

All Stories Are True: Visual Narrative and Revisionary History in the Artwork of Kara Walker

In the collection of essays titled *Dust Jackets for the Niggerati* (2013), Kevin Young's seminal article "Miss Pipi's Blue Tale" details Kara Walker's work with the American Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and abandoned Lands, the office that kept records of the displaced blacks after the American Civil War, documenting the violent offenses enacted by whites upon blacks at that time. Walker's exhibition *Bureau of Refugees* (2007), a series of silhouette collages in reds, greens, and blacks, draws from these historical accounts not only to call attention to the atrocities of white violence against black bodies, but also to reclaim and lend voice to a forgotten history. Young likens Walker's work in the exhibition to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, which took place only two years before the debut of *Bureau of Refugees*. According to Young, the Katrina evacuees are a re-embodiment of what it historically means to be a person of color, abandoned by its government and left to survive in a racially contentious national climate. Like the refugee freedmen of the Civil War, Katrina's evacuees are products of a nation that divides itself along lines of race and entitlement, favoring white privilege over black impoverishment. Young suggests that in the exhibition *Bureau of Refugees* Walker subverts this racial bias by reimagining national history and personal power: "What if the refugee, in other words, did not mean merely a fate filled with homelessness and ruined memory, but with future tense and possibility? What might it mean then, to be a refugee not from another country, but in one's very homeland?" (45).

These questions are posed by what Young calls the "refugee art" of Kara Walker. As displaced subjects, the characters in Walker's art take on a renewed sense of empowerment even while falling victim to and participating in acts of violence and humiliation. This paper seeks to explore issues of spectatorship and agency in the artwork of Kara Walker, taking into special consideration the critical essays of Kevin Young in the catalogue *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* (2007) and *Dust Jackets for the Niggerati* (2013) alongside a full-length study of the artist by Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw titled *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (2004). Both authors discuss the revisionary history of Walker's visual narratives yet formulate conclusions from two very different frames of

reference. While Young examines Walker's art from various cultural and historical perspectives, Shaw's reading takes into account the personal experiences that influence Walker's work.

Much of Walker's art takes the form of visual narrative, telling stories with images and words. The artist has said that the genre of narrative allows her room to blend fact with fiction, creating new ways to negotiate past experience and imagine the future.¹ Walker takes ownership of the characters in her work, claiming them as a product of her own imagination, and in doing so lends agency to herself as an artist in control of the force and direction of her narratives. In her own words, Walker explains:

For me they become characters the moment I start working with them. Because they become mine in a way. So that when I encounter the much contested African American tchotchkes and derogatory images, they don't have the power over me that they used to. . . . Being an artist in control of characters that represent social manipulations that blacks have undergone in this country at least, puts me in the position of being the controller or the puppet master of imaginary black people.²

It's interesting to note here that Walker uses the words "imaginary black people" to describe her characters. Doing so allows her to reimagine and revise the otherwise horrific history of discrimination and cruelty that occurred during and after the abolishment of slavery, gaining control over a past that appropriated individual agency and personal dignity.

In *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw argues that Walker's continued desire to return to themes of racism and sexism throughout her work stems from what Walker calls her "personal slave narrative" (19). This is a narrative of the artist's life that begins when Walker's family moved from California to the more racially divided Atlanta, Georgia. Shaw discusses the sense of isolation that Walker felt growing up in an environment where she was too assimilated into white culture to be accepted by her black peers, and too dark complected to be accepted into white social circles. Shaw asserts that for Walker, "the characters that fill her narrative are a way of overcoming the power that stereotypes and negative representations of African Americans have had in the artist's personal

¹ See Kevin Young, "Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarking, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker," *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. (Minneapolis, MN.: Walker Art Center, 2007).

² Kara Walker, quoted in Capp Street Project: Kara Walker, exhibition brochure, interview with the artist by Lawrence Rinder, 24 February 1999.

life” (19). By duplicating these characters in her artwork, Walker opens our eyes to the experience of black female disenfranchisement in the United States. Relying on the collective gaze of the audience, “she creates new characters, new clusters of fixations, with which to tap the guilt reservoirs that lie within her spectators” (19).

Shaw’s excavation of Walker’s personal narrative goes back to Stone Mountain (a suburb of Atlanta, where Walker resided as a teen) and its notoriety as the birthplace of the modern Ku Klux Klan in 1915. Shaw contends that Walker took on the role of spectator in a kind of southern gothic anti-romance, surrounded by the legacy of the Deep South and its heritage of racial segregation and white supremacy:

Walker viewed her life as though it were being led in a minstrel show, one that she had accidentally fallen into. She began seeing her racial identity as something that was lived and performed on a daily basis in a sort of “pageant” in which she was an unwilling participant. Her experience of this pageant which she has likened to continual reenactment of the Civil War era in the present day, became a metaphor for her contact with the unknown. In reflection of these teenage experiences, much of her art has been a search to discover exactly what her role might be within this unbidden drama. (12)

Walker’s search for self-invention is born of the experience of being looked at (and down upon) as black and female, yet she is able to find agency in the act of becoming a spectator in the drama of her own racial and sexual objectification. As spectator, Walker gains access to the (typically phallic) power of the gaze and its possible implications. According to Shaw, spectatorship allows Walker to transcend the boundaries of race and gender, “revealing the artist’s self-realization of her status as ‘other’ of the ‘other’ and one who dares to speak the unspeakable” (8).

It is important to note that Shaw’s discussion of “the unspeakable” intersects with the writings of author Toni Morrison, who also uses the term to describe the trauma of violence against blacks in the antebellum South. In the 1989 essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in Literature,” Morrison observes among authors of 19th Century slave narratives a tendency to exclude the unspeakable (or more abhorrent) details of slavery. Describing a forgetfulness that transcends racial division, Morrison compares the “silent omission” of black experience in U.S. historical narratives to what she calls a “national amnesia” surrounding slavery. This “will to forget” cuts across the color-line,

uniting the races in national oblivion. Indeed, Morrison argues that “through significant and underscored omissions [in slave narratives] . . . one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to a sense of Americanness.”³ However, this “Americanness” is predicated on the absence of black suffering from U.S. memory and historical narrative.

Much like Kara Walker’s aforementioned “imaginary black people,” the “fabricated Africanist presence” of Morrison’s understanding locates national identity as a fiction that depends on the otherness of race. Walker plays with this fiction in ways that simultaneously call attention to and subvert black suffering, revising national narratives to include the silent omissions of its forgotten history. In her book *Seeing the Unspeaking*, Shaw comments on how the unspeakable narratives of our national past are visually laid bare in Walker’s art: The “fictionalized, imagined, and rememored emotions of pain, anger, and humiliation over the abuse of their enslaved black female bodies are present as ghostly specters in the silhouette characters, as shadowy icons of death that have been resurrected to haunt to living” (47). Here, Shaw argues that Walker (re)locates the atrocities of slavery within our line of sight, forcing the audience to bear witness to the trauma of the past. In doing so, Shaw recalls Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) where the word “rememory” is used by the main character Sethe to describe memory’s ability to return us to the past, bringing it (and all its suffering) back to life.⁴

In “Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarking, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker,” Kevin Young also reflects on the nature of “rememory” and its relationship to violence in Walker’s art, stating that “the body’s reconstituting and radical dismemberment may be one way of getting to what Toni Morrison, in her novel *Beloved*, names “rememory” - for the morphing black body is a familiar trope not just for racists but also for black artists” (47). Young argues that the graphic nature of Walker’s art figures as a kind of historical reclamation, subverting racial and sexual violence by shifting the power of the gaze from master to slave:

³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*, 6.

⁴ See Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 88.

What has proved interesting over the years is the way in which the gaze of her visual art seems to shift, at first appearing to reflect a racist and radicalized view of violence and desire. Exploding pickaninnies, nursing mammies, and amputated Negroes, oh my! Yet as Walker's work has progressed, or as we've progressed in it, the figures on the walls of galleries have given us back some sense of the revenge of those amputated selves - they have taken up arms, as it were, and provided if not a vengeance against, then revelation about Massa's desire; and if not revelation, then at least a reveling in the polymorphous pleasure of it all.⁵

While Young agrees with Shaw regarding the subversion (or inversion) of spectatorship in Walker's work, he departs from Shaw in his estimation of Walker's artistic influences. Unlike Shaw, rather than looking to the personal to explain the revisionary history of Walker's art, Young firmly roots Walker's visual (and textual) narratives in historical fact and cultural politics. This can be seen, for instance, in his understanding of Walker's work as "refugee art," mapping the history of violence against post-Civil War slaves to that of the evacuees of Hurricane Katrina.⁶ It is also evident in Young's detailed tracing of Walker's silhouettes to the daguerreotypes and stereographic images popularized in the late 19th and early 20th century. Young contends that the racial "marking" evident in these photographs were an early predecessor to blackface, where "black subjects are often darkened, literally, by either the camera or makeup to ensure that no one misses their blackness (or mistakes them for white)."⁷ Young further argues that Walker's use of the black-cut silhouette is not, as Shaw maintains, a simple allusion to skin color to signify race, but is more importantly an act of marking her characters such that race becomes an historical hyperbole or blackface performance.

Young's estimation of Walker's art disengages from any conversation of the artist's personal life to focus mainly on the political implications of its racial and cultural history. Reading Kevin Young and Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw alongside one another, it becomes clear that while both authors reach the same conclusions about their subject, referencing Toni Morrison's concept of "rememory" to establish themes

⁵ Kevin Young, "Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarkings, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker," *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, 37.

⁶ See Kevin Young, "Miss Pipi's Blue Tale," *Dust Jackets for the Niggerati*, (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co. 2013).

⁷ Kevin Young, "Triangular Trade: Coloring, Remarkings, and Narrative in the Writings of Kara Walker," *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, 40.

of remembering and forgetting in Walker's work, they do so from very different perspectives. Both Young and Shaw share in the view that Walker subverts the roles of spectatorship and agency in her art, reworking narratives of slavery and the antebellum South to include and revivify the "unspoken" history of black experience within the personal and national body. However, Shaw chooses to concentrate Walker's "personal slave narrative," tracing Walker's artistic influences back to her childhood experiences growing up in the Deep South. Young, on the other hand, deconstructs Walker's artwork from a more overtly political and historical context, citing its "refugee" connections to the displaced black bodies of the Civil War, and more recently Hurricane Katrina. What is evident is that Kara Walker is not an artist that can easily be pinned down. Working across many different mediums and themes, her work eludes being pigeonholed by critics in the art community and beyond.

Fredric Jameson has argued that all narrative "must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community."⁸ With this in mind, the art of Kara Walker can be understood not only as a meditation on the destiny of a community that is steeped in racial denial and obfuscation, but also as a challenge to rewrite this destiny from a renewed perspective of agency and celebration. Walker's reclamation of untold history, both in fact and fiction, involves remembering the traumas of a black past that must be negotiated in the present. In the process of forgetting and remembering, the trauma of slavery is situated in her visual narratives as the site of personal and national repression as well as the site of revelation. To withhold these revelations would be to silence the identity of race and nation, like the 19th Century postwar refugees who were, as Toni Morrison writes in *Beloved*, "Silent, except for the social courtesies when they met one another, they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another" (53).

⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 70.

Works Cited

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Random, 1987.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

Shaw, Gwendolyn DuBois. *Seeing the Unspeaking: The Art of Kara Walker*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.

Walker, Kara. *Dustjackets for the Niggerati*. Joanna Ahlberg, ed. New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co, 2013.

Walker, Kara. *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 2007.