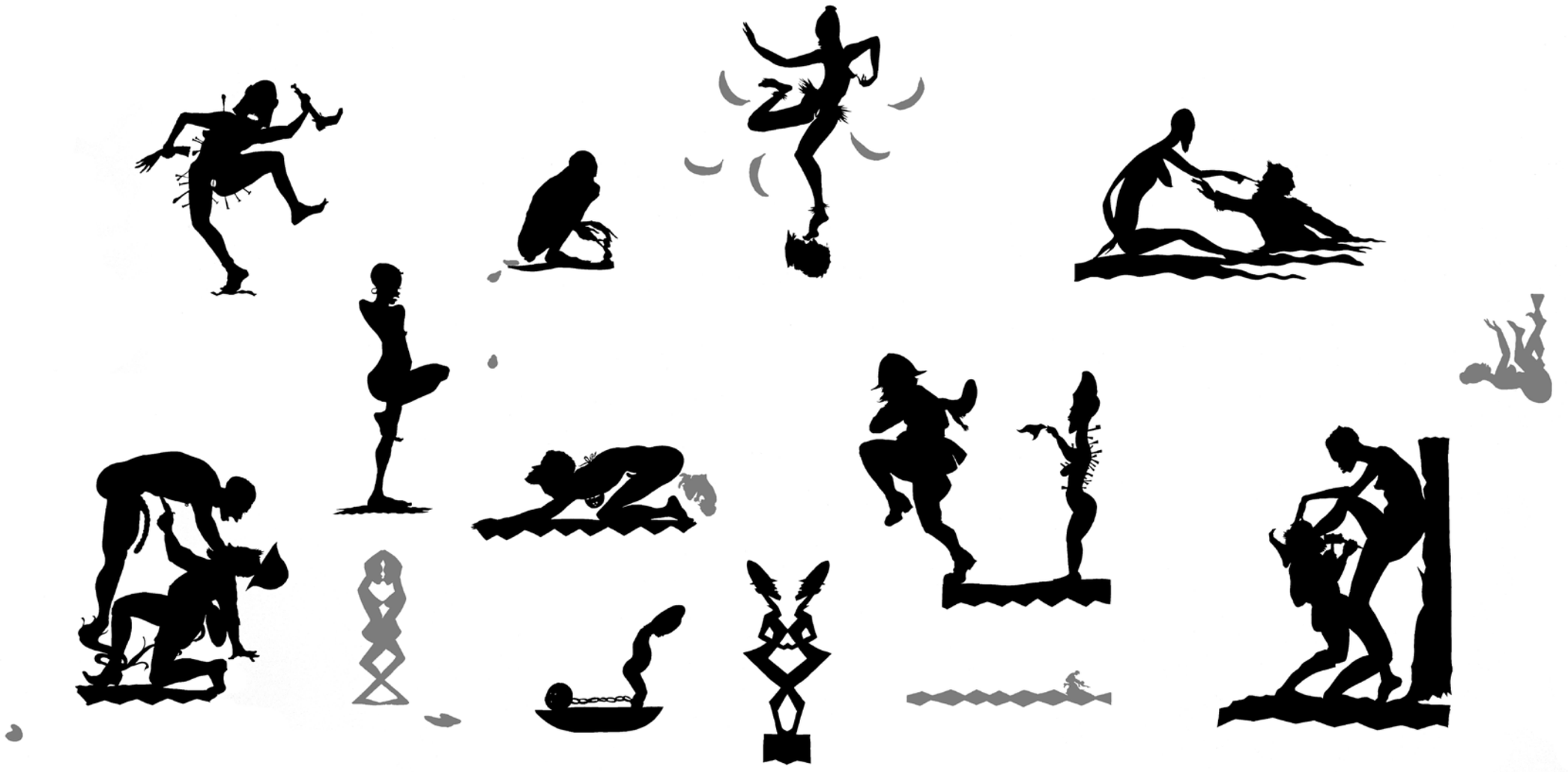
Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love

-WALKER ART CENTER-

Gallery Guide



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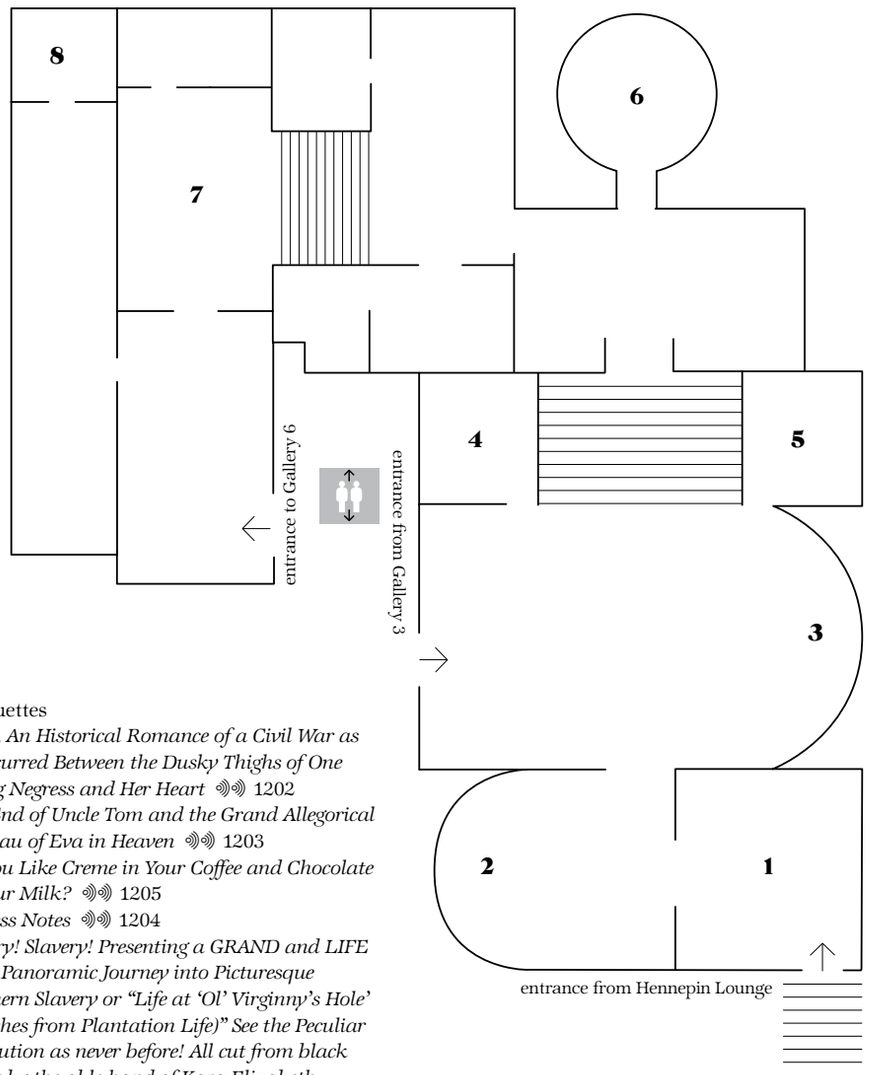

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At her New York debut at the Drawing Center in 1994, Kara Walker unveiled a daring reinvention of image-making in which she incorporated the genteel 18th-century medium of cut-paper silhouettes into her paintings. Since that time, she has created a poignant body of works that addresses the very heart of human experience, racial supremacy, and historical accuracy. This exhibition presents a comprehensive grouping of the artist's work to date, featuring paintings, drawings, collages, shadow-puppetry, light projections, and video animations that offer an extended contemplation on the nature of figurative representation and narrative in contemporary art.

Drawing her inspiration from sources as varied as the antebellum South, testimonial slave narratives, historical novels, and minstrel shows, Walker has invented a repertoire of powerful narratives in which she conflates fact and fiction to uncover the living roots of racial and gender bias. The intricacy of her imagination and her diligent command of art history have caused her silhouettes to cast shadows on conventional thinking about race representation in the context of discrimination, exclusion, sexual desire, and love. "It's interesting that as soon as you start telling the story of racism, you start reliving the story," Walker says. "You keep creating a monster that swallows you. But as long as there's a Darfur, as long as there are people saying 'Hey, you don't belong here' to others, it only seems realistic to continue investigating the terrain of racism."

Audio Guide

Art on Call audio commentary is available by dialing 612.374.8200 on your cell phone and entering the code or by downloading files to your MP3 player at newmedia.walkerart.org/aoc.

previous pages and back cover: *Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress* 2001 cut paper on wall 16 ft. x 37 ft. 6 in. (4.9 x 11.4 m) Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 2002
All works by Kara Walker courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

SILHOUETTES

NARRATIVE 1

"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, a love affair with the idea of it, with the notion of major conflict that needs to be overcome and maybe a fear of what happens when that thing is overcome. And, of course, these issues also translate into [the] very personal: Who am I beyond this skin I'm in?" [1]

The exhibition opens with works on paper and canvas from the artist's initial explorations of race and gender stereotypes with the medium of silhouettes. Around 1993, Kara Walker began to make caricaturelike ink drawings and paintings that incorporated black paper cutouts. **(fig. 1)** At this early stage in her artistic career, Walker took on the role of a satirist, which allowed her to critique subjects as far-reaching as the Civil Rights movement, feminism, poverty, education, modernism, and the art world.

Walker was born in Stockton, California, in 1969. At the age of 13, she moved to Atlanta, Georgia, when her father took a teaching position at Georgia State University. The move from California to a part of the country with more pronounced racial divisions had a profound effect on the artist. "I became black in more senses than just the kind of multicultural acceptance that I grew up with in California. Blackness became a very loaded subject, a very loaded thing to be—all about forbidden passions and desires, and all about a history that's still living, very present . . . the shame of the South and the shame of the South's past; its legacy and its contemporary troubles." [2]

After receiving a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991, Walker moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to pursue an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. Significant changes in race relations and gender politics were taking place in the United States at this time: In 1991, Anita Hill testified before Congress to sexual harassment by then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas; this was followed by Rodney King's infamous beating and arrest by the Los Angeles Police Department later that year, which led to the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

While Walker's early works did not specifically illustrate these social and political events, her satirical use of pre–Civil War images and language presented a biting commentary on the fragile status of civil rights and freedom of speech in American society. Keeping a finger on the pulse of current events, Walker began to develop a distinctive drawing style that found its origins in the exaggerated features and derogatory attitudes found in minstrel shows and racist paraphernalia, which she combined with the Eurocentric exaggerated depictions often found in Walt Disney's cartoons. In her earliest experimentation, the solid black contour shape of the silhouette mimicked the reductiveness of a cliché, a negative characterization intended to oversimplify a particular group or behavior. As the artist observed: "The black silhouette just happened to suit my needs very well. I often compare my method of working to that of a well-meaning freed woman in a Northern state who is attempting to delineate the horrors of Southern slavery but with next to no resources, other than some paper and a pen knife and some people she'd like to kill." [3]

To create a silhouette, Walker draws her images with a white grease pencil or soft pastel crayon on large pieces of black paper, which she then cuts with an X-Acto knife. As she composes the imagery, she thinks in reverse, in a way, because she needs to flip the cutouts over when assembling the final work. This reversal, an allusion to a cast shadow or mirrored image, echoes the nature of the silhouette as both alluring and deceptive. The cut pieces are then adhered to paper, canvas, wood, or directly to the gallery wall with wax.

The history of paper-cut portraits dates back to the court of Catherine de Medici in the late 16th century in France. This decorative practice, which grew increasingly popular during the second half of the 18th century, was named for Etienne de Silhouette (1709–1767), Louis XV's widely disliked French finance minister who cut black paper portraits as a hobby. Beginning in the 1700s, silhouette-cutting gained credence as an art form in the United States because of its popularity among the aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie. However, by the mid-1800s "shadow portraits" had lost most of their prestige. Being deemed a craft rather than an art form secured this portraiture technique a place at carnivals and in classrooms devoted to the training of "good ladies." During the early 20th century, silhouettes gained favor as sentimental keepsakes and souvenirs at fairs.

Such imagery was also tied into the 18th-century phenomenon of physiognomy, a pseudo-science claiming that one's character and intelligence were inscribed on one's profile. **(fig. 2)** This reduction of human beings to their physical appearance presented the artist with a tool, a Trojan horse from which to

FIG. 1 Kara Walker *Cut* 1998 cut paper on wall 88 x 54 in. (223.5 x 137.2 cm) Collection Donna and Cargill MacMillan

—— **FIG. 2** Illustration by Johann Caspar Lavater in the book *Physiognomishe Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntniss und Menschenliebe*, 1775

deploy other such characterizations found in the history of racial representation: "The silhouette speaks a kind of truth. It traces an exact profile, so in a way I'd like to set up a situation where the viewer calls up a stereotypical response to the work—that I, black artist/leader, will 'tell it like it is.' But the 'like it is,' the truth of the piece, is as clear as a Rorschach test." [4]

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE
NARRATIVE 2

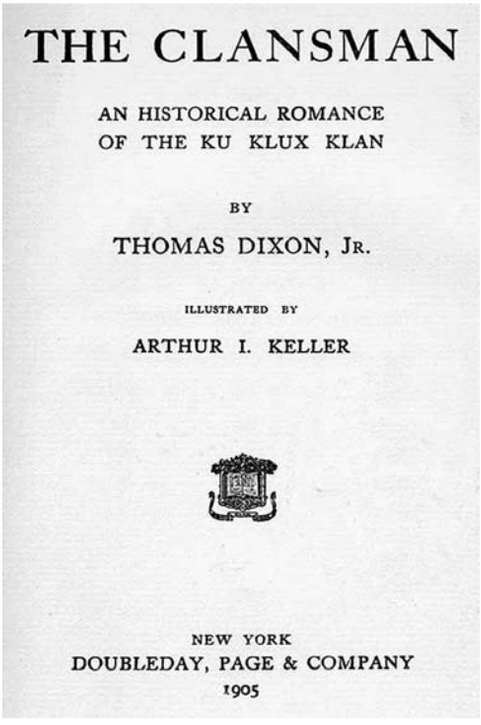
In the second room is Walker's first large-scale tableau entitled *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. Made in 1994, this imposing gathering of cartoonlike characters, such as the innocent Southern belle aiming for a kiss from her gallant gentleman, creates the illusion of a genteel pre–Civil War romance.

This 50-foot-long piece, consisting of black cut-paper silhouettes that are slightly larger than life-size, is installed as a panoramic mural reminiscent in scale of the historical cycloramas that emerged in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Two famous examples of this pictorial entertainment still exist in the United States: *The Battle of Gettysburg* (1884) and *The Battle of Atlanta* (1886). The spectacularly large paintings intrigued the artist because they tamed the unpleasantries of Civil War politics and had a seductive visual form, much like the silhouette.

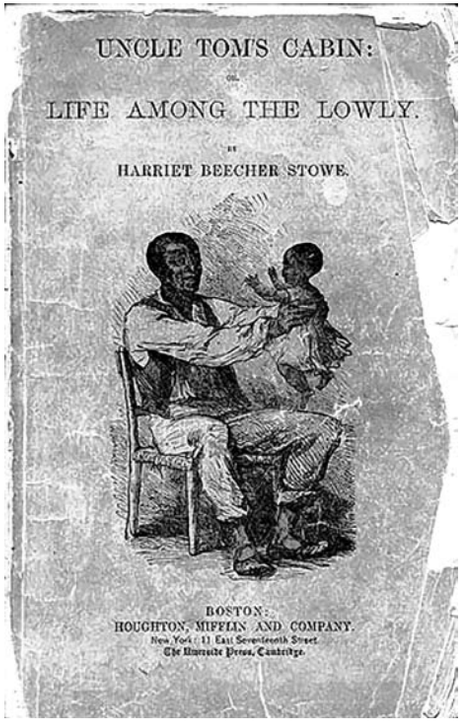
Early on, critics acknowledged this double nature in her work, describing her aesthetic as "looking like a cross between a children's book and a sexually explicit cartoon." [5] Walker wanted her drawings to go beyond shock value and evoke a response from her audience: "I didn't want a completely passive viewer. Art means too much to me. To be able to articulate something visually is really an important thing. I wanted to make work where the viewer wouldn't walk away; he would giggle nervously, get pulled into history, into fiction, into something totally demeaning and possibly very beautiful. I wanted to create something that looks like you. It looks like a cartoon character, it's a shadow, it's a piece of paper, but it's out of scale. It refers to your shadow, to some extent to purity, to the mirror." [6]

Walker's bitter humor references the first American form of theater, the minstrel show, in which white actors painted their faces black to sing, dance, and deliver comic skits in a "Negro" manner that propagated derogatory language and demeaning representations of black Americans. The artist has said that minstrel shows interest her because, like the silhouette, the performances involved "middle-class white people rendering themselves black, making themselves somewhat invisible, or taking on an alternate identity because of the anonymity . . . and because the shadow also speaks about so much of our psyche. You can play out different roles when you're rendered black, or halfway invisible." [7]

The artist's appropriation of racist and sexist stereotypes extends to her use of language, which is evident in the precise and sometimes flamboyant titles of her pieces and exhibitions. These often intertwine the testimonial style of the slave narrative with the melodrama of the historical romance novel. The words "gone" and "historical romance" in the title of this



—— **FIG. 3** Title page of a 1905 edition of Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s book



—— **FIG. 4** Cover of an 1879 edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's book

mural reference two best-sellers of American literature: Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905). **(fig. 3)**

The artist also introduces the term "Negress," both to identify the narrator of the story and to locate the scenario in a time before the Civil War. This loaded word appears in many other titles throughout Walker's oeuvre and over time has evolved into a complex adoption of a racist fantasy projected on black women and an element of self-loathing on the part of the artist.

UNCLE TOM
NARRATIVE 3

The third room features works made between 1995 and 1997, including a second large mural entitled *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*. Like many of Walker's works, this tableau is inspired by a literary source and references in its title the two main protagonists in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly*. **(fig. 4)** The panoramic composition includes a number of allegorical figures that appear repeatedly in the artist's hyperbolic tales.

Walker accepts that the subjects of racial representation and the legacy of slavery are difficult and unsettling. Though her unabashed appropriation of stereotypes may not make it obvious, her work in fact resists the idea of positive or negative representations of African American history. Walker's choice of Uncle Tom as the protagonist in this mural exemplifies its ambiguity. Stowe wrote the character of this long-suffering slave as a model of Christian virtue, but she also portrays him as childlike and submissive, which gives evidence of her own internalized racism.

Walker's rendering of Stowe's protagonists avoids the pitfalls of victimization and the illusions of racial reconciliation. In this mural, for example, Uncle Tom is seen on the far right

giving birth to a child as he raises his arms to the heavens in prayer. In this allegory of fatherhood, Walker manipulates her literary source to retell a story we thought we knew, thereby revealing the traps of representation.

CENSORSHIP?
NARRATIVE 4

Walker's charged imagery has generated intense debate. In July 1997, an older generation of African American artists embarked upon a letter-writing campaign in which they publicly asked colleagues to "spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African American artist, Kara Walker" and not to exhibit her work. Questioning the maturity and artistic merit of Walker's art, the campaign inspired accusations of censorship but also support. The debate over the appropriateness of displaying her work continued through letters and articles that appeared in various art journals and culminated with a public symposium "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke: A Harvard University Conference on Racist Imagery" in 1998.

The series of 66 watercolor drawings in this gallery, *Do You Like Creme in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?* (1997), started as a response to the controversy. In one, she writes "What you Want" followed by "Negative Images of White People Positive Image of Blacks." Another reads "The Final Solution: How to unfairly stereotype White People" and at the bottom of the page, she adds "for balance." These comments speak to a tension that plays a large part in Walker's work, the give and take between white society's discrimination against blacks and black prejudice against whites in response.

Kara Walker follows in the footsteps of a long line of artists who took it upon themselves to speak truth to power. Nineteenth-century caricaturist Honoré Daumier and postwar German Expressionist George Grosz, for example, also used forbidden images to satirize bourgeois society.**(fig. 5)** (Paintings by Grosz, Otto Dix, and others who used art to criticize abuses of power are on view in the Medtronic Gallery in the exhibition *Body Politics: Figurative Prints and Drawings from Schiele to de Kooning*.)

NEGRESS NOTES
NARRATIVE 5

"One of the things that's happened here with the work that I've done is that because it mimics narrative, and narrative is a kind of given when it comes to work produced by black women in this country, there's almost an expectation of something cohesive . . . a kind of Color Purple *scenario where things resolve in a certain way. A female heroine actualizes through a process of self-discovery and historical discovery and comes out from under her oppressors and maybe doesn't become a hero but is a hero for herself. And nothing ever comes of that in the pieces that I'm making."* [8]

In her series of drawings entitled *Negress Notes*, Walker addresses many of the same themes that appear in her large-scale paper silhouettes. In the latter, all of the figures are rendered "black," but her watercolor and gouache drawings fully disclose the race, authority, and status of her characters. Here again, the artist employs the fictional persona of the Negress: "The name had popped up a few times in school, and really I was just culling it from one source, which was *The Clansman* by Thomas Dixon, Jr. There is a reference to a 'tawny Negress: would she be the arbiter of our social life and our morals?' She's trouble, but she doesn't really do anything. She just sits there, though she is described all over the place. You know, the shifty eyes, the cunning mind, power hungry, dark . . ." [9]

In these and other works, the Negress is referred to as a type of heroine, a "Negress burdened by good intentions." Ultimately, she is also an "Emancipated Negress," a contradiction, a free soul with an enslaved soul, an allegory for the split identity posited by African American philosopher and writer W. E. B. DuBois as "double-consciousness." In his essay "Strivings of the Negro People" (1897), he explains the term as, "this sense

—— **FIG. 5** Honoré Daumier and Sulplice Guillamue Chevatier Gavarini 19th century lithograph 12 3/4 in. x 17 5/8 in. (32.39 cm x 44. 77 cm) Collection the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Mrs. Charles C. Bovey

of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

RETELLING HISTORY
NARRATIVE 6

Though history is often the backdrop for many of her stories, Walker doesn't take it at face value. Fact, fiction, and fantasy are intertwined. Through this scrambling of "truth," the artist is also suggesting that "official" history, particularly African American history, is just as much a construct as her own narratives. "The illusion is that it is about past events," she says, "simply about a particular point in history and nothing else. It's really part of the ruse that I tend to like to approach the complexities of my own life by distancing myself and finding a parallel in something that's prettier, more genteel, like a picture of the old South that's a stereotype." [10]

In the 1997 mural *Slavery! Slavery! Presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole' (sketches from Plantation Life)" See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause*, the artist reinvents Eastman Johnson's painting *Old Kentucky Home—Life in the South (Negro Life at the South)* (1859). **(fig. 6)** The title is infused with Walker's sense of humor, and the imagery explicitly quotes scenes from Johnson's pastoral painting, an ambiguous depiction of idleness and interracial interactions in which a white mistress enters the yard of the slave quarters and finds a man playing the banjo while a child dances with his mother. In Walker's version, this picturesque scene of afternoon leisure is rendered as a carnivalesque nightscape in which the subtext is unleashed and unsettling events take place by the light of a crescent moon.

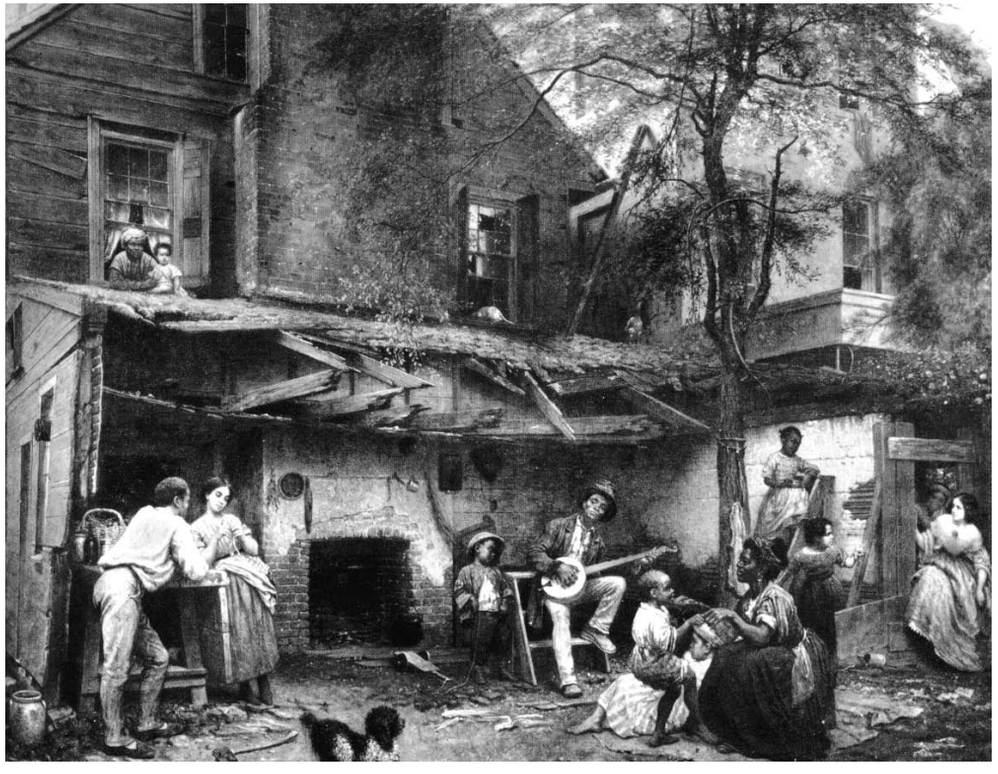


FIG. 6 Eastman Johnson *Old Kentucky Home—Life in the South* (*Negro Life at the South*) 1859 oil on canvas 36 x 45 1/4 in. (91.4 x 114.9 cm) The Robert L. Stuart Collection, on permanent loan from the New York Public Library, S-225; Collection New York Historical Society

ENDLESS CONUNDRUM
NARRATIVE 7

Historically, as European empires invaded and occupied large regions of Asia, Africa, and Oceania, Western thinkers characterized indigenous cultures as uncivilized, encountered by colonialists in a "state of grace," without written history. In the 19th century this fallacy informed the concept of "primitivism," the study of art made by people untouched by the industrial revolution.

At the beginning of the 20th century, modern artists such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Constantin Brancusi appropriated elements from native art forms as well as ritual objects and vernacular practices they considered "naïve" and "genuine." They sought to infuse their artwork with the aesthetic of non-Western art. This fascination with the "other" led to the notion of the "noble savage" championed by 18th-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and obviously to many grave misunderstandings about African art in particular.

In the 2001 mural *Endless Conundrum, an African Anonymous Adventuress*, Walker ventures back beyond the antebellum South into the colonial past of European trespassers and African natives. As the title indicates, the story is again "narrated" by a woman distinguished by her bravery and curiosity. Less explicit is the title's pun on Brancusi's jagged sculpture *Endless Column* (1938), a celebrated monument of modern art that was inspired by African forms. **(fig. 7)** Walker integrates Brancusi's zigzagged pillar throughout the composition as a decorative motif and in one instance as the source of libidinal pleasure.

Overall, the piece is a visual minefield inflected with exotic elements and unsentimental humor about the construction of the "primitive," particularly regarding convictions

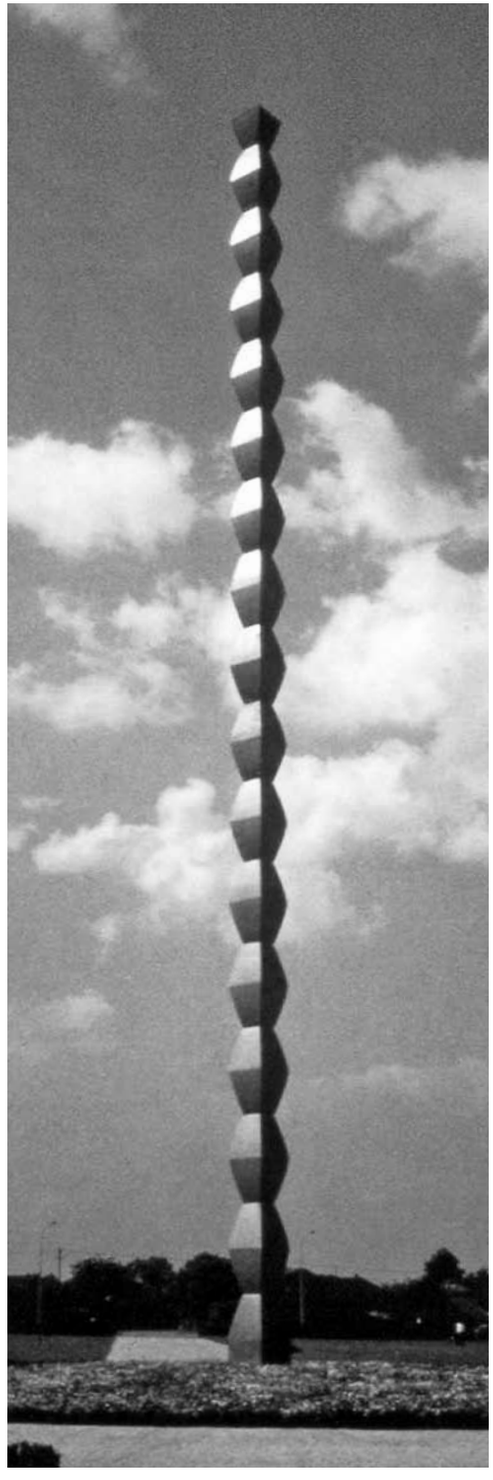


FIG. 7 Constantin Brancusi *Endless Column* 1938 Cast iron and steel 98 ft. (29.9 m) Târgu Jiu, Romania

—— **FIG. 8** Nail figure, *nkisi nkondi* before 1900 wood, nails and other iron elements, cowrie shells, porcelain, and resin 41 in. (104 cm) tall Collection Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland

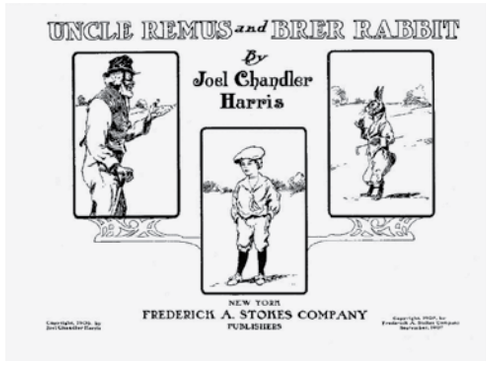
about the sexuality and spirituality of native cultures. On the bottom right-hand side of the tableau we see a male European artist using his chisel on what appears to be the statue of an African woman that has come to life. Their ambiguous embrace stages the "endless conundrum" alluded to in the title—the back and forth of love and hate, creation and destruction. At the top left, a female form resembling the ritualistic Congolese nail figures known as *nkisi nkondi* dances joyfully, though her back is pierced with nails, as she holds a dismembered limb in her hands. **(fig. 8)**

At the center top of the composition is a Josephine Baker–like rendition of a bare-breasted dancing Venus wearing the remains of a banana-leaf skirt. Baker, an American expatriot dancer and vocalist, came to represent a mythic image of erotic exoticism for Europeans in the 1920s. She debuted in France with La Revue Nègre, an all-black show that Cubist artist Fernand Léger helped bring to Paris. In its climax, Baker—naked save for a few brightly colored feathers—performed the "Dance of the Savages." In this mural, she sends bananas flying in the air while standing with one leg on the face of a European man and touching her exposed nipple.

AFRICAN-AMERICA
NARRATIVE 8

"I don't know how much I believe in redemptive stories, even though people want them and strive for them. They're satisfied with stories of triumph over evil, but then triumph is a dead end. Triumph never sits still. Life goes on. People forget and make mistakes. Heroes are not completely pure, and villains aren't purely evil. I'm interested in the continuity of conflict, the creation of racist narratives, or nationalist narratives, or whatever narratives people use to construct a group identity and to keep themselves whole—such activity has a darker side to it, since it allows people to lash out at whoever's not in the group. That's a contact thread that flummoxes me." [11]

Shot in black-and-white film and video, *8 Possible Beginnings: or, The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker* (2005) consists of eight grim fantasies that hypothesize the genesis of the black experience in America. Walker's first tale is set at sea as bodies are thrown off a slave ship in the middle passage. Labeled with loaded aphorisms for blackness, such as "AFRICAN," "AUTHENTIC," "BLACK," "ONE FAKER," and "A WANNABE," these bodies are swallowed by the proverbial "Motherland," only to be digested and reborn as King Cotton in the New World. Before the Civil War, Southern politicians used the phrase "King Cotton" to refer to the dominance of the Southern cotton-based economy. The robust male figure may therefore symbolize the cotton industry, its foundation on slaves as free labor, its importance in establishing America as a world economic power, and its responsibility in planting the seeds of violence and racism in this country.



—— **FIG. 9** Cover page of Joel Chandler Harris' book *Uncle Remus and B'rer Rabbit*, 1905

King Cotton's rebirth from excrement may also be an allusion to the Egyptian god Khepri, who pushed the sun through the sky during the day and through the underworld at night, similar to the way a scarab rolls a ball of dung. Egyptian myths played an important role in the 20th-century Pan-African movement and especially in Cheikh Anta Diop's controversial book *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (1974). In it the Senegalese anthropologist and archaeologist claimed that the ancient Egyptians were "Negroid" and that Egyptian myths in turn formed the basis of Western European civilization through their influence on ancient Greece. Diop hoped that his theories and archaeological tests would not only disprove the prevalent belief that Europeans brought civilization to Africa, but prove the opposite.

Walker's use of myths to question potentially racist assumptions is similar to Diop's strategy. Her video references instances when storytelling has been used to reinforce and redefine the ranking of people according to race. An example quoted by Walker in the last section of her video is Walt Disney's patronizing film *Song of the South* (1946), which is based on Joel Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings* (1881). **(fig. 9)** Although Harris' collection of stories is evidence of the African influence on American folklore, the character of Uncle Remus is another example of subtle racism, and neither the book nor the film acknowledge any history of racial oppression. Instead, they feature Uncle Remus telling cheerful stories about avoiding trouble and the trickster B'rer Rabbit's "laughing place."

Walker's body of work is a visual riddle that poses many questions as it unearths the malignant roots of the black experience in the United States. She is not in favor of a generalized anguish. She grants no accusatory voice to any of the characters, nor does she disguise the victim from the victimizer. Instead, she proposes hypotheses from which we might glean an explanation of the origin, extent, and depth of racism.

NOTES

——**1** MoMA Online Projects, "Conversations with Contemporary Artists," transcript of a conversation with Kara Walker, 1999, http://www.moma.org/onlineprojects/conversations/kw_f.html.

——**2** Ibid.

——**3** Kara Walker interview by Elizabeth Armstrong, in Richard Flood, et al., *no place (like home)*, exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997), 106.

——**4** Ibid.

——**5** Holland Cotter, "Selections Fall '94," *New York Times*, September 23, 1994, C35.

——**6** Jerry Saltz, "Kara Walker: Ill-Will and Desire," *Flash Art* 29, no. 191 (November/December 1996): 82–86.

——**7** MoMA Online Projects, conversation with Kara Walker.

——**8** Kara Walker interview by Susan Sollins, Program 5: Stories, *Art:21—Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 2, VHS and DVD (New York: PBS, 2003).

——**9** Kara Walker interview, *no place (like home)*, 106.

——**10** Kara Walker interview by Susan Sollins, *Art:21*.

——**11** David D'Arcy, "The Eye of the Storm," *Modern Painters* (April 2006): 59.