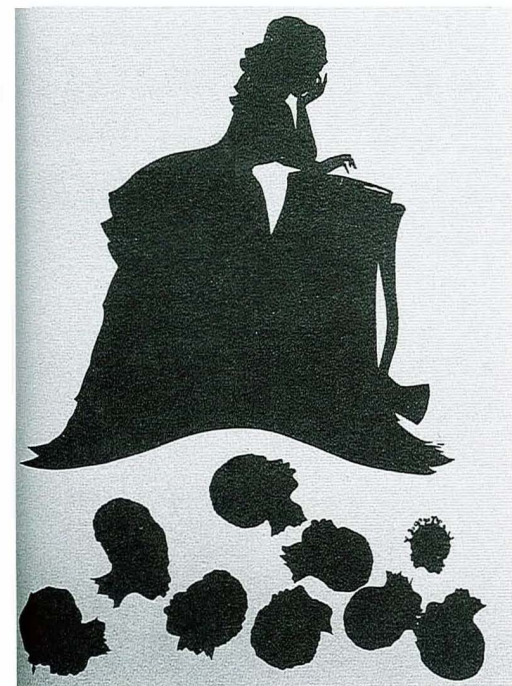


Figure 5. [upper left] Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* (detail), 1999-2000, cut paper and adhesive on painted wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

Figure 6. [upper right] Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* (detail), 1999-2000, cut paper and adhesive on painted wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

Figure 7. [left] Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* (detail), 1999-2000, cut paper and adhesive on painted wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

Figure 8. [below] Composite of details from Kara Walker's *The Emancipation Approximation*, 1999-2000, cut paper and adhesive on painted wall, dimensions variable. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York.

