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Let's Talk: Stereotypes and Subjectification

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The hardest part of human existence is communicating. We are as bad at communicating with each other as we are with ourselves. By not taking the time to assess or examine our own thoughts and how we have formed them, we suffer from our misunderstandings and unwillingness to truly listen that inevitably allows our preconceived notions to prevail. What is so important about communication? It not only allows us to listen and understand it provides the ground to change our thoughts and prejudices. Kara Walker's floor-to-ceiling installation, consisting of cut-out silhouettes titled *African't* (1996) prompts conversation, but where to start in this discussion? Walker's masterpiece is loaded with ideas – stereotypes, misconceptions, and tropes of institutionalized racism - that we have discussed as a nation in order to change these issues that have plagued American culture since the beginning of slavery. Using conversation and communication we can break down the racial discourse that continues these negative and detrimental stereotypes. Walker's work addresses humanity and moral progress, her piece connects the past to the present and ultimately questions what kind of future we will create. Her intent is to effectively help American society address and reconcile our terrible past so that we may all be treated and treat each other fairly in the future. To see this piece is to confront within ourselves our dark thoughts and feelings about these stereotypes, to understand where they come from in order to change these fallacies.

In this paper, I am viewing *African't* as an instrument to open a nationwide discussion about slavery and its ramifications that have been squashed and ignored, the stereotypes presented in this piece have a dual purpose, to represent the harmful prejudices and to subject the viewer to their detrimental and internal biases. Walker uses stylized stereotypes of the past, referencing the African people who were brought to America during the early 17th century.¹ In using black cutout silhouettes, Walker conveys the severity of these prejudices imposed upon African-Americans and ultimately anyone of non-white skin.²

The imagery of *African't* is stunning and horrifying, and the work forces the viewer to recognize and dwell upon the images of the various forms of slavery of a people. These forms include the rape of women and of a culture, the extinguishment of the individual and the degradation of an entire people, casting upon them the primitive and savage stereotypes portrayed by the silhouettes. The piece itself is masterfully executed and displayed, encompassing and inevitably trapping the viewer in the content through the staging of the cut-outs. The work is at once startling and confrontational, presenting many stereotypes within the racial discourse that prevent the current black community from being seen as just people.³ At first these appear to be images of the past, but ever so slowly the viewer that these images speak true for today and continue to confront the problems placed upon black people who must grapple with them from birth. The vignettes each address different aspects of these stereotypes. Starting at the left side of the piece, a tiny goat-like child is prying apart nails from wooden floorboards with a

hammer, and the actions of this creature symbolize an upheaval of western civilization as it must assimilate, adjust and conform to slaves in the American culture. As the goat-like creature takes out the nails from the wood, they scatter under young women who are dancing. Elegant and playful, these two young women are dancing gracefully in colonial dresses. The taller of the two is dancing on her toes, avoiding the nails while the other is looking up and jumping over a child's body, signifying the trampling of innocence as the slave is made to conform to another's idea of beauty and purity while never achieving nor being allowed to achieve this idea.⁴ Next to them an older male house-slave lifts a young slave girl who reaches for a butterfly, one generation working to raise the other. Yet the man cannot lift the girl above him, as they both look up to something they cannot achieve, no matter how close. A tribal member has lit a palm tree with a monkey running up the tree on fire, their native land and culture lost and their homeland up in smoke. A mother and daughter plump up a son, the mother suckling his penis while the daughter puffs air into his bottom. The men must be strong but without male role models they are shaped by their mothers, sisters, and other women, another stereotype that persists today. A tribal woman dancing is both spitting and defecating as she moves, the endless and hard life of a slave with no rest. She is armless, powerless, as she defecates on a skull, her ancestors and deceased loved ones, she spits on a British Pith Hat, a representation of the beginning of the slave trade in Africa. Next to the dancer, food is roasting over a pit fire, the smoke resembling escaped souls whose only deliverance was their expiration. The food itself is shaped like a human, emulating the constant overworking until death. The ground shifts down as it leads to a sun shrouded by clouds above a naked slave woman picking cotton while being raped by her white master. This contradicting imagery presents the knowledge of this rape practice, in full view yet the clouds delineate the darkness of this act, the openness of it exhibits the powerlessness of those who are victims and witnesses. A young woman is squatting near them, holding a crescent shaped object. She sits on a half-dug grave, replacing the slave that has died. Above her, a little girl is running down a hill of more half-dug graves with bodies protruding from the grass, another crescent shaped object on these deceased bodies. The crescents are the mantle of struggle passed from one generation to another. The little girl on the graves has a balloon situated at her belly, the crescent objects and the balloon are also representations of the moon cycle, the waxing (generating), full moon (birth) and waning (death).⁵ However, even in death the slaves are not given proper respect or treatment, they are not buried fully or in a place where they can lie undisturbed, instead they are merely ground for the next generation to rest upon. At the top of the hill a woman with a flame close to her mouth shows her gnarled teeth, she is savage and fearsome yet tamed into wearing a colonial dress. These images impact the viewer, creating discomfort the longer one looks upon them. These racialized stereotypes all carry deeper meaning that have implications about our humanity. When first seen they make no apparent sense or seem to belong together but slowly they appear to have very specific purpose and intent. As the eyes move from left to right the vignettes appear more disturbing and violent, compelling the viewer to keep looking. The small goat creature at the far left of the piece signifies our animal and lower selves, the creature is a contradicting manifestation of sexual desire and civilization, it foreshadows the vignettes that follow. The cutouts of women and girls are fetishized caricatures that embody sexual pleasure as a form of power. This is apparent in the

raping of the cotton picker, even when the white slave owner enters the black world he has dominion over it. This is a powerful image, it speaks to with ability of white people to cross over to a black world but not vice versa for a black person.



Walker's choice in color is another crucial key to the slavery discourse. Choosing to use black cut outs and paste on a white wall tells the viewer of misplacement and displacement of black people in a white world. This metaphor also holds a dual purpose, to illustrate black people are not in a friendly environment, perpetuating a delusion about a whole people being out of place, being savage and lesser than.⁶ The second purpose is to represent "holes" in history, holes that are like shadows that haunt us.⁷ The color used also represents the misconception of good-versus-evil: black cut outs on a white wall also simulate the idea of black as darkness, evil, and negative whereas white is seen as pure, goodness and cleanliness. These opposing colors directly correlate with our own issues with race, instead of seeing people we instantly see their defining differences. Walker's use of black and white tells us her world is also black and white, shamelessly showing us her world that she inhabits. In her black and white world, the white man in this caricature connects the contemporary white male in the position of those who maintained colonization and the slave discourse. In this white world, the power rests with this group of people who ultimately have the power to change the discourse since they are knowingly and unknowingly supporting it.

By using these characteristics and positioning her characters in precarious and visually stunning positions, Walker shocks her audience to make viewers understand not only

what slaves were subjected to, but also how these stereotypes have persisted in American government and society. This uncomfortable awareness subjectifies the viewer to implicate them in the immoral actions of slavery.⁸ In a way, Walker is shaming the audience, however she does this only so the viewers confront their own internal biases. Her caricatures have no shame themselves, they defecate, spit, dance, run, and lift, and they all do what they must to continue to exist. The shame felt by the viewers is meant to be intentional, it places us in the position of the slave owner and as the witness to these actions. The tension created by these positions and juxtapositions reveal the awkward untruthfulness of the stereotypes portrayed. The immorality of her images exposes the ill-used logic behind these generalizations that were created with the intent to suppress and have dominion over “the other.”

These images all work within the slavery discourse and the continual reestablishing of stereotypes about African Americans in U.S. history, but particularly through fetishizing black women. The women portrayed are either naked or dressed in “white” clothing in order to tame and dominate their individuality. As described by Roderick A. Ferguson, Walker’s black figures project the “racialized, gendered, and sexualized” stereotypes layered particularly on black women throughout the centuries.⁹ The overt sexualization of black women, fetishizing them for their otherness and differences while also alienating and deliberately ousting for their blackness (thus savage nature), the cut-out figures reassert these negativities only to change them. By addressing these issues, Walker’s intent is to restart the fight for black feminism while digging deeper into how and why these implications are imposed on black people, most notably black women.¹⁰ Walker exposes the origins of these stereotypes, using black and white metaphorically to show the audience that the nature of these stereotypes has no truth or basis. She intends for the audience to confront these issues, these generalizations about black sexuality, race and gender that are placed continuously by society and thus only society at large can lift them. Although her fight is for black people, it cannot be fought without those who impose these ideas, knowingly and unknowingly. As the viewer is transported to their imagined plantation, they are forced to encounter the events and realities of black people during that time because U.S. history is written in such a way as to not reveal these atrocities to the extent that Walker does. Once the viewer is a part of these images, he cannot escape the truisms that they convey and he is then forced to confront his own internal biases.

The reluctance of the greater populations to converse in America’s dark past is why U.S. society is unable to extinguish these prejudices. Ferguson provides an explanation in his essay “A Special Place within the Order of Knowledge”

Whether the page is how we narrate history, identity, or community, the point is still the same: the holes and blanks represent those unspeakable things that haunt us, and we must never refer to any specific acts or events that account for the shadows that make up the unspeakable and its terrifying range. Naming and defining them means risking not only our claim on history and its promises of membership; it means forfeiting our claim on politics as well.¹¹

Our willingness to ignore the worst of our past in order to continue the white norm of American culture, is to deny what our culture is today; by not acknowledging the damage and violence of history, those who write history or are privileged by it risk their standing in it. In subjectifying the viewer, they are in a position to reevaluate the current culture, their place in it, and open the discussion for themselves in the very least. It is up to the viewer to interpret the work for themselves, to confront their internal biases and address the very real issues that still persist today.¹² The art piece acts as a pivotal educational construct, a “racial catalyst” that the viewer can use to radically change internal biases.

In conclusion, it is important to question, why should you, the reader, listen to me, the writer of this essay, a white woman who is speaking about something she is not a part of? However, I am a part of the problem of race in the United States because I perpetuate and represent the colonial discourse of the stereotypes it has created. As a white woman, I am a visual representation of “white privilege” and all that it implies. Growing up, my environment has pressed upon me the many stereotypes represented by Kara Walker’s cutouts, and they have shaped my thoughts and my intellectual development. It is up to me to dismantle them within myself, a struggle that I deal with daily when recognizing my own privilege and the results of that privilege. Without this privilege, those who try to cast light on the barrier placed upon them are told “we know your plight, we’ve heard it” or express that in due time, they will no longer have to suffer.

It was Martin Luther King Jr. himself who wrote in his letters from Birmingham that those who are silent to these problems are as guilty as those who fight to keep the status quo or to keep rights from others.¹³ According to Paul Hegarty, there is violence in our silence: “Silence is not the final truth - it is the place where truth is undone.”¹⁴ By staying quiet to the plight of others, we deepen their wounds and stop the process of healing and growth. Denying that we have internal biases denies that we are human, I am not asking you the reader to be perfect, I am asking you to think of what damaging thoughts do in the larger scheme of things. Silence is like an itch, we can only take it for so long, at what point do stereotypes become too much for civilization to bear? Battling stereotypes is to wrestle with our upbringing, yet we are constantly questioning what our parents have taught us, so why not include what society has impressed upon us? We must first start from within ourselves if we wish to create a truly equal society. I must fight for those who fight for themselves but whose words fall on closed ears or whose lives appear to be lesser than my own life. I must fight for women for I am one, and I must fight for humans because I am one first and foremost.

1. See Roderick A. Ferguson, “A Special Place Within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History,” *American Quarterly*, Vol 61, No. 1 (2000), 185-192.
2. Hazma Walker, “Kara Walker: Cut It Out,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, Vol 11, No. 1 (2009), 108-113.
3. *Ibid.*, 112.

4. Fa-ti Fan and Amy Tang, "Postmodern Repetitions: Parody, Trauma, and the Case of Kara Walker," *Differences*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2010), 142.
5. Marika Preziuso, "A Subtlety by Kara Walker: Teaching Vulnerable Art 1," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol 17, No. 3 (2016), 136-148.
6. Walker, "Kara Walker: Cut It Out," 187.
7. Ferguson, "A Special Place Within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History," 201.
8. *Ibid.*, 187.
9. *Ibid.*, 190.
10. Black feminism: the idea that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are all combine in the experience of being black and a woman.
11. Ferguson, "A Special Place Within the Order of Knowledge: The Art of Kara Walker and the Conventions of African American History," 186-7.
12. Charles R. Garoian, "Performing Pedagogy: Toward Art and Politics," (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).
13. Alton Hornsby, "Martin Luther King, Jr. 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail'," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol 71, No. 1 /4, (1986), 38-44.
14. Paul Hegarty, "End: Silence," *George Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist* (London: Sage, 2000), 158-160.