The work of Kara Walker plays a compelling role in the discussion of race because it displays for us the embodied realities of race and power. She lays bare the wounds of the soul without adopting a victim mentality. In her deconstruction of history, racial stereotypes, gender politics, and morality, Walker stirs our imagination. By infiltrating our imagination and generating new awareness, Walker restores full humanity and human agency to those who exploit others and those who are exploited. Walker reveals the soul wounds of both the perpetrators and victims of racial violence and disallows us from segregating people into monsters and innocent victims. By jarring the viewer and presenting silhouette stereotype figures in both abuser and victim roles, she obstructs any conceptual shortcut viewers might make to confirm these stereotypes. In this way, Walker reverses the engine of racism bred by slavery. Walker contradicts the underlying concept of racism; that the dualism of superiority and inferiority originates from external factors like skin color or country of origin. Walker demonstrates that the dualisms emerge from our own dark imagination and insidious desire to claim superiority even at the cost of another’s humanity. The work of Kara Walker fills in a gap left by Abraham Kuyper in his brief description of European superiority. Walker reveals that the real dualism in humanity is not between white and colored skin but between deception and truth and even between disbelief and faith.

I will support my assertion that Walker’s art catalyzes our imagination to restore humanity to the powerful and the disempowered, by looking at three aspects of Walker’s art.
First I will examine how Walker re-appropriates the silhouette art form. Second, I will explain how the content of Walker’s work, which often consists of exaggerated racist stereotypes and violence, universalizes and humanizes the discussion of racial identity and its impact on relationships. Third, I will discuss the context of Walker’s work, (that of a contemporary person attempting to recover and create her identity and instruct others in casting a new vision for human relationships), through a discussion of her most recent installation at the Domino Sugar Factory.

Kara Walker is an artist living and working in New York City. She was born in 1969 in Stockton, California. She studied painting and printmaking at the Atlanta College of Art, obtaining her B.A. in 1991. She completed her Masters in Fine Art Degree at the Rhode Island School of Design in 1994. She is most known for being the youngest person to receive the McArthur Genius award in 1997. Her art is influenced by personal experiences. When Walker was thirteen, her family moved to Stone Mountain, Georgia just outside of Atlanta. Stone Mountain is notable for being the birthplace of the Ku Klux Klan in 1915 and host to annual Klan rallies through the 1980’s. The transition was difficult for Walker. Walker’s father, who had been on the painting faculty at University of the Pacific, moved the family to take a position at Georgia State University. In Georgia, Walker observed her father’s diminished status in the community because of his skin color. Walker herself felt that African American children ostracized her because her California accent was deemed too white. At the same time, European American children shirked her because she was deemed too dark skinned. Walker describes taking on the role of an observer being led through a minstrel show and living out her racial identity in a pageant.¹ Walker’s early works evoke the disorienting feeling of observing bizarre and surreal scenes of racial stereotypes participating in violence.
The work in which Walker is most prolific is her creation of silhouettes. Traditionally, silhouettes were developed and used to create profile portraiture. Often, portraits are sought to convey and preserve their sitter’s likeness, values, and legacy. In Walker’s study of the history of relationships between white and colored races, she imagines herself inhabiting the thoughts and feelings of a 19th century African American woman. Walker explains that she chooses the medium of silhouette cutting because it is an art form that might have been accessible to a 19th century African American female artist. Her use of the silhouette to explore issues of race and racial identity can be further traced to John Casper Lavater, who popularized physiognomy as a science in the 18th century. He theorized that the silhouette could reveal a person’s character and racial attributes. Lavater began promoting the study of physiognomy as a science of morality and racial superiority. Darby English observes, “Physiognomy gave value to the [silhouette art] form because it could now be an art that could help people enter into historical legitimacy.”

Silhouette artists used blackness in a non-racial way, to represent what should be preserved and to shroud what is “unrepresentable.” In contrast, Walker’s silhouettes depict these unrepresentable parts that people would normally hide if they were trying to profile themselves as representatively moral or superior. Walker’s silhouettes are large-scale wall panoramas, portraying antebellum stereotypes of masters and slaves rather than specific individuals. Rather than posing as stable figures, these stereotype characters are cast in scenes of physical exploitation and violence among each other as well as with animals. Walker’s silhouettes convey the murkier desires and legacies that lurk in the shadows of a human profile. The silhouette demands the viewer’s imagination as it conveys much through scanty information. Walker observes that stereotypes similarly engage and limit the viewer’s imagination through abbreviated and incomplete information. Walker’s pedagogical design, seeks to understand and
raise awareness in her viewers of the subconscious narratives that inform the way we perceive and interact with each other.\textsuperscript{6}

Walker thus reinvests the formerly innocuous, utilitarian, straightforward, and “weak” medium of silhouette cutting with confrontation, unpredictability, and subversion. Walker challenges our visual assumptions, so that she can challenge our conceptual assumptions. Since silhouettes are all black, we can’t identify the character by skin color but by stereotyped
physiognomic traits or accouterments of class or gender. For example, in this profile we guess that these are upper class Europeans because of their hair, their clothes, and his sword. Behind him, we suppose, is a figure of a lower class person because of the coarser, squatter, stockier figure, the crouched animal like posture, and the bare feet. Furthermore, because these are antebellum images, we also suppose that this lower class figure might be a different race. When we recognize that we have further associations between social class and races, we realize how structural racism infiltrates our imagination and concepts. As Mark Reinhardt writes,

Walker does not treat the problem of racism as a matter of faulty information processing. The conception of racism implied by her work has more to do with how certain deeply rooted even institutionalized, cultural scripts are shaped by the most fundamental and affectively charged layers of the imagination.7

Walker deconstructs the process by which we determine a character’s race thereby deconstructing our assumptions of racial identity. Furthermore Walker deconstructs the portrait silhouette’s function of affirming and preserving social values and humanism. By portraying stereotypes rather than real individuals, and by portraying unstable action scenes rather than portraying a sitter, Walker’s silhouettes challenge and question our values. These silhouettes even challenge our humanity for our complicity in human exploitation. Walker’s silhouetted stereotypes convey that identity is not to be found in race, nor in reconstructed history, but in newly constructed narratives. For this reason, Walker dissects, examines, and alters historic images and the values they are meant to convey. These images include romantic antebellum figures, founding father figures, and black minstrel figures.
Here is an example of a minstrel image, an exaggeratedly corpulent mammie with kerchief on her head. The comedic element of this image lies in the viewer’s assumption that she ignorantly holds a child upside down. However, if you look again, you see that her facial features are distorted such that she seems to have a pig’s snout. Where the viewer was once laughing, the viewer is now horrified by what is occurring in front of our eyes. The figure is actually a monster dressed as a mammie, torturing the vulnerable child. Some viewers may read this image as sublimated vindictive retribution by an African American woman. However, this image conveys a more profound truth about humanity. Walker shows us that the stereotypes of mockery and denigration are actually rooted in fear of the other.
Here is another image of a founding father portrayed unflatteringly as exploiter, rather than a hero or protector.

Walker’s art has been the subject of controversy because of its content. Prominent black artists such as Betye Saar have protested against Walker’s images as damaging to the black psyche and abetting institutional racism. However, it is in her display of the human ability to categorize an “other” and to dehumanize that person that Walker’s content becomes a powerful vehicle for re-humanizing the discussion on reconciliation. In confronting the most debased identities that people can sink to or impose on others, Walker frees people to confess, repent, and heal from secrets, sins, and wounds and embrace new identities.

Walker’s silhouettes portray hybrid humans, minstrel racial types as well as romanticized antebellum or mythological images. The character types in her silhouettes imply slave and
master characters. Often these characters and their immediate surroundings appear genteel yet ominous. This next image is all about secrets.

In this image, Walker conveys the complex interplay of power and vulnerability in each character. In this otherwise genteel romantic image, there is the threat of violence. As the gentleman leans in to kiss the lady, behind him, his sword looking extra sharp, points to a naked, crouched and shoeless figure. To further add to the disorienting juxtapositions, the mistress is
ambiguously portrayed as vulnerable. Here the mistress balances precariously on tiptoe to meet the gentleman’s kiss, while behind her, someone hides under her skirt. This image conveys the vulnerability and complicity of both the mistress and the person hiding under her skirt. The vulnerability of her precarious stance implies the risk of his possible exposure. Alternatively, the other person under her skirt may serve as someone supporting her and providing stability, although there is a risk that she may be pushed over. Sometimes in Walker’s works, the slave is portrayed as a complicit party to the violence and violation.


Here the slave figure is clearly being exploited, tricked with a carrot and chased with a riding crop. However, she wears shoes, which implies she has agreed to some privileges. The rabbit with a gun implies a race, and a race arouses the competitive spirit. So we might conclude that she is not only running because a master compels her to, but also to pursue her desires (however distorted they may be).
Many of the racial stereotypes Walker chooses are dehumanizing and the violence portrayed is horrifying. Yet, in repossessing the stereotypes and reframing them in monstrous proportions or in monstrous stories, Walker forces us to confront them and examine our curiosity, attraction, and revulsion. Walker shows us how false and hollow these stereotypes are, and in many ways frees us from them. They are shown to be “larger than life” fiction. They don’t represent real individuals. Then by showing us the violence and mixing up the victims, she reminds us of our humanity.

Kara Walker, *Untitled (Hunting Scenes)*, 2001

These scenes become more than just a portrayal of psychic pain, an acknowledgement of injustices, or sublimated vengeance. By creating scenes, which deny any one stereotyped victim, no one is allowed a claim over another person or group; no one is more entitled to a superiority of brute strength or innocence. No one is condemned to an identity of victim or aggressor.

In many scenes, power is played out in the bodies of men and women.
This piece is horrifyingly evocative and ironic. In slavery, the masters owned the bodies and offspring of their slaves. This was especially poignant for women as their wombs, their children, and their breast milk all belonged to their owner. Many female slaves were deprived of their own children and forced to offer maternity to white children as wet nurses and mammies. As we look more at this piece, we puzzle that the mother appears larger and stronger than the kidnapper. The kidnapper’s step looks precarious, as if she might lose her shoe. Even more disconcerting, the baby is holding the sharp implement that was used to extract him from his mother. This suggests that he is complicit in damaging and depriving his mother. The mother cries out, her hair is in disarray and her dress flaps wildly, while the kidnapper composedly walks off and unflinchingly sucks on a pipe. Finally, it looks like there is an arm of another child in the mother’s womb waving to be lifted out or to bid his twin farewell.
The viewer is brought to experience many conflicting emotions and questions. Which figure is guilty? Which figure is more attractive? Which figure deserves compassion? Which figure will be the better caregiver and provide the child with a better future? Why do we value one kind of child-raising over another? Is anger at the child justifiable? Is the child a traitor or a victim who has been rescued? Who so carelessly gave the carving tool to the child? Is the removal of the child deserved, or is this an instance of manipulation, aggression, and assertion of rank and status?

The viewer wants to find someone to blame, yet as we examine which parts attract and repel us, we find all the figures both attractive and repulsive and at the same time utterly human. Walker has stimulated our imagination to elicit anger and compassion for all of them. Thus she reintroduces humanity into the world of stereotypes. Walker makes us aware of our desire to identify someone to blame, to find an easy answer and to assuage our own guilt or helplessness. She confronts our self-righteous indignation and disrupts the chain of assumptions and value judgments that build a racial stereotype.

Many of Walker’s early works depict sexual exploitation or sexual seduction played by both stereotypes. While sexual sadism was part of the history of slavery, Walker’s depictions of such “anti-reproductive” sex remind us that all humans, regardless of race, are guilty of things that lead to the demise rather than the flourishing of humanity.

In Spring 2014, Creative Time commissioned Kara Walker to do her first large-scale public project. It was located in the now retired Domino Sugar Factory on the waterfront of Williamsburg, Brooklyn. This is the title and introduction Walker gave her project:

At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker has confected:  
A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby
an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant”


The project consists of thirteen life size tchotchke boys (stereotyped cherubic child laborers made for decorative purposes) carrying baskets of fruit or body parts made from poured brown candy sugar.
Their procession leads you to the monumental sphinx 35 feet tall. The sphinx is made of carved polystyrene blocks and 30 tons of white sugar donated by Dominos. While a sphinx in ancient mythology is usually a hybrid of a woman or androgynous human and lion or eagle, Walker’s Sphinx is a hybrid of a black mammy and an over sexualized black woman. Walker further exaggerates various parts of her sphinx to stimulate our imagination and challenge our assumptions.

She makes the hands and breasts oversized, the shoulders extra narrow, and she truncates the back and legs to emphasize the extra large heart shaped rear end that encircles the vulva. The
cliff like proportions of the sphinx’s rear leads the viewer to anticipate a cave or entrance there. By playing with the assumptions of the viewer’s imagination, Walker adds to the riddle of the piece. The place of anticipated entry could be a birth canal or a tunnel to a tomb. This ambiguity begs the question of whether playing into a gender and racial stereotypes signals survival, or self-destruction. Furthermore, this image that is potentially beautiful or vulgar, is universalizing. We are all born from between a woman’s thighs. We are all birthed onto a mountain of social, cultural, and historical legacies that include imposed identities, stereotypes, exploitation, greed, lust, as well as love, comfort, desires, sacrifice, and the desire to refine. The sugar sphinx brings us back into the mythical and spiritual realm. Walker’s selection of a sphinx signals the presence of a riddle and mystery. How can this super-natural, super-powerful being sit so serenely as the brown children who serve her labor and break? What and who is she actually guarding? The sphinx’s finger makes a gesture that can be interpreted both as a gesture of defiance and as a gesture of fertility? Fertility conveys hope but why convey hope after this revelation of human cruelty and exploitation in the sugar industry? Walker ultimately asks whether we would sacrifice our comforts and self gratification, as evidenced by our greedy consumption of sugar, in order to protest and reform industrial and commercial processes that exploit communities and our environment.

In my own journey of researching Walker’s works along with the biographies and the history they allude to, I found myself growing discouraged and distressed that there were such cruel injustices and hatred of life in our history, that people gloried in cruelty, and that people were made to endure incredibly punishing existences because they were deemed inferior by those in power. I grew increasingly depressed doing this work, until I was reminded of Christ. Christ takes all the sufferings, cruelties, hatred, and repulsion of the world for all time onto
himself on the cross and vanquishes it all by dying and resurrecting. We are not damned to our own potential for cruelty or any legacy of racist lies because of Christ’s resurrection. In Christ we have a new narrative that empowers us to always question, study, and reform.

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2 Shaw, 20.


4 English, 152.


