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The question of visualizing narratives of slavery has been contested, with many believing addressing these narratives through stereotypes perpetuates racism. However, these critiques eliminate space for humanizing the lived experiences of enslaved people. In this paper, I address how Walker's *A Subtlety* uncovers the historical roots of many pervasive stereotypes that continue to affect African Americans in the present. Specifically, I acknowledge how economic motivations for slavery bolster and maintain racist notions. In Conclusion, Walker's *A Subtlety* works against historical erasure that prioritizes narratives of progress in place of acknowledging ongoing racial discrimination in the United States.

Refining Tastes

Kara Walker's *A subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* has raised many questions about acceptable portrayals and explorations of slavery. Walker herself billed the piece “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.¹” This introduction places the focus of her work on not only the lived experience of slavery but the economic and cultural demands that encouraged and continue to encourage exploitation of brown bodies to this day. While Walker places her work in the appropriate historical context of early America, she refuses to historicize the phenomenon by employing popularly recognizable stereotypes of contemporary African Americans. The main figure in the installation is the woman-sphinx dominates the central section of the factory. The figure is a huge woman posed as a sphinx and coated entirely in refined white sugar. The overwhelming presence of this monument is striking in the largely barren, cavernous space. The factory is also populated by thirteen molasses cast children which stand at the height of an average man. These sculptures only add to the materiality of the factory itself, which is naturally coated in sugar from over two-hundred years of production. This multiplicity of meaning extends the aim of the work from merely historical remembrance of slavery to a critical examination of the present racism and the manifestations of such racism in the U.S. *A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) forces the audience to confront their own perceptions of race and reveals the historical basis for many preconceptions of race. This confrontation of past and present racism works as a

¹ Harvard University, “Kara Walker | Sweet Talk || Radcliffe Institute,” Youtube Video, 1:29:16. Posted [December 2014].

political critique of the lack of real progress made both individually by singular viewers and broadly in the collective vision of society².

Walker combats the favoring of economic historicizations of slavery over the lived experiences of people by providing a modern visual representations as a counterpoint to the literary record created by white slave owners. The history of slavery has largely been conveyed to the present through personal and economic records of those who perpetuated systems of enslavement.³ There is a distinct lack of documentation of the lived experience of slavery because the illiteracy of slaves was enforced as a tool of subjugation. In the present this leaves a void in the human considerations of slavery, which A Subtlety calls to public attention through its monumentality and prominent place in the historical venue of the Domino Factory. Working through alternative materials, Walker visualizes narratives of slavery that defy hegemonic, white representations. Born from her disillusionment with the classical, patriarchal world of oil painting, Walker branched out into what she described as a second-class art forms⁴. Her most famous works are black and white silhouette scenes and a subtlety represents her shift into a more established form of fine art, sculpture. She uses this medium as a means of embracing the limitations she felt classical art had imposed on her as black and female artist. She captures moments that have been defined in the collective conception through stereotypes and faulty history, and reinscribes them as faithfully as possible to the true horrors of slavery to show audiences the histories they are infrequently taught.

² Nicholas Mirzoeff, "For Critical Visuality Studies" in *The Visual Culture Reader 3rd Edition*, Routledge (2013): 83.

³ Amy K. King, "Circling Back and Expanding Beyond: Theorizing Excess in Circum-Atlantic Contexts," *South: A Scholarly Journal* 48, no. 2 (2016): 214.

⁴ Harvard University. "Kara Walker | Sweet Talk || Radcliffe Institute." Youtube Video, 1:29:16. Posted [December 2014].

The demolition of the Domino Factory represents the destruction of the material history of slavery, Walker defies this legacy with references to the empire building of colonial powers which support current economic powers. *A Subtlety* finds particular emphasis in the location of an operational site of sugar refining for the past two-hundred years because it represents the longevity of inequality and exploitation that extend beyond the legal endings of slavery.⁵ Walker achieves the humanization of sugar refining industry by using human shapes to demonstrate the process. The exaggeratedly curvaceous lines of the sphinx-woman and children serve as a reminder of the people, largely enslaved or underpaid, whose labor produced the raw materials for this factory and more broadly the sugar we all consume. These soft lines in comparison to the harsh linear lines of the Domino factory demonstrate the harsh disregard of industry for the human effects of its progression. Walker explicitly references the continued commodification of people of color in the pursuit of material goods in her founding statement of the installation. Sugar refining was one of the earliest foundations of american capitalism and continues to function as a system of exploitation of workers. This legacy has roots in the empire building of the Eighteenth Century, which Walker symbolizes through the sphinx form of the central figure. This character has roots in the Egyptian empire and its later appropriation by Britain demonstrate the shift toward European global dominance.⁶ Musser suggests that the Sphinx is not agential figure, but rather a product of capitalist empire that forces anyone who seeks power, even over themselves, to achieve it through the white establishment.⁷ The title of the piece, *A Subtlety*, also

⁵ Marika Preziuso, "A subtlety by Kara Walker: teaching vulnerable art," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 17, no. 3 (2016): 138.

⁶ Ibid., 143

⁷ Amber Jamilla Musser, "Queering Sugar: Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, no. 1 (2016): 167.

alludes to sugar statues of European royalty that shared the same name.⁸ Walker utilizes this connection to draw parallels between the ruling classes in Europe and the planter class in the colonies who both built their wealth through exploitation. The materiality of sugar as a medium works to tie the historic to the phenomenon to the ongoing abuses of the sugar industry. While American colonizers used many British strategies for consolidating power, materials such as sugar, cotton and tobacco formed the foundation of economic conditions which allowed the U.S. to seek independence from Britain and build their own networks of exploitation. In the pursuit of independent empire building, the colonies conflated people and raw materials deeming both available for consumption in the name of capitalism.

Walker's installation acknowledges the economic incentives for the system of slavery, while humanizing the lived experiences of the enslaved. The 13 child statues surrounding the sugar sphinx represent the reproductive violence of slavery.⁹ The use of sugar as the material of the sphinx and children conflates the consumable nature of sugar with the slaveholders opinion of black bodies as expendable for the fulfillment of both labor and sexual demands.¹⁰ The children stand in the cavernous among the audience as a testament to the product of non-consensual relations many enslaved women had to endure. Molasses as the material forming the children instead of refined sugar suggests they are merely a byproduct of a larger process that prioritizes the production of finished goods. The primary sculpture, a woman with African features and identifiers, is an explicit representation of the sexualization of black women. Posed as a sphinx, her most exaggerated characteristics are those that mark her as African, her enlarged

⁸ Harvard University, "Kara Walker | Sweet Talk || Radcliffe Institute," Youtube Video, 1:29:16. Posted [December 2014].

⁹ Hamza Walker, "Kara Walker: Cut It Out," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 11, no. (2000): 111.

¹⁰ Treva B. Lindsey, and Jessica Marie Johnson, "Searching for Climax: Black Erotic Lives in Slavery and Freedom," *Meridians* 12, no. 2 (2014): 189.

lips and wide nose, and her sexual body parts, such as her breasts and her labia. This not only links blackness with hyper-sexuality, it reinforces these notions as something knowable through visuality¹¹. In explicitly demonstrating these common stereotypes of black sexuality, Walker forces the viewer to confront the existence and pervasive nature of institutionalized racism which allows these generalizations to appear natural, and to some even unremarkable. Although the sculpture is completely white because it is finished in refined sugar, the figure is still recognizable to the audience as of African descent. Their perception of the sphinx as a black woman despite her color demonstrates the construction of race as 'knowable' through stereotype¹². This forces the audience to confront their own racist conceptions of a black female body as inherently sexual and marks this as a history of racism still in progress.

The timeliness of this exhibit in the midst of the Ferguson protests against police brutality, as well as the 50 year anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act suggests the extent to which this racism extends beyond sexuality¹³. When people are viewed as sexual objects, it is not a difficult transition to the complete dehumanization of individuals. This is demonstrated through nothing better than the perverse reactions of some audience members. The evocative nature of Walker's installation encourages viewers to react viscerally. These reactions, whether positive or negative, are instrumental in revealing the internalized feelings of people relating to race as part of society's collective vision¹⁴. Forcing people to work through their initial feelings about the piece, Walker invites and even demands the exploration of viewer's preconceived notions. A

¹¹ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "For Critical Visuality Studies" in *The Visual Culture Reader 3rd Edition*. Routledge, 2013: 99.

¹² David Wall, "Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 82.

¹³ Laura K. Reeder, "Kara Walker: Subtlety as a Big Idea," *Art Education* 68, no. 1 (2015): 56.

¹⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "For Critical Visuality Studies" in *The Visual Culture Reader 3rd Edition*. Routledge, 2013: 94.

new depth is added to the work as something of a performance piece with Walker covertly filming some of visitor reactions. Here there is an accountability in looking. The, often white, gaze upon Walker's sculpture is returned by Walker herself in the form of digital record.

Although personal examination is one potential outcome, the work has also brought to the forefront a lack of regard for the historical oppression represented in this work. The prevalence of visitors taking sexualized or joking photos demonstrates both the lack of public knowledge about the experience of slavery or a lack of willingness to acknowledge this past which has allowed the continuation of fetishization and sexualization of black women. Here the violence of looking is realized by Walker as a continuous tool of subjugation.¹⁵ This collaboration between artist and viewer further demonstrates the bigotry that has clearly not disappeared from society since the visualization of black sexuality by colonial powers through cartoons, paintings, photographs, and writing.¹⁶ Many people are either unaware or unwilling to acknowledge the sexual abuse common to slavery. Not only were black women visualized as sexually available by colonizers, these ideas were enacted commonly in slavery through rape. This is represented in Walker's work through not only the exaggerated genitalia of the figure, but also through the presence of the children surrounding her, which are presumably hers. The children add a dimension of horror to the understanding of slavery, in which children were often forcibly created and often sold away from their mothers. The melting of the sugar children evokes an association to tears. This humanizes the feeling of the enslaved and acknowledges their pain.

¹⁵ David Wall, "Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker," *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 89.

¹⁶ Paul Landau, "Empires of the Visual: Photography and Colonial Administration in Africa," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*. UC Press, 2002: 113.

Walker described both the space and the figures as “weeping the substance,” which alludes to the human cost for the production of this luxury.¹⁷

Walker herself is a subject of ideas of progress as a successful black female artist. She has received the MacArthur Fellowship, commonly referred to as the “Genius Grant” for her silhouette work.¹⁸ The use of Kara walker as a benchmark of progress not only essentializes ideas of racial equality confines it to the microcosm of the art world. Even among her contemporaries, the acceptability of her depictions of slavery are questioned. Criticism of her work has come largely from fellow black female artists who argue that Walker’s success is predicated on perpetuating stereotype, thereby providing white audiences with images they find comfortable and familiar. Betye Saar in particular has been a vocal opponent of Walker’s work, which she believes promotes black female sexuality as spectacle. This critique raises questions about the gatekeeping of representation.¹⁹ Must Kara Walker be the spokesperson for black female sexuality because that is her focus and her work is successful? Wickham addresses the essentializing nature of limiting Walker’s work to the realm of identity politics.²⁰ She argues that Walker’s work defies the binary of good or bad representation and that the visceral discomfort the work engenders in audiences serves her purpose by transgressing the established norms of stereotypes. The grotesque nature of much of Walker’s work disrupts passive, comfortable viewing and thereby forces audiences to confront the implications of their gaze. Other scholars suggest that Walker’s work is perhaps so heavily criticised because it examines more of an

¹⁷ Art21. “Kara Walker: ‘A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby’ | Art21 ‘Exclusive.’” Youtube Video, 09:37. Posted [May 2014].

¹⁸ Laura K. Reeder, “Kara Walker: Subtlety as a Big Idea,” *Art Education* 68, no. 1 (2015): 52.

¹⁹ Phoebe Wolfskill, “Old and New Negroes, Continued: Betye Saar and Kara Walker,” In *Archibald Motley Jr. and Racial Reinvention: The Old Negro in New Negro Art*, 2017:164.

²⁰ Kim Wickham, “I Undo You, Master”: Uncomfortable Encounters in the Work of Kara Walker,” *The Comparatist* 39 (2015): 347.

interplay between black and white experiences, rather than a straightforward correction of black misrepresentation.

Kara Walker's examination of the past and the aestheticization of colonial history confronts the passive, assumptive knowledge of the audience and forces the viewer to consider their own role in the creation of a slavery narrative that does not reflect the truth. This confrontation is also applicable to the current social environment in which racism is still prevalent and traces these notions to their colonial roots. Walker states that her work is not reflective of history, but rather "consumed" by it.²¹ In her statement and her art Walker demonstrates the inseparability of the past from present conditions. She evidences this with visual works that bridge space and time to bring the lived experiences of people to the forefront.

²¹ Harvard University, "Kara Walker | Sweet Talk || Radcliffe Institute," Youtube Video, 1:29:16. Posted [December 2014].

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