Research Article

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Prissy's Quittin' Time: The Black Camp Aesthetics of Kara Walker

Abstract: Through a close reading of Walker's first silhouette instalment—the audaciously titled Gone, *An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994)—this article examines how Walker utilises black camp to undermine both white supremacist and restrictive black uplift discourse. To be sure, the article is not an attempt to conflate these two, for the former is powerfully worse than the latter. However, it is necessary to explore how both discourses reinforce essentialist articulations of blackness and also to examine how black camp is a provocative analytic for their simultaneous disruption. Camp is usually understood as a queer-derived cultural practice that inflates identity to expose the constructed nature of gender. However, this article shows that black articulations of camp inflate identity to demonstrate the fiction of race as well.

Keywords: black studies, queer theory, visual studies

Visual artist Kara Walker has been shaking America's family tree to see what rotten fruit falls since the 1990s. Walker's large-scale silhouette depictions of slavery and colonial narratives provoke outrage, confusion, and encomiums in almost equal doses. This is in part because Walker's silhouettes—and more recently her sculpture work—are not the comforting or didactic historical dramas of her talented forbearers such as Jacob Lawrence and Aaron Douglass. Nor is her artwork a continuation of the useful but narrow sloganeering of the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Walker makes satirical, ambiguous, and angry post-black art that is uninterested in grand-narratives or in positing a heroic and innocent black subject. Rather, Walker makes use of the painful white supremacist minstrel caricatures popularised in the nineteenth century and places them in perverse, macabre, and often sexually-charged scenarios with white masters and mistresses. Themes from popular fiction and American folklore of the previous two centuries are bitingly reimagined to expose white supremacy's vicious staying power.

Through a close reading of Walker's first silhouette instalment—the audaciously titled *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994)—I will explain how Walker utilizes black camp to undermine both white supremacist and restrictive black uplift discourse. To be sure, it is not my intention to conflate these two, for the former is powerfully worse than the latter. However, it is necessary to explore how both discourses reinforce essentialist articulations of blackness and also to examine how black camp is a provocative analytic for their simultaneous disruption. Camp is usually understood as a queer-derived cultural practice that inflates identity to expose the constructed nature of gender. However, as I argue below, black articulations of camp inflate identity to demonstrate the fiction of race as well.

Before we move through Walker's first silhouette piece, I will first illuminate some of the key terms I will be using: queer, camp, and black camp. Queer is both a sexual identity and a disruption of convention informed by such an identity. To put it another way, queer not only encompasses a range of sexualities and gender identities that practice alternatives to the discursive violence of compulsory heterosexuality,

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but queer is also a point of departure for questioning orthodoxy more generally. In the words of Michael Warner, "the insistence on 'queer'—a term defined against 'normal' and generated precisely in the context of terror—has the effect of pointing out a wide field of normalization, rather than simple intolerance as a site of violence" (16). As such, queerness is certainly and inseparably rooted in the embodied experiences of gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, intersexed, and non-gender conforming people, but it is also a theoretical vehicle emerging from this embodiment to unsettle the predominance of normativity, understood as sites of intersections of violence. Walker's *Gone* is a response to the multitudinous violence of slavery, and it also prefers a queer mode of contestation rooted in, but not restricted by, sexual and gender orientation. Indeed, literary critic Arlene Keizer was the first to note that "though Walker is not gay, her work is profoundly queer, and a queer of color theory has produced a conceptual matrix that illuminates her artistic formation and practice" (1670). Accordingly, Walker's *Gone* can be read as a challenge to the tyranny of normativity as represented in black uplift. Thus, queer studies "disallows any positing of a proper subject of or object for the field by insisting that queer has no *fixed* political referent" (Warner, 16 emphasis mine).

Camp is an expression of queer identity, but it is not synonymous with it. To be sure, camp is a term that often avoids definitional fixity, but I understand camp as a queer social practice that utilises humour, theatricality, and incongruity to undermine hegemonic social categories. Camp became part of mainstream public discourse through Susan Sontag's influential 1964 essay "Notes on Camp." In the essay Sontag mistakenly characterises camp as "disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical" (54). Camp *is* political, and the late Sontag received strong criticism for this misrepresentation of camp. Indeed, Moe Meyers has argued that Sontag's influential essay was the beginning of a mainstreaming of camp that ignored the category's history within queer community. [1] To be fair, Sontag did identify the queer roots of camp while also, and importantly, refusing to essentialize queer identities. But Sontag failed to recognise the political heft lurking beneath the apparent jocularity of camp. Indeed, camp can have a playful relationship to the serious without disrespecting objects of camp fascination. [2]

Walker's *Gone* deploys these qualities of camp—theatricality, humour, incongruity—through what I term black camp to challenge white supremacist narratives of blackness through ironic performance of racist stereotypes. According to cultural critic Susan Gubar, "Racial camp makes a mockery of romantic nationalism, religious grandiosity and folk sentimentalism," and these are all defining characteristics of Walker's *Gone* (27). Gubar's development of what she calls racial camp is important, but in this article, I use the term black camp rather than racial camp to speak to the specificity of Walker's mordant thematic material and the work it does in relation to blackness. And although black uplift discourse—as represented in the respectability politics of the BAM and Afrocentricity (to name just two black social/political movements)—and white supremacy are in direct confrontation over the meaning of blackness, the two interpretive frameworks do strangely similar work. While black uplift discourse may rely on strategic essentialism,[3] nevertheless they are both invested in essentialist understandings of blackness. In other words, both theoretical narratives attempt to circumscribe the possibilities of blackness. Walker's use of black camp, on the other hand, fiercely resists the stifling politics of black uplift discourses while also challenging lethal white supremacist imaginaries. This is no easy feat, but camp's playful way of inflating identity to expose the artificial nature of categories often assumed to be stable and real is precisely how Walker responds to both the lingering violence of slavery and the violence of normativity represented in black uplift.

Understanding Walker's work as camp is not an attempt to uncritically appropriate the terms from LGBTQ practice and theory, but rather to demonstrate how blackness is inseparable from these identities and politics to begin with. Roderick Ferguson reminds us that blackness has always been narrated as queer

1 "Reclaiming the Discourse of Camp." *The Politics and Poetics of Camp,* edited by Moe Meyers, www.georgesclaudesguilbert.com/meyer.pdf Accessed July 2017. pp. 1-2

2 Babuscio, Jack. "Camp and the Gay Sensibility" *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality,* edited by David Bergman, Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, pp. 29

3 Gayatari Spivak coins the term strategic essentialism as the supposedly temporary tactic of marginalized groups to politically mobilize under the banner of shared and stable identity characteristics. Spivak later renounced the term because of its misuse by male nationalists suppression of female activists. Gayatri Spivak. Other Asias. Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, 2008

from a white heteronormative purview for a perceived failure to enact heteropatriarchal family structures.[4] Walker's art powerfully illustrates how white supremacist logics have historically understood black sexuality as fundamentally deviant. If blackness, within this racist perspective, is sexually aberrant, then blackness also has roots and access to camp aesthetics. Exploring the largely unexamined historical nexus of camp and the black tradition of signifying is beyond the scope of this article. However, signifying is the African American practice of sardonic repetition and revision of white cultural forms and is a big part of Walker's work.[5] Indeed, the antebellum slave practice of comically imitating the mannerisms of the white master class through acts like the cakewalk (slaves mocked the stylistic pretensions of their unwitting masters at plantation balls; the "best" performances were awarded cake) is a hoary example of the practice. But signifying's humorous use of incongruity, spectacle, and veiled critique illustrate the not-so-coincidental habits that also define queer survival strategies. Again, where these strategies historically coincide are for another article. However, performance studies scholar Daphne Brooks writes, "I propose that we read cakewalking as a form of camp, not to replicate an erasure or colonization of queer identity politics and critical discourse but to broaden Meyer's definition of camp's currency and to make visible camp's black genealogical roots" (273). Therefore, camp and queer may be extended to include persons and cultural productions that are maligned by mainstream culture for being what Fabio Cleto describes as "strange, slippery, and undecidable" (14). In other words, black expressions of camp can be opprobrious according to black uplift epistemologies for their errant indeterminacy. Specifically, *Gone's* sexual irresolution, though arguably part of signifying practices, along with its outré surrealism in respect to black iconography make it closer to camp (although not detached from signifying). Indeed, this makes black camp, and much of Walker's other art, anathema to a black uplift frame because it revels in an undecidability—often sexual— that doesn't *only* reproach white supremacist imaginaries.

The piece that launched Walker into art world notoriety, *Gone* is a bravura first work from the then-24-year-old artist and is an excellent example of black camp. The use of the 19th-century artistic innovation, the silhouette, in *Gone* and in much of her later work also signals Walker's fascination with marginalia, a theme that I will return to and discuss in greater detail. Camp is deeply interested in humorously centring the peripheral.[6] The fact that silhouettes have been dismissed as minor "feminine art" partially explains why Walker brings the marginal form to the centre. Art historian Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw writes, "Walker has stated on numerous occasions that silhouette cutting has historically been a weaker, more feminine form, one that might have been accessible to 19th-century African-American artists" (20). However, much of the artistic output of silhouettes in the 18th and 19th century was a way to render and memorialise romantic white middle-class identities. These connotations were not lost on Walker when she decided to employ the silhouette as her primary artistic medium. Of course, African slaves were excluded entirely from these representational practices at a time when phrenology and other forms of specious racial science were emerging to measure supposedly innate racial differences. And if silhouettes operated as a sort of "feminine" branding of white middle-class identities—a reductive yet expressive way of communicating bourgeois status—then Walker, through the silhouette, radically deconstructs the meanings of the medium. Walker mocks the gendered pretention of the silhouette by using the very same artistic technique to reveal the underside that the scenes of middle-class gentility were often predicated upon: the violent silencing of black bodies. And these were black bodies viewed as irreducibly and grotesquely different. Walker has stated, "The silhouette says a lot with very little information, but that's also what the stereotype does. So I saw the silhouette and the stereotype as linked" (qtd. in Alexander Alberro, "Kara Walker" 25-26). In this way, through direct and serious engagement with a form coded as substandard and thus marginal, Walker is working within the aesthetic and political guidelines of both signifying and camp. She is producing black camp through this peripheral medium.

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4 Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004 p.20

5 Henry Louis Gates argues this point in Bowles, Juliette. "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes" *International Review of African American Art* 14, no. 3 (1997)

6 Mark Booth makes this argument in "Uses of Camp" *Camp Grounds*. Edited by David Bergman, University of Massachusetts Press, 1993, pp. 63

Figure 1 . Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994). Cut paper on wall; 13 x 50 ft. (4 x 15.2 m). © Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

To be sure, Walker's *Gone* mocks the solemnities and pretensions of the old south in a darkly comic way that some black spectators may find objectionable, but Walker is very serious about the subject matter. Part of the dual critique of Walker's black camp is that she tweaks the pretensions of the politics of black respectability as much as she ridicules the pomposity of white supremacist logics both subtle and thuddingly obvious. Walker is employing a camp sensibility to do what Christopher Isherwood has described as "expressing what is basically serious . . . in terms of fun and artifice and elegance" (51). Perhaps fun is not the word that should be conjoined to Walker's art; however, there is complicated pleasure that *may* be derived from Walker's gallows humour. Of course, such "fun" does not diminish the profound social significance of Walker's treatment of slavery. I suggest Walker's use of camp (in some of her work) presents an overlooked and misunderstood point of access to the continuously significant consequences of American slavery. Indeed, it is worth repeating that her work does not trivialise the shame and horror of slavery, but rather offers a possibly new and admittedly controversial way of talking about slavery.

The connective tissue between the overlapping categories of camp, queer, and signifying present in Walker's work is that they are practices used by vulnerable populations that use humour, double coding, and performance to satirise normative practices and expectations of race, sexuality, and gender. As Jonathan Dollimore writes, "camp thereby negotiates some of the lived contradictions of subordination, simultaneously refashioning as a weapon of attack an oppressive identity inherited *as* subordination and hollowing out dominant formations responsible for that identity in the first instance" (224). This is precisely what Walker achieves through her black camp aesthetic practice. Walker caustically inhabits maliciously constructed raced and gendered identities to wield an attack on those that would mistake such caricatures as authentic. Indeed, her work more broadly is a scathing critique of the politics of authenticity from multiple sides. Thus, Walker's *Gone* is an object of black camp because it values racial, sexual, and gender indeterminacy and has a brassy and absurdist way of communicating the paradoxical power of the marginal.

The Problem of Black Uplift

Walker's *Gone* understandably ruffles the feathers of black uplift discourse. The events depicted in her installation presumably unfold under the moonlit tranquillity of woodlands near or on an antebellum southern plantation. At the far left are silhouettes of a young apparently white couple; a woman and a man, on the verge of a romantic kiss. They both look to be dressed in the fashionable clothing of 19th-century Southern American aristocrats. There is a pair of legs other than the woman's own underneath her dress. The man is wearing a sword that—possibly inadvertently, possibly intentionally—extends out to nearly poke a pre-pubescent black girl's bottom. The presumably black child that is in danger of being poked is crouched and holding a dead swan by its neck. She is showing the swan to a sitting black woman that appears to be disapprovingly gesticulating to the child. Behind the supine black woman's back is the severed head of a

man with Caucasian features. The woman appears to be sitting in a pool of the man's blood. Beyond this woman and the severed head are a young white boy and a young black girl on a hilltop. The young girl is on her knees performing oral sex on the young boy as he extends his hands to the sky toward a thin figure floating in the air. The figure is propelled by their wildly cartoonish inflated penis. On the ground and to the right, a thin black woman joyously lifts her leg to discharge two infants from her uterus. To the right of the woman giving birth is a woman, ostensibly black, with a handkerchief adorning her head. She is holding a broom and being carried by a man in formal attire; his head cannot be seen because it is buried underneath her skirt. Obviously, this is a very charged scene that, like many camp artefacts, is designed to provoke.

> Herman Gray is among the astute critics that have recognised the subversive parody that informs the kind of black cultural politics that is not specific to Walker. Gray writes:
> On the terrain of stereotypes . . . black expressive forms operate using the tactical maneuvers of irreverence and spectacle—inhabiting and combining the most shocking, outrageous, and carnivalesque. These forms and tactics through which they are deployed produce for many a dangerous cultural politics, one that teeters on the divide between the pleasures and fun of subversion and the real politics of control, regulation, and reproduction. The political and aesthetic burden of proof faced by black artists and culture workers who draw on such tactics is decided in the end on the basis of self-reflexivity, location, and level of engagement. The artist is neither neutral nor absent, but always present and engaged. Indeed, for many artists (and the audience) this politics of self-reflection and irony is part of the fun, the point, if you will. (5)

Gray is arguing that the tactics employed by Walker and by black artists using similar strategies are undergirded by the artists' hyper-awareness of the self as performative. Walker's art demonstrates a deep awareness of the historical misrepresentation of blackness and, moreover, is too pointedly bizarre and impudent for it to be misconstrued as a factual remembrance of antebellum culture. Indeed, Gray speaks of a black cultural politics interested in manipulating the racial stereotypes that emerged from this American historical period in irreverent and outlandish fashion, and indeed this is a strong element of the "fun" of camp.[7] And although Gray admits that such manipulation risks reinforcing hegemonic narratives of blackness, he argues that black post-modern artistic practice has reached a level of sophistication in which such an aesthetic style may be responsibly employed. However, this artistic and political practice should engender at least a modicum of anxiety in a world where a person's racial identity still affects everything from life chances to self-image. Painter and writer Robert Storr addresses this deeply felt concern and the way it relates to Walker's work. Storr quite sensitively outlines the risk of clumsy artists reinforcing white supremacy with such a strategy but argues that Walker's art manages to sidestep this problem.[8] In other words, Walker's decision to lampoon racist perceptions of black people through outlandish performance should be alarming; however, the elegant dexterity of Walker's engagement with such loaded material should be acknowledged. Indeed, Walker's work enables the spectator to recognise the lingering power of racist/racialist mythos in American life. Storr suggests a lesser artist interested in re-coding stereotypes would not be able to convey the dark comedy, terror, shame, and ambivalence of a shared past that reverberates into the post-Obama moment. However, this article suggests that Walker's work isn't *merely* parodic or satirical. The "carnivalesque" and the undermining of power relations through self-reflexivity and performance that Herman Gray observes in Walker's work are also part of the political progressiveness of camp. Fabio Cleto writes:

> It has in fact been possible to trace a convergence between the camp scene and the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, for the two share hierarchy inversion, mocking paradoxicality, sexual punning and innuendos, and—most significantly—a complex and multilayered power relationship between dominant and the subordinate (or deviant) and finally the whole problem of how far a "licensed" release can effectively be transgressive or subversive. Just like the carnivalesque scene, while inverting the principle of normality, camp invokes it, for camp presupposes the 'straight' sense that has to be crossed, twisted, queered. (32)

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7 Thomas Hess claimed that "camp exist in the smirk of the beholder." Hess, Thomas. "J'Accuse Marcel Duchamp," *Art News* 63, no, 10, 1965, p. 53.

8 Storr, Robert. "Spooked." *My Compliment, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love,* edited by Phillip Vergne, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 2007, p. 67

One dimension of Cleto's "straight" sense is the the refusal to acknowledge anti-blackness as a building block of the American project. Walker "crosses" this assumption through a re-examination of the "multilayered power relationship between dominant and the subordinate." The master/slave hierarchy created in antebellum America that continues to impact the present is the most prominent and consistent power relationship explored in Walker's work. Moreover, Walker *queers* the straight (black uplift) approach to challenging and exposing this lingering imbalance of power by excavating anti-black iconography to illustrate how much these supposedly buried caricatures still shape commonsense perceptions of black people, although black uplift discourse would rather conceal this iconography. Indeed, *Gone* and much of Walker's later oeuvre moves beyond mere parody and satire because of the highly stylized and absurdly artificial imagery; it's "carnivalesque." Indeed, this article emphasises the aspects of camp within Walker's *Gone* that are interested in the "mocking parodoxicality," "hierarchy inversion," and "sexual punning" that Cleto describes as strong elements of camp. However, I argue that in *Gone* such qualities should be viewed as a critique of the white supremacist and black uplift perspectives that would take Walker's imagery at face value and that this connects Walker to a longer genealogy of what I am calling black camp.

Here, it would be helpful to briefly rehearse black uplift rejection of Walker's art. Black uplift discourse represents the "straight" and favoured method within black studies of confronting questions of blackness. In relation to the work of Walker, the BAM legend Betye Saar, who is roughly thirty years Walker's senior, has been the most visible advocate of the black uplift artistic position, launching a letter-writing campaign aimed at stopping Walker's work from being exhibited in museums across America. Indeed, Saar's well-recorded letter writing campaign is understandable but participates in a BAM logic of respectability that sometimes reinforced the very codes of creative stricture that it claimed to be against.

The Black Arts Movement played a powerful and necessary role in challenging the supposed superiority of European American artistic standards. Indeed, in the words of art historian Lisa Gail Collins, "no other African American cultural movement has revolved so entirely around the purging, from the African American psyche, of racial self-hatred, the internalisation of anti-black ways of seeing and thinking. Clearly, the visual culture of the Black Arts Movement directly underscored the new ways of seeing" (8). However, "purging" carries disquieting meaning for those that question the value of purity, and perhaps even uncomfortable resonances with eugenicists and Social Darwinists' investments in racial purification in early 20th-century America. Certainly, BAM and the visual work that emerged from it necessarily affirmed the beauty of blackness, but the directives of critics and artists like Larry Neal and Betty Sayre to expel whiteness from the black psyche discount the heterogeneity and the enduring plurality of black ways of thinking.[9]

Much of the criticism from African-American artists and observers of Walker's ascendancy in the predominantly white art-world is based on the expectation that black representations need to be unambiguously positive. For example, artist Howardena Pindell edited a book *Kara Walker No, Kara Walker Yes* that collects some of the writing of Walker's African-American dissenters. In 2009 Pindell also organised a public event that allowed these critics to speak out. The tone of this event was mostly accusatory. Artist Theodore Harris accused Walker of portraying slaves as "enthusiastically submissive." Harris also denounced Walker's art for allegedly "mocking artists in the emergency cultural coalition who in an ironic twist made it possible for Kara Walker to exhibit her work in museums." Harris's estimation of Walker's work is that it is "pro-mammy art" and "a move to degrade the potency of revolutionary art." Journalist Gloria Dulan-Wilson claimed Walker has "deep psychological problems . . . and for all of us that have been traumatised we say to you sweetie seek professional help." Wilson is convinced of Walker's sickness and wonders "what can we do to help the sister get whole again? Because she is not whole." The logic of black uplift discourse informs these statements. Such logic contends that black artistic representations should be noble, heroic, revolutionary, and uplifting as part of a struggle against anti-black racism. This respectable blackness struggles against anti-black racism with the assortment of cultural tropes that have helped blackness achieve moral cogency and authority in the face of erasure and debasement. Moreover,

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9 Cornel West is an articulate advocate of this position. See "The New Cultural Politics of Difference." *The Cornel West Reader,* Basic Civitas Books, New York, 1999

black uplift aims to speak to an imagined collective that everywhere experiences such struggle in the same way. Indeed, the art that these critics demand is art that carefully selects the appropriate responses to that shared experience. Walker's critics demonstrate that there is a real investment in the idea that black people, with a few minor differences, are generally the same, and those that depart from a cultural politics that is not obviously about uplift, revolution, or religion need to be monitored, corrected, and even excluded. The late Stuart Hall called this the "first moment" of black cultural politics when, "the 'black experience,' as a singular unifying framework . . . became hegemonic over other ethnic/racial identities" (443). Hall was critiquing the dominance of a spurious monolithic blackness that pretends to speak for every person within the imagined community. However, Walker's artwork upends the authority of black cultural protectionists who either implicitly or explicitly defend the sustaining sameness of the so-called black experience. Walker's decision to make work that is intentionally disturbing and sometimes morally ambiguous is a decision to advance a project that shares the intellectual objective of what Hall called the "new" or "second moment" of black cultural politics. It is a moment that ushers in what Hall described as the end of the innocent and essential black subject. Hall writes:

> Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject, you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject. Now, that formulation may seem to threaten the collapse of an entire political world. Alternatively, it may be greeted with extraordinary relief at the passing away of what at one time seemed to be a necessary fiction. Namely, either that all black people are good or indeed that all black people are *the same* (444).

Thus, Walker's visual art is a reflection and continuation of this new cultural politics that is possible when we question binaries and grand narratives as the only legitimate way of articulating the complexities of being black.

Walker's very personal way of deconstructing what is arbitrarily designated "collective black experience" is perhaps not only a visual compliment to Hall's influential critical intervention but is also in line with the art and identity intervention known as post-black. The term post-black is meant to express an end to essentialist conceptions of blackness. Art critic Thelma Golden and visual artist Glenn Ligon coined the term in the 1990s and defined the ethos as, "characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness" (1). Some black cultural commentators have criticised post-black art as an evasion of blackness or a denial of anti-black racism. However, this view is a misrepresentation of post-blackness and obscures the queer dimension of post-black work. Walker's arguably post-black art is a response to the straight meanings of BAM's still influential uplift position, as it is profoundly interested in questions of blackness that resist normative expectations of how to talk about it. Scholar Derek Conrad Murray writes, "I want to emphasise the notion that post-black *queers* (as an operation) the black romanticism in African-American art (the hetero-patriarchal logics that subtend its value systems and aesthetics" (29). Walker's work may fall under the umbrella of "post-black", but additionally it may be considered black camp for its social departure from conventional—racist and romantic—conceptions of identity that promote unity and stability. According to Cleto, "camp and queer, in fact, share in their clandestine, substantial inauthenticity, and their unstable and elusive status, a common investment in 'hetero-doxia' and 'para- doxia' as puzzling, questioning deviations from (and of) the straightness of orthodoxy..." (16). In other words, *Gone's* gender and racial indeterminacy situate it as a striking example of black camp as it queers and confounds *any* straight definition of blackness.

The White Racist/Racial Imaginary

As a result of Walker's black camp approach, her art is generally perceived as out of sync with vindication aims. However, Toni Morrison's brilliant literary criticism *Playing in the Dark* may help unpack how Walkers'

work sardonically challenges the white racist imaginary. Morrison provides an extended discussion on the "Africanist presence" within early American literature. Indeed, Morrison interrogates the ways in which white American writers like Hawthorne, Melville, and Poe used blackness as a trope to articulate their fears, desires, and anxieties about the new world. Blackness was a rubric employed to demarcate the unknown from what was presumed to be knowable: the European immigrant self. However, there was a creeping fear that the stability of whiteness was illusive. Morrison writes, "the ways in which artists—and the societies that bred them—transferred internal conflicts to a "blank darkness" to conveniently bound and violently silenced black bodies, is a major theme in American literature" (38). In other words, the use of black bodies to represent complicated and potentially dangerous emotions and situations (a blank darkness) is a pronounced feature of not only early American literature but also the construction of white American identity. Morrison suggests it is through the debasement of black bodies that whiteness is corralled into stability.

Walker also recognises the imaginative dimension that is at play in constructions of blackness and how white supremacist perceptions utilise blackness to create immutable categories of racial distinction. Moreover, embodied blackness becomes a physical space for white racialists/racists to explore anti-social impulses because of the debased position of blackness within the imaginative framework. Morrison writes:

> Black slavery enriched the country's creative possibilities. For in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me. The result was a playground for the imagination. What rose up out of collective needs to allay internal fears and to rationalize external exploitation was an American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American. (38)

Morrison's insights are important to this discussion because the imaginative is exactly what Walker performs within a black camp aesthetic. Indeed, Walker's work coincides with Morrison's critique of the white imaginary representing as it does the site where white viewers continue to project their fears and desires. Specifically, Walker's characters burlesque white supremacist *imaginings* of black people. In other words, the logic that supports Walker's art is very similar to Morrison's exploration of the white racial imaginary. For instance, in public conversation Walker has stated some of the motives and intentions of her art:

> The question was how could I turn this feeling that I had become a *blank space* into which people projected their fantasies into something concrete? What about the possibility that I might reflect those fantasies back into the projector's unsuspecting eyes, and cause them to want to face the shame of (our) collective psyche? And how could I do it politely and seductively? Would it be possible to fill in the silences in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*? Would it be possible to give structure to the lives of the cardboard Nigger Wenches who populate pornographic racial fiction? The Tawny Negress of white supremacist lore? What would I project into the imagination of a coon-show Rastus or the "wicked" pickaninny Topsy? (3; emphasis added).

Walker discusses blackness in the white imaginative frame as a "blank space," while Morrison very similarly describes this kind of blackness as a "blank darkness." Walker's aim is not to reify these distortions, but to encourage conversation on the American psyche through the very difficult and painful re-articulations of blackness that happen when she assumes the identity of characters like "Nigger Wench." Walker's project, if it could be said to have a definable goal, is to confront American slavery and expose how it continues to shape contemporary understandings of blackness. By performing absurdist caricatures of blackness, caricatures that become anti-racist when examined through a black camp lens, Walker caustically undermines colour-blind political logic that studiously ignores the many racist meanings we still imbue to blackness.

Many of these themes come together quite brilliantly in Walker's first work, *Gone. Gone with the Wind*, the literature and film that Walker satirises via a black camp aesthetic needs no introduction to most; its status as a well-known American cultural object/phenomenon allows Walker to reintroduce and deflate southern plantation mythology. Philip Core described camp as "a lie which tells the truth," and Walker's *Gone* uses the lie of racist iconography to expose the truth of antebellum depravity (81). Indeed, the lie that is foremost in Walker's acerbic radar is the lie of southern romantic purity. In *Gone with the Wind,* this lie is

magnified for weepy melodramatic affect. The man and woman that begin the scene on the far left might be Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler from the novel. But more importantly, they are figures of white southern power, prestige, and glamour.

Initial criticisms of both the novel and film mostly avoided any sustained inquiry into the glorification of plantation culture. Literary critic Malcolm Cowley was one of the few dissenting voices that criticised *Gone with the Wind*'s apologia for racial slavery. Cowley writes, "*Gone with the Wind* is an encyclopedia of the plantation legend...false in part and silly in part and vicious in its general effect on southern life today" (211). On the other hand, critic Richard Harwell wrote, "If it does not fit the history of the Civil War as revisionists since her time have seen it, Margaret Mitchell's view does fit the view that was the Southern view for many years and itself has a validity as history. To put it another way, it is that great desideratum of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, an unbiased history of the war from the Southern point of view" (xvii). Moreover, Harwell doesn't include a critical African-American perspective of *Gone with the Wind* in his compilation of criticism on the text and the film. Such a glaring omission can only express his accord with Mitchell's project of plantation glorification and a very troubling disregard for the descendants of slaves. In this way, *Gone with the Wind* still lives in the American imaginary as a tragically beautiful statement on the loss of white Southern grandeur as it supposedly existed in antebellum America. Indeed, the myth of white southern majesty continues to circulate through the sweeping romantic images of the popular film version of the novel.

Walker's version of *Gone with the Wind* takes a decidedly campy and acerbic knife to this toxic American myth. The swooning southerners are adorned with the symbols of their wealth. The woman wears a billowing and fashionable dress. The man leaning in to kiss the young woman appears to be in a uniform that suggests he is in a position of military authority. Perhaps he is a high-ranking confederate officer off to command his troops to protect the southern way of life. The idyllic intimacy between the man and woman is thrown into harsh and satiric relief by the chaos unfolding right behind their backs. Of course, the enraptured couple remains oblivious to the surrounding degradation. It is their idealised romance that Walker uses to address the contiguous counter-universe that props up the couple's lifestyle and ability to 'act' in-love. The figure beneath the Southern Belle's dress *could* be a young slave child literally elevating his/her mistress so she may perform the romantic act. In other words, the child underneath the Belle's dress is the physical/psychological support on which the southern couple depends upon to enact their corrupt fantasy. The couple, in order to preserve their fantasy, choose to turn away from the exploitation that creates the psychological and material conditions for their desire and status. In this way, *Gone* reveals more about the construction of white American identity than the caricatured blackness that constitutes the remainder of the scene. In Walker's words, "whiteness is just as artificial a construct as blackness is" (3).

The Vagaries of Indeterminacy

During an interview that focused on *Gone*, Walker was asked how much of Mitchell's novel influenced her first silhouette. Walker talked about her preconceived notions about *Gone with the Wind* and how some of her suspicions about the novel's racism were confirmed after reading it. However, she also admitted something else:

> My expectation, as I said, was to go in and be sort of horrified and disgusted with representations of happy slaves or ignorant slaves. The Mammy figure is both soothsayer and does everything to please her white folks. And I went into my reading of the book with a clear eye towards inserting myself into the text somehow. And the distressing part was always being caught up in the voice of the heroine, Scarlet O'Hara. Now, I guess a lot of what I was wanting to do in my work, and what I have been doing, has been about the unexpected. You know, that unexpected situation of kind of wanting to be the heroine and yet wanting to kill the heroine at the same time. And, that kind of dilemma, that push and pull, is sort of the basis, the underlying turbulence that I bring to each of the pieces that I make (2).

Art critic Mark Reinhardt has suggested that the Southern Belle on the verge of kissing the soldier, "could just as well be the Negress named by Walker's title" (113). The southern belle's profile is ambiguous enough

to make this speculation. However, it is not necessary that the spectator be convinced that the southern belle is biracial because the camp inversions of the "historical romance" seen in the relationships between other figures in the tableaux still mock the supposed purity of the southern belle and her gentleman. However, if the belle *is* bi-racial, it gives that primary relationship and subject of Walker's sharp ridicule *unexpected* pathos. Indeed, if we entertain such a possibility, it would be an artistic gesture in the spirit of Cleto's reading of queer. What this means is that identity is seldom an either/or ontological certainty. Rather, a queer conception of identity leaves space for contradictory, ambiguous, and indeterminate expressions of self. The connection of this queerness to Walker's *Gone* may be illustrated through a quote from Harriet Jacob's slave narrative. Walker places these words from Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* on one of her text cards to comment on black women using their sexuality in extremely coercive conditions: "The influences of slavery had had the same effect on me that they had on other young girls; they had made me prematurely knowind, concerning the evil ways of the world. I knew what I did, and I did it with deliberate calculation" (290). In other words, Harriet Jacobs was a real-life historical subject that, under powerfully coercive conditions, consciously used her body to escape the more intolerable cruelties of slavery. The assumption that is being queered through Walker's representation of the belle is that she is *only* a victim. Specifically, Walker *may* be linking Harriet Jacob's reality with the Southern Belle/Negress of *Gone* to argue for the queer indeterminacy that also characterises post-black conceptions of identity.

The pre-pubescent black girl performing fellatio on the pre-pubescent white child is yet another provocative and initially startling scene from *Gone*; however, when viewed as a camp inversion of the meanings accorded to the couple at the beginning of the vignette one can see the satirical humour once the shock subsides. I suggested above that the Southern belle on the verge of a kiss with the Southern gentleman may be bi-racial. If we follow this conjecture, we might see the young children engaged in sex acts upon the hill as funhouse distortions of the polite southern romance that sets *Gone* in motion. The children offer a comically vulgar contrast to the regality of the older couple's moment of intimacy. In other words, the children could represent the older couple at some earlier stage in the tainted southern courtship. Is it a moment of innocent childhood sexuality or the incipient stage of the malevolence undergirding the adult sexual situation? Once again, resorting to binaries to understand Walker's work is inadequate because human complexity is seldom a matter of either/or. Black camp is a vehicle for post-black understandings of self that account for this complexity. In other words, Walker is bravely asserting there is no such thing as an "innocent" black or white subject, although Walker's *Gone* is always a powerful opprobrium of racial chattel slavery and the dysfunctional behaviours that emerge from its anti-black logics.

The black female figure raising her leg to give birth is probably *Gone*'s most disturbing camp performance of blackness. Here, Walker presents an image of a young, thin, visibly black woman cheerfully raising her leg to allow two babies to comically drop from her uterus. The charged image is meant to sardonically comment on the supposed extreme fertility of black slave women, while never losing sight of the dehumanising historical institution where the stereotype emerged. This particular image is also a sly reference to the character Prissy from both the novel and movie. Prissy was a slave subjected to a violent and humiliating rebuke from Scarlet O'Hara for supposedly lying about being a midwife. Of course, the novel and movie predictably obscure the many reasons why a slave may practice deception thereby shamelessly perpetuating the myth of black incompetence. In Walker's piece, Prissy's seeming inability to assist Scarlet with ushering in life is bitingly camped. If camp has been employed as a strategic manoeuvre that embraces stereotype to demystify assigned identity through humour, then Walker seems to be doing something remarkably similar to the figure of the birthing woman. Indeed, the figure is an intentionally ludicrous depiction of black femininity designed to caustically foreground a stereotype that has not yet vanished despite the minor cultural gains of the civil rights movement. In Walker's typically brazen fashion, she humorously unearths what has been politely but insincerely buried: the trope of subhuman black women procreating at the expense of the state. Of course, such a racist caricature disguises how slavery depended on the systemic rape of black women for the unpaid workforce that such sexual violence produced. However, for detractors like Sayre and Pindell, the satirical humour is too often misperceived as an earnest recreation of black identity. Philippe Vergne writes, "Walker's sin is her humor, which she uses to tear holes in our cognitive understanding of the world . . . she uses humor –against all catechisms, against the catechism

of her community—to undermine all expectations about her role as an African American female artist"
(24). To be sure, Walker's absurdist version of black parturition is an anti-racist mode of self-defence and
self-distancing from the malicious stereotype of black hyper-fertility. However, Walker's typically darkly
comic manner threatens the good taste of black uplift. Indeed, Walker employs humour, a strong feature of
camp, to display her contempt for all those that would fence her creative vision—both black and white—and
assume to *know* her. Esther Newton writes:

> Only by fully embracing the stigma itself can one neutralize the sting and make it laughable. Not all references to the
> stigma are campy, however. Only if it is pointed out as a joke is it camp, although there is no requirement that the jokes
> be gentle or friendly. A lot of camping is extremely hostile; it is almost always sarcastic. But its intent is humorous as well
> (107).

Walker very caustically and uncomfortably embraces the stigma in a clearly ironic way that becomes
savagely funny when viewing it as an example of camp.

Figure 2. Kara Walker, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young
Negress and Her Heart* (1994) [DETAIL]. Cut paper on wall; 13 x 50 ft. (4 x 15.2 m). © Sikkema & Jenkins Co.

The figure with the ridiculously enlarged penis propelling him—or her—through the air as if he/she were
a float is the other camping of blackness that deals directly with stereotyped black sexuality, however, the
image also explores the power of queer indeterminacy. Perhaps the gender indeterminacy of this figure is
the most traditionally queer element of Walker's camp vignette. The slender figure with hips suggesting
a female physiology also appears to be pregnant with the protruding phallus. Therefore, the androgyny of
the floating figure is a dual critique of both traditional southern/antebellum gender roles *and* the sexual
stereotypes affixed to black bodies. Accordingly, Judith Butler writes, "If the inner truth of gender is a
fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems
that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of
primary and stable identity" (363). Indeed, the gender ambiguity of the figure is part of Walker's general
effort to destabilise bourgeois southern social order through the theatrical undermining of the 'straight'
meaning that the couple at the far left of the vignette attempt to enact. In other words, Walker exacts revenge
on multiple oppressive hegemonic categories through the enigmatic gender identity of the floating figure
by aestheticising gender and sexual indeterminacy. As seen in the writing of Butler such a refashioning
of gender identity is in strong contradistinction to the way gender is frequently positioned as something
inherently stable within heteronormative culture.

Moreover, the giant penis attached to the floating figure camps white racialist imaginings of black
male sexuality. Again, Walker's use of "sexual punning and innuendo" along with the extreme artifice of
this representation connect her vignette to camp discourse. Frantz Fanon has written extensively about

the white racialist/racist imaginary in relationship to black sexuality.[10] Walker caustically takes aim at this stereotype. To be sure, the myth of the big black penis is inextricably tied to reconstruction era vilification of black men as unchecked sexual menaces to white womanhood. Indeed, white male sexual anxiety about black men was the political pretext for the horrifically violent disenfranchisement of black people in postbellum America. Despite the violent consequences of the myth of the big black penis, there is perhaps a crude flattery that some black men, pun intended, "hold onto" in an anti-black social context where Richard Pryor famously quipped, "shit you done took everything else mother fucker."[11] But as discussed above, the backhanded "compliment" extended to the criminalised yet desired black male body is interestingly not the case with the other caricature in *Gone*, the birthing black woman. There are no social prizes or psychic benefits attached to the stereotype of black female hyper-fertility. Such hyper-fertility, like that of the comically tumescent black penis, suggests a hyper-sexuality and all the carnal delights that the white gaze attaches to such sexuality. But in a patriarchal and sexist context where black women have been sexually victimized as a result of this dangerous misconception, it is even *more* physically and emotionally detrimental for black women to live with the image of hyper-sexuality (however this is not to say that black women can't have subversive fun with the stereotype as Walker seems to do). Because of the privileges of patriarchy and the ways that gender could sometimes work to the benefit of black men; the ostensible big black penis, though threatening to the white racist imaginary also enjoys a kind of contemptuous renown that black men would exercise to claim symbolic weight in a gendered world. Even so, the myth of black male hyper-sexuality *could* be used as capital, while the myth of black female sexuality is *often* a scourge in a patriarchal setting. Hence, the positioning of the black male figure with the grotesquely engorged penis *above* the grounded, comically birthing black woman underscores the constructed social distance between the two figures. This is not to suggest, however; that black women are restricted from camping racist assumptions about their body as a strategy for emotional and material survival as Walker illustrates. However, the key argument within racist/racialist conceptualisations of black sexuality is that black sexuality is animalistic, and a gross departure from the human. The sexual stereotypes affixed to black bodies, stereotypes that continue to circulate made it easier for antebellum whites to rationalise social and sexual exploitation of their property. However, Walker seems to be suggesting that there is also a complicated value within these sexual stereotypes; there is perhaps a queer indeterminacy. Walker is, of course, aware of the way stereotypes of black sexuality can be ambivalent and ambiguous sites of pleasure for black people who play out the discussed social/sexual roles.

Walker is without a doubt aware of the deeply contested site of stereotyped black sexuality. Indeed, I think that in her imagery in *Gone* and in her subsequent work, Walker pays excruciatingly close attention to the ambivalence inside of such performances. For what if the black female subject *is* sensual, seductive, and fecund? What if a specific black woman (*possibly* the Southern belle in *Gone* as Mark Reinhardt suggest) enjoys her body and enjoys some of the slippery, messy, power that comes from an extravagant performance of such sexuality? Although the birthing woman in *Gone* is an exceedingly outrageous (anti-racist) *stereotype of the stereotype* of black female sexuality, what if a particular black woman enjoys the complicated, contradictory, and tenuous power that comes from an extravagant performance of the constructed identity (Rihanna, Lil'Kim, Niki Minaj)? What of the black male that lacks sexual prowess or can't claim to possess huge genitalia? Does he live with a secret shame? What if he does live up to these expectations and performs such an identity? Walker seems to suggest in the world of desire these things matter even when we wish them not to and may vex even the most sophisticated students of sexual and racial politics. The question that some of Walker's art may aim to answer is "what does the desiring black subject do with the imagery if he or she takes pleasure *and* pain from them?" The answer could lie in black experimentation with camp as a theoretical tool that may alleviate at least some of the psychic burden of these stereotypes in a way that does not diminish the inherent pleasure of sexuality.

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10 See *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, New York, 1967 pp. 147-148
11 Pryor, Richard. *Live: In Concert*. Rhino, 1979

Rashidah Ismali-Abubakr is an example of an African American critic gingerly embracing a similar perspective. What begins as firm criticism of Walker evolves into a complex meditation on pleasure, pain, sexuality and blackness. Abubakr states,

> Kara Walker doesn't take responsibility for what happens on the other side of the canvas, nor does it move us in a humane way towards recognizing the humanity of all people [her art] insulates an image that is already imposed on all of us, black, white, Asian, Jewish...we all have these images deeply ingrained in our psyches. Where does she take it? She could challenge us but she adds to it the element of sex and she adds to it a psycho-sexual dimension that triggers sadomasochistic responses in us. Some people are aroused by that. I do not condemn it or condone it. That's just a reality. And she understands it and that is the power of art. If it is erotic, if its powerful, if its focused, it makes us feel.

Abubakr is not fully committed to her view that Walker is irresponsible. In fact, everything that Abubakr says after the accusation of irresponsibility seems to betray her critique of Walker. When Abukakr discusses the sexual complexities of Walker's work, it seems that Abubakr is in the process of trying to formulate a *stable* and *coherent* assessment of Walker's work. However, much of Walker's work is a deliberate undermining of these modernist categories. At least a portion of Walker's work, and *Gone* in particular seems to be suggesting that identity is queer in the post-modern sense that Cleto has discussed (performative, situational, multifaceted). The racial and situational indeterminacy of Walker's southern belle figure attests to this.

Moreover, Abubakr seems to understand that a potential result of art is that it can elicit feeling. However, she seems to perhaps unintentionally suggest that it is not a requirement that black art has to elicit unambiguously positive feeling. Abubakr seems to believe it is unfortunate black artists are held to a different standard than their white peers. Indeed, to expect all black art to conform to such a formula once again strips us of our complexity. It may be true that a respectable black artist would want to put such images to bed, but maybe Walker doesn't think such issues can rest since we all know the bed isn't only for sleeping. Nevertheless, one can't miss the angry, mocking tone of her caricatures. It's angry because Walker has recognised that her racial body was a blank space for other people's reductive fantasies and fears. In an interview, Walker admits, "I got interested in the ways that I almost wanted to aim to please... and fulfill these assumptions and associations with blackness. I became very submissive and subservient to myths about blackness, the [kind of] blackness that's exotic, animalistic, or savage; or noble and strong and forceful—worth putting on display, something grander than grand" (1). This culpability doesn't sacrifice the anger. They, in fact, comingle and complicate black humanity. Walker doesn't ignore the disease of white supremacy or the reality of black complicity. Indeed, she sarcastically highlights the continuing significance of race as it exists in our most private interactions. Walker brazenly examines the taboo and, what is more; refuses to shy away from the troubling and fascinating power of indeterminacy.

Black camp is the artistic vehicle that Walker uses to undermine the power of at least two kinds of discourses. They are not the same and one is more deleterious than the other, but both theoretical narratives attempt to circumscribe the possibilities of blackness and Walker's use of black camp fiercely resists the stifling politics of black uplift discourses while also challenging white supremacist imaginaries. The macabre, yet anti-racist humour of Walker's dual critique is most legible within a queer of colour critique that connects camp and signifying through black camp and illustrates how the techniques and qualities of both traditions are performative weapons that come into sharp focus to serve the vulnerable in ways that are undertheorized. Walker manages to bridge this gap in a startling way that will continue to dazzle fans and befuddle her critics.

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