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Refiguring History:
The Works of Faith Ringgold and Kara Walker

by

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Method

In this thesis, I seek to investigate various elements that the works of Faith Ringgold (b. 1930) and Kara Walker (b. 1969) have in common as well as explore the differences. My method is to begin with an examination of the work of Ringgold on its own and follow with an analysis of the work of Walker. While dealing with Walker, I continue an examination of Ringgold so that the work of both artists and the connections and differences between the two become clearer.

Introduction

This thesis compares the works of Ringgold and Walker through an examination of their use of appropriation and narrative, as well as the effect of the pictorial choices, through which they challenge canonical understandings of medium and genre while addressing issues of gender and race. The fact that these artists create works that both seem to have nothing in common aesthetically but that nonetheless share certain strategies and goals provides the opportunity for a more thorough investigation. These similarities have been remarked upon, but not explored in depth. For instance, Dan Cameron explains:

Kara Walker’s cut-paper silhouettes depicting elaborate fantasies of interracial violence and debauchery, which at first glance might seem aesthetic opposites to Ringgold’s story quilts, share the goal of reconstructing the narrative of history from the perspective of someone who is clearly dissatisfied with the officially sanctioned versions.¹

Ringgold and Walker both challenge and evaluate accepted models of history, creating images that critique proscribed ideas and present new possibilities for future dialogue in discussions of race and gender inequalities. Moira Roth and Yolanda Lopez categorize

Ringgold's female characters as women who "speak boldly for themselves, evoking (and creating anew) female histories, yearnings, and multilayered identities." It is, in fact, exactly what Ringgold herself and Walker accomplish in their works. Walker's work, much like Ringgold's, seeks to ask questions which challenge historical and current gender and racial constructs and question new ways of examining these frameworks.

Ringgold and Walker create a revised history by appropriating traditional material and historical narrative, and reworking it in humorous and violent ways in order to rewrite and revise a tale told incorrectly one too many times.

Faith Ringgold: Background

Ringgold has challenged issues of gender and race through various types of depictions and techniques, during a career that has spanned decades that saw the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, and many other significant events in United States history. Ringgold was educated at the City College of New York in Harlem and it was here that her involvement in the art world began. Simultaneously, Ringgold came to maturity in an art world which has gone through dramatic changes in the past few decades, including the onset of the feminist art movement, the black art movement and the concept of the post-black. Racial and gender injustice has remained an important

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3 Thelma Golden and Glen Ligon define post-black in the exhibition Freestyle as: "It [post-black] was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as "black" artists, although their work was steeped, in fact, deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness." It is not my project here to deal with the changing definitions of post-black art. For more information, see: Thelma Golden, "Post", in Freestyle, (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001), 14.
theme in her mature work, as have the inequalities in the canon of art history, inequalities of both gender and race.⁴

Ringgold began her career during the tumultuous era of the 1960s and 1970s, a time in which established ideas, artistic technique, and the overall gender and racial hegemony of the Western art world were being reevaluated. Art was seen as having a role in the political struggle for social inequality and economic opportunities.⁵ The transformations in the civil rights movement from peaceful protest to more confrontational tactics was mirrored in African-American art, leading to the employment of what Patton calls “more abrasive” and “challenging” subject matter.⁶ Ringgold’s work challenges gender and race and her role as an artist challenging traditional views of work is described by Frieda High W. Tesfagiorgis. She states:

within the context of the dominant art world, which separates folk art from fine art, Ringgold’s work is interpreted as revolutionary, rebellious, political feminist production because it defies form, meaning, technique, aesthetics, and function that are encoded in European-derived canons.⁷

Ringgold’s early work focuses on her interest in representing “real” black people, mainly inspired by the lack of recognition of African-American artists and representations of blacks in her formal art education. The American People Series is a pertinent example of such work.

Faith Ringgold: Early Works

⁶Ibid, 193.
⁷Frieda High W. Tesfagiorgis, “In Search of A Discourse and Critique/s that Center the Art of Black Women Artists,” in Black Feminist Cultural Criticism, 150.
Before examining Ringgold’s use of strategies and techniques in her later work, as we will later when looking at The French Collection, it is important to discuss her early choices in order to establish an understanding of how her work has changed and what influences these choices have had on the effectiveness of her critique.

**The American People Series #20: Die**

The last work in The American People Series, which is entitled Die (Figure 1), is an example of the use of violent imagery to make a commentary on racial violence. Ringgold has created a striking image, combining vivid colors and sharp contrast of line to portray a scene of frantic men, women, and children. Their facial expressions depict fear, pain and horror as they tumble into a confusing milieu of fleeing and fighting bodies and blood. The scene is undoubtedly one of violence: there are guns, blood, and people dying. Ringgold has created a charged representation of the time of the Civil Rights Movement through her commentary on the violence of racism, both in thought and action.

Ringgold states: “I felt called upon to create my own vision of the black experience we were witnessing.”8 Not only does Ringgold depict a physically violent scene, she creates an image weighted with emotion. In Die, racist thought and violence affects everyone; be they man, woman and child, white or black. There are no distinctions nor is there anyone in control of the situation. Everyone is afraid and everyone is tormented.

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Completed in 1967, *Die* is very much an exploration of the consequences of racial violence. It is defined by Lopez and Roth as a statement representing both the Civil Rights Movement and the beginnings of black power. During this period, Ringgold’s work is often referred to as “protest art,” a term that Ringgold finds lacking. Ringgold explains:

> Often older artists wrote my paintings off as “protest” art, sometimes even dismissing them as merely history painting or social realism... Art for them was an abstraction, a fragment of an idea that nobody could understand, much less condemn. However, I had called my art “Super Realism” because I wanted my audience to make a personal connection with its images and the message.

By defining her art as “super realism,” I believe Ringgold makes a statement that her subject matter is not only real, but it is so real that it cannot be ignored or written off because it is unpleasant or differs from the norm. She gives heightened credence to the violence of her image by stating its realness. “Super real” implies the severity of the image in terms of its social consequences. Whether subconsciously or consciously, Ringgold sets the stage for her later explorations into retelling and reexamining race and gender roles in history. Her works are valid, “super real,” interpretations of social issues. While they protest social injustice, they go a step farther and offer a new perspective.

*The Slave Rape Series*

*The Slave Rape Series* (Figures 2-4), completed from 1973-1993, is one of Ringgold’s first fabric projects. These works exemplify early explorations into techniques and strategies which Ringgold would use throughout her career, namely narrative, work in a series, use of fabric, and appropriation. The images show African

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9 Faith Ringgold, *We Flew Over the Bridge*, 147.
slave women as tiny naked figures set against African landscapes, or as large depictions of the female body in positions of defense. The figure, regardless of size, is captured in an image bound by a thick fabric border. In her autobiography, Ringgold describes the figures as large, close-up images of idealized African-American women struggling against capture and enslavement.11

Body and Narrative

As an African-American woman, Ringgold visually explores the history of slavery and more specifically, the history of the African-American female body. The nakedness of her figures, combined with the fear, shock, and determination on their faces, as well as the weapons held by the women, reference the sexual assault and rape of slave women, a well-documented and common occurrence during the era of slavery. While it appears that the sexual assault of female slaves is the theme of the image, Ringgold adds another level to the meaning of the works, describing the images as “a narrative in which I placed myself in the time of my female ancestors, those brave African women who survived the horror of being uprooted and carried off to America.”12 Here Ringgold introduces the concept of herself as a character in her narrative. This insertion of an alter-ego is a concept that becomes an integral part of many of her later works. Based on Ringgold’s explanation, the focus is not solely on the rape of the body, as can be assumed from the title, but the forced relocation of African women. Ringgold’s description makes clear that the woman is no longer just wielding an axe against a white slave master, but is

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11 Ibid, 197.
12 Ibid.
fighting to stay in her homeland. Ringgold shows the body as a site of rape, dislocation and violence, as well as a means with which to narrate such events.

Material

Multi-layered meanings of her work become common as Ringgold’s art develops and she continues to challenge issues of race and gender. While the image itself provokes racial and gender critique, the chosen material, fabric, adds yet another level. African-American quilting is a practice with an extensive history. Quilting is family-based and techniques and patterns are passed from generation to generation. In addition to being items for practical use, quilts were a way for African-Americans to tell their stories. These traditions continue today, especially in many parts of the South and provide insight into the folklore traditions and histories of many African-American families.13

In the Slave Rape Series, Ringgold painted on unstretched canvases and combined them with pieced fabric borders. These initial experiments lead into her later works on fabric and with quilting. The importance of quilting and collaboration becomes an important theme in Ringgold’s work, especially her story-quilts. The Slave Rape Series is one of many collaborations between Ringgold and her mother, Willi Posey, a fashion designer. The use of fabric is a notable shift in material from Ringgold’s earlier painting, seen in Die. As her work evolves, Ringgold begins using quilts to express her experience, a trend ultimately leading to the concept of the story-quilt.

Appropriation of Material (And History)

Thus, as early as *The Slave Rape Series*, Ringgold was tapping into the traditional African-American tradition of quilting. The use of quilts, especially as a form of collaboration with her mother, also references the importance of quilting as a female and maternal lineage tradition. The adaptation of quilts into an aspect of her social commentary itself is an effective method of critique. Patricia Mainardi defines quilts within the realm of needlework arts, explaining this area as “a universal female art, transcending race, class, and national borders.” Mainardi emphasizes the quilt as primarily a female art form: the racial, national, and class differences in technique and tradition secondary to the essential femaleness of needlework. By reusing this material, Ringgold explores this idea, as well as the cultural traditions of her own African American heritage. She chooses to appropriate a positive historical tradition as part of her narrative. It is not just the subject matter that challenges gender and race constructs; it is the conscious and purposeful use of a material which in itself brings a gendered and raced history.

*Faith Ringgold: The French Collection*

Introduction

*The French Collection* is a later series of works, completed in the early 1990s. It is directly related to her earlier works, like *Die* and the *Slave Rape Series*, and yet she has honed her strategies and techniques to a new level of acuteness. *Die* is from Ringgold’s

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first series and sets up the concept of “super realism” while using narrative. The Slave Rape Series exemplifies Ringgold’s early use of fabric and quilting, a material choice which drastically influences her later works and allows for an analysis of her work as a form of appropriation of material. This series also exemplifies her use of narrative and her beginning exploration of the female black body and gender critiques, as well as her use of self-projection.

When looking at Ringgold’s more recent works, it becomes apparent that she is talented at using subtle hints and undertones which enhance both the humor of her critique and the critique itself. The French Collection is an excellent example of Ringgold’s ability to challenge difficult social issues such as race and gender, through a seemingly non-violent and humorous strategy. In order to understand the strategies she uses, I will examine two quilts from The French Collection, Picasso’s Studio (Figure 5) and Dinner at Gertrude Stein’s (Figure 6). Through an analysis of these story-quilts, I will address the ways in which the use of new strategies and techniques—humor, wit, irony, satire, and self-satire—combine with appropriation, narrative, and material to create a race and gender critique. I will also examine how the effectiveness of this critique is evident in the relationship to the viewer.

Ringgold began creating story-quilts as a way to tell her story, and through it, the story of African-American women. This combination is a form of “super-realism,” in that the story is real, it is autobiographical, but it also encompasses the experiences of many other women. The story-quilts represent Ringgold’s idea of reworking and retelling stories of social injustice.
The works from *The French Collection* present a three-tiered critique. They challenge race in society, gender in society, and the concept of exclusion of African-American and women artists in the canon of art history. In an interview with her daughter Michele Wallace, Ringgold explains that:

...as far as the *French Collection* is concerned, the whole idea is that black people don't have the cultural authority of the West. I just wanted to play with that. Because I think it is all just a big joke. And I don't want to play that game...Nobody's culture is right and nobody's culture is wrong. All of it has to do with the things you put together to make your people grow, and live and flourish.\(^\text{15}\)

Ringgold draws on traditional and well-known images and figures, as well as her personal experiences traveling and working in Europe. Using her and her family’s experiences from their time spent in Europe Ringgold examines how the cultural dynamics of exclusion which ignore black culture and encourage European culture can be reexamined.

**Narrative**

Ringgold begins this critique with her use of narrative. In *The French Collection*, she writes a story and makes it a physical part of the quilt. Combined with the painted image, the result is a powerful combination of picture and oration—she creates a situation where the viewer finds her/himself in the position of a student. In Ringgold’s quilts, the narrators are always women and they are often in the form of a semi-autobiographical character. Willia Maria Simone is the heroine of *The French Collection*. She represents a combination of Ringgold and her mother Willi, as well as Josephine Baker and other

important African-American women of the early twentieth century. Narrative is often seen as challenging for visual artists because it is difficult to depict a beginning, middle, and end, factors necessary in the telling of a story. However, by telling a story that the viewer would be expected to know, artists force the viewer to retell it in his/her mind while looking at the visual representation. Ringgold’s reworking of an image, in tandem with her written words, enables the telling of a revised story.

In Picasso’s Studio, at first glance the setting appears to be a typical painter/model scene. However, upon closer inspection, the many ways Ringgold has manipulated the traditional studio scene become apparent. Picasso’s Studio tells the story of Willia Marie, who is at the time an artist’s model but who also wishes to create art. The text depicts a conversation between Willia Marie and her Aunt Melissa in which Aunt Melissa functions as an empowering and inspiring voice telling Willia Marie to trust in her art and create art that is important to her. The sentiment is echoed by the African masks in the image, which whisper to Willia Marie as she poses. The voice of the masks simultaneously encourages Willia Marie and negates Picasso:

"The masks on Picasso’s walls told me, ‘Do not be disturbed by the power of the artist. He doesn’t know any more than you what will happen in the next 5 seconds—in your life or his. The power he has is available to you.’"

The narrative is between Willia Marie, Aunt Melissa and the African masks. Picasso plays no part in the drama. He stands meekly in the corner painting a blank canvas with a new image unseen by the viewer. Picasso becomes marginalized by Ringgold’s reversal of roles. By giving voice to the Africans and women, Ringgold diminishes the idea that

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16 Ibid.
18 See Appendix for this and all subsequent references of text in Faith Ringgold’s story-quilts.
the white male artist is the canon—the powerful tome of art history that traditionally has
excluded artists of color and female artists. Aunt Melissa explains briefly the history of
conflict between Africans and Europeans, referencing the violations of African culture as
well as African peoples:

‘Europeans discovered your image as art at the same time they discovered Africa’s
potential for slavery and colonization. They dug up centuries of our civilizations, and
then called us savages and made us slaves. First they take the body, then the soul. Or
maybe it’s the soul, then the body. The sequence doesn’t matter, when one goes, the
other usually follows close behind.’

Ringgold has created a reversal of several traditional power dynamics simply by
rearranging the position of the characters and emphasizing a different conversation—that
of the women and the objects in the room.

The insertion of a semi-autobiographical character allows Ringgold to explore her
own positioning as an African-American female artist, as well as challenge the
constructed identities associated with the African-American female body. The identity of
Willia Marie is contrasted with the prescribed identity associated with the African-
American female body. Much like her association with the women in the Slave Rape
Series, Ringgold is again linking her experience with her character’s experience. Not
only does she create a semi-autobiographical character, she aligns herself with the masks,
creating for herself a collective identity. She places herself in the position of the model,
in the highly sexualized scenario of the artist’s studio, a situation common to this era.
Traditionally, the black female would have been the model; a career as an artist would
most likely be an unfulfilled dream. However the encouragement of Aunt Melissa and
the masks imply that an art career is a feasible option. They lesson the power of the
identity of the artist (Picasso), and empower Willia Marie to define her own identity, whether as an artist or model. Willia Marie remembers the words of her Aunt Melissa:

‘I can hear you now Aunt Melissa. ‘Willia Marie, modeling ain’t so-o boring you have to talk to masks and paintings. The only thing you have to do is create art of importance to YOU. Show us a new way to look at life.’ ‘You betta listen to Aunt Melissa, girl’ the ladies from Avignon whispered. ‘She’s the only one making any sense.’

Added to the conversation between the women and the masks, is this final text which brings in the voices of the women of Avignon, the subjects of Picasso’s famous painting, who validate the truth of Aunt Melissa’s words.

Picasso Resituated: Appropriation of Form

I have already discussed the appropriation of material; however Ringgold uses for concepts, ideas, and form as well. Robert Nelson defines appropriation as the distortion of a prior assemblage, stating that “It maintains but shifts the former connotations to create the new sign and accomplishes all this covertly, making the process appear ordinary or natural.” 19 In other words, appropriation is a means through which an artist comments on, reinterprets or challenges previously established traditions, norms or opinions. Here Ringgold reuses Picasso’s famous image, Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (Figure 7), completed in 1907, which is often referenced as the beginning of cubism. 20 Rather than standing as one seminal work, it becomes a backdrop for the story of Willia Marie, the artist model and thus is reinserted into an expanded history. Picasso’s original image shows a grouping of five nude prostitutes, posed in a brothel in a space defined by draperies. Their faces resemble Oceanic masks, objects viewed and admired by

Picasso.21 The image is segmented by jagged lines and patches of color which serve to delineate form. The majority of the women stare directly out of the painting, their eyes wide.

Ringgold includes this image as part of the backdrop for her story-quilt, taking us into Picasso’s studio. The first thing Ringgold does is make Willia Marie the focus of the image. She is the central form of the quilt, and Picasso has been relegated to the corner. Not only is he decentralized, he is depicted as almost as naked as the model herself. The difference is that he appears ashamed of his nudity, while Willa Marie stares directly at the viewer, self-contained, and more in control than Picasso himself.

The relationship between Picasso and the female has been remarked upon extensively, and Ringgold examines this tension as well as the way Picasso portrays the women themselves. Often Picasso’s portrayal of the female is negative and violent. William Rubin explains what he calls a “particular component of Picasso’s psychology: his deep-seated fear and loathing of the female body—which existed side by side with his craving for and ecstatic idealization of it.”22 This conflict is apparent in his taking apart and reconfiguring of the female body using Cubist technique.23

The influence of primitivism on Picasso is apparent in Demoiselles. Picasso creates the women’s faces modeled from Oceanic masks, and the paintings colors are referred to as “primitive coloring,” by Rubin.24 Following the completion of Demoiselles, Picasso credited the striations and hatchings to African and Oceanic

22 Ibid, 253-54.
23 For more information detailing Picasso’s life and relationships, see: John Richardson, A Life of Picasso, Vol. 1 & 2, (New York: Randomhouse, 1996).
scarification marks and body painting.\textsuperscript{25} By including traditional Oceanic masks as well as other references to primitivism, and giving them a stronger voice than the artist himself, Ringgold is critiquing the tradition of using tribal artifacts and art as curiosity. She relates the African masks to the identity of the African female, stating:

\begin{quote}
It’s the African mask straight from African faces that I look at in Picasso’s studio and in his art. He has the power to deny what he doesn’t want to acknowledge. But art is the truth, not the artist. Doesn’t matter what he says about where it comes from. We see where, every time we look in the mirror.
\end{quote}

Ringgold reclaims the creations of her ancestors and, through this act, her culture and traditions, commonly appropriated by Europeans during this era. By reusing the same image, \textit{Demoiselles}, but placing it in a setting of her creation, Ringgold is asserting a sort of control over the original image and over the historical and social implications of it. This method of appropriation enables Ringgold to reapproach \textit{Demoiselles} and critique its history, as well as its inclusion in the canon and thus the Westernized canon of art history itself, suggesting once again that this canon may not be completely valid.

Picasso’s melding of primitivism and the female is apparent in the presence of the female nude with the face of a tribal mask. This combination suggests the traditional use of the black female body as an exotic form of entertainment. The African figures in \textit{Demoiselles} are characterized by Steinberg as “embodiments of sheer sexual energy, as the image of a life force.”\textsuperscript{26} This eroticization of black female body is a common occurrence by no means singular to Picasso. In discussing the exploitation of the female black body, Lisa Gail Collins states that during the nineteenth-century, the black nude body “evokes a racialized, sexualized, and exploitative history.”\textsuperscript{27} It is this history that

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{25} Ibid, 251.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibid, 253.
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Ringgold appropriates and challenges in her positioning of Willia Marie and the narrative which encourages her to make a career for herself.

As discussed, in her appropriation of Picasso, Ringgold reacts violently to Picasso as well as the canon of art history. In this work, Picasso as an individual has been decentralized and reduced to nothing but his underwear. This minimalized character appears again in *Picnic at Giverny* (Figure 8), as the nude artist model, which we will discuss later. Picasso is representative of himself as well as of the art history canon. Simply put, through her use of appropriation, Ringgold is able to violently sever Picasso from the context in which he is comfortable. Though seemingly less violent that *Die*, it is equally, though differently, a violent separation. It is, unlike her later piece, *Dinner at Gertrude Steins*, a violent response to the injustices of the art history canon.

Meeting Gertrude Stein: Appropriation of Events

*Dinner at Gertrude Stein’s*

*Dinner at Gertrude Stein’s*, also from *The French Collection*, uses appropriative techniques as well. However, instead of focusing the appropriation of a specific image or form, Ringgold is appropriating a past event, dinner at Stein’s. While she does include recreations of famous images, the event itself is the focal point. In an interview, Wallace asks Ringgold why she wanted to have dinner at Gertrude Stein’s. The artist replies:

> Because everybody went to Gertrude Stein. You had to go there because Gertrude Stein was the center of expatriot and intellectual exchange and also because of the way she wrote. Her writings. And I wanted Willia Marie to know all these people because I never got a chance to meet any of these people.\(^{28}\)

\(^{28}\)Ringgold, "The Mona Lisa Interview: With Faith Ringgold."

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Ringgold places Willia Marie in a gathering at Gertrude Stein’s house. On the wall are recreations of various famous paintings: Picasso’s portrait of Stein is on the wall directly above Stein, and works by Matisse and Impressionist works can be identified as well. The attendees are men and women, and black and white. The women include Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Zora Neale Hurston, and Willia, and the men are Picasso, Ernest Hemingway, Leo Stein, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Langston Hughes. The conversation is dominated by the African-American attendees. Willia describes the setting:

The colored writers read from their books and challenged each others points of view on issues concerning race and politics. The others were being quiet and sometimes saying a word or two but mostly being listening and not saying. I was being listening and quiet and standing so that I would not miss anything from being sitting.

Ringgold has placed Willia Marie to the far left of this image. She is not included in the circle of important literary and art figures, but in the text explains her desire to listen and learn from the conversation rather than take part in it. Willia is in the position of a student. She has access to famous and talented figures and can learn from their conversation. By appropriating an event which includes the top literary and art figures and including an African-American woman, Ringgold claims Willia’s (and through Willia her own) space of importance and inclusion in the scene. However, she does so without the expense of anyone else. Ringgold, through Willia Marie, wants to learn from all great minds and artists—she does not try to exclude whites for blacks, but includes all.

Throughout The French Collection, Ringgold critiques gender and race inequalities by using strategies and techniques—appropriation, narrative, and choice of material—in a subtle and humorous way. Her use of appropriation, narrative, and
material are practices that can be traced through her earlier works. I argue that her later works are just as confrontational and violent as those earlier images, but are less abrasive.

**Kara Walker: Background**

Kara Walker’s work explores issues of race, gender, and sexuality through paper-cut silhouettes depicting life in the ante-bellum south. Her images contain scenes of sexual violence and deviousness, emphasizing the power relationship between the Master and Negress, two characters exaggerated and explored throughout her work. The brilliant interaction between the subtle meanings and blatant imagery of Walker’s critique comes from her breadth of knowledge surrounding accepted historical references and the multi-layered character development she creates based on historical literary figures.²⁹

Kara Walker was born in 1969. Her childhood in Stone Mountain, Georgia exposed her to the profound racial discrimination of the South. She received a B.A. from the Atlanta College of Art, but it was not until graduate school at the Rhode Island School of Design that she began to explore racial and sexual themes in her work. Walker began teaching at Columbia University in 2001. A widely recognized and respected artist, Walker was the youngest person to be awarded the prestigious MacArthur Foundation scholarship in 1997, at the age of twenty-right. This decision created great controversy because Walker was accused of perpetuating negative aspects of black stereotypes through her work. The controversy surrounding Walker’s works is representative of the continually evolving concepts and definitions of black and post-

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black art. Walker, born a generation later than Ringgold, was exposed to a different atmosphere of social interpretation as well as experienced childhood and education at a different level. The 1980s saw a change from the revolts of the previous decades in African-American art to an era in which African-American artists, as Patton notes, “revealed a power and self-assuredness about who they are that contradicts myths and misconceptions about race and ethnicity.” Many black artists during this period did not feel the need for continually presenting a positive image of blackness, but found a place in which to poke holes in the seriousness that had been black art. The desire was not as much to defend blackness, but to represent pride in blackness. Walker explains that throughout her life she “saw 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 inability to control racial dynamics and experiences created the desire to challenge them. Her art explores where she fits as an individual into this racial diorama.

Kara Walker: Early Works

Walker’s images are shocking; in fact, it is their shock value that challenges the viewer as well as sparks the controversy over her use of negative imagery. As Wallace notes, “For those who are most attentive among her audience, Walker is clearly carving out—through evocative, playful, and sexually frisky silhouettes, watercolors, drawings,

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33 Shaw, 12.
and parodic texts—an alternative world vision.”

It is her ability to create this place where everyone, despite race, age, sex, or class, is reduced to the same perverse interactions that allows for a recitation and reconsideration of accepted history.

*Freedom: A Fable by Kara Elizabeth Walker—A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times with Illustrations*

**The Silhouettes: Appropriation of Form, Shift in Content**

Much as Ringgold is able to appropriate the traditions of quilting, Walker uses the history of the material itself as a commentary on gender and colonialism. The silhouette is a tradition which is considered weaker and more feminine than other art forms. It is also seen as a delicate and a product of leisure, associated with an upper class, white background. According to Shaw, Walker’s use of the “elegant, negative form [of the silhouette] expresses a void space in art history—one that is barbarous, rude, uncouth, unpolished, in bad taste, and completely savage.” The imagery Walker presents in this medium is in direct contrast to the position of the silhouette. As Shaw further notes, Walker “redraws issues through the nostalgic and deceptively innocent form of the silhouette.” By using the silhouette in a form which removes it completely from its traditional position and inserting it into an image of violent and negative representations, Walker is redefining the tradition of this material, as well as challenging the social

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33 The use of silhouettes also references physiognomic theory, the theory that facial features reveal a person’s natural and national character, was documented by Johann Casper Lavater in 1772. Shaw, 20. The association of this concept with Walker’s evaluation of identity within her work provides another level of interpretation when evaluating her critique of identity.
35 Shaw, 39.
33 Ibid, 25.
implications which come with the history of the material.\textsuperscript{38} In addition, as does Ringgold with the use of quilting, Walker reuses material historically established as craft, and is thus elevating it to a higher form of art. It is interesting to note that the traditions of quilting employed by Ringgold are steeped in African-American tradition and heritage, where the silhouette tradition is not. By claiming a material not previously associated with African-American tradition, Walker challenges the definitions of art forms based on race distinctions as part of her critique.

**Narrative and Audience Interaction**

*Freedom* (Figure 9-14), completed in 1997, is a written narrative, told in a single voice that “provides the reader/viewer with a singular insight into a contemporary’s unfounded reflections about the value and possibility of a racial utopia.”\textsuperscript{39} The setting is: a ship en route to Liberia on a trip to capture slaves. The protagonist is N—, an American woman who has trouble accepting Africa as her homeland. In this work Walker uses text to provide a framework for a basic reading of the tale, but the physicality of the book itself also contributes to its meaning. While the text provides a framework for a basic reading of the tale, the structure of the piece itself forces a deeper interaction between the reader and the work.

Although the silhouetted images are appropriated from a long and laden tradition, as we have seen, in Walker’s work the silhouette is almost totally disengaged from nineteenth-century tradition of illustration and portraiture by its insertion into what is, in

\textsuperscript{38} For farther information regarding the history of the silhouette, see John A. Parks, “The Dark, Black Outline,” *VNU Business Media* 3 (Summer 2006): 125.

\textsuperscript{39} English, “This is Not About the Past: Silhouettes in the Work of Kara Walker,” in *Kara Walker: Narratives of A Negress,* 148.
effect, a book modeled on a child’s pop-up book. Before turning the page, the reader must refold and straighten the images before the story can continue. As English notes, the “pop-up book both supports the notion of book-as-pure knowledge and indicates the malleability of what that knowledge discloses.” 40 That is to say, Walker is challenging notions of accepted history, while utilizing tools with connotations that relate to the continuance of that history.

Furthermore, the viewer’s relationship is forced to be an intrusive, violating presence in relation to the work. English writes that the viewer:

activate[s] the work in the most actual way: turning pages and pulling levers, we direct scenes that work at odds with the story the author is trying to tell. (Although hardly as violent or violating, this is not unlike a rape; Walker and we both know it.) Yet the trick is on us in our roles as enactors of the irony that consumes the incongruous volume. 41

This interactive and confrontational relationship with the viewer is a technique Walker utilizes throughout her career, one which doubtless contributes to the controversy surrounding her work. She makes the viewer complicit rather than allowing him/her to separate his/her experience from the experience occurring in the book. This confrontation is in itself a form of violence towards the viewer.

A comparison to the ways Walker and Ringgold engage the audience is helpful here. As the artist, Ringgold creates her own levels of meaning to the work, but leaves the interpretation of her clues up to the viewer. I have already discussed Picasso’s Studio, in which Ringgold violently reconfigures Picasso’s studio to be a place of empowerment for Willia. Likewise, in Picnic at Giverny, Ringgold references four important male painters of the Western canon, Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Gustav

40 Ibid, 151.
41 Ibid.
Klimt, and Edouard Manet. The positioning of Picasso in the pose of the nude from *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe*, (Figure 15), completed in 1863 by Manet (1832-1883), is fairly simple to identify for an individual proficient in art history, while the use of design similar to Klimt as the basis for the picnic blanket is harder to pick out. Ringgold is inviting the viewer to recognize the various ways she plays with the meanings inscribed in the canon, through her reclaiming of historically important imagery and artists. However, depending on her audience, Ringgold’s work may be too subtle. For an art historical audience, her references to the canon and famous artists are noticed, but for a non-art historical audience, some of her clues may be too difficult to pick out. However, her works are still readable. It is hard to determine whether this is purposeful on Ringgold’s part or not. Her imagery is a method of exploration of subtle clues and hints towards the understanding of a greater theme, in this case, the lack of representation of women and people of color in many aspects of the canon.

While Walker’s work is confrontational, it is also subtle. The first impression of Walker’s grand scale silhouettes is often of the delicate detail and impressive technique of a pleasing image. Upon closer inspection, the shocking, often vulgar qualities of her imagery become clear, and it is here that we see the more subtle references to silhouette tradition, nineteenth-century visual culture, and slavery Walker is creating. While both artists manage effectively to capture the viewer’s attention in a manner which forces continued evaluation, the way each artist presents her work allows the initial response and attraction to a piece to be very different. Like Ringgold, Walker presents us with a dynamic play between text and image. In my opinion it is the physical motion of the image itself that creates the narrative, and the text is backup. In one of the illustrations,
N—gives birth, the process shown by the baby diving from between her legs. However, viewing a still image does not fully show the interaction, as the baby can be pulled out by the viewer, and is attached to a longer string of babies which can be continuously pulled from N—'s vagina.

Body

The interrelationship with the viewer in *Fable* shows a level of audience inclusion which is necessary for a reading of the tale. In many ways, it is the physical relationship with the protagonist of the story that allows the audience to delude him/herself as a character in the story. It is fascination got note that the body of N— is possibly more of a protagonist than N— herself. She is the sole voice, but the images of her body represent her words in such a way that the visualization of the text is effective because of the physical representation of her body and the female actions of her body. However, the words, along with the audacity associated with N—for her preaching of them, reemphasize the traditional status of the female body as vessel while at the same time serve to empower the female voice.

Much like Ringgold's references to the eroticization of the female body in *Picasso's Studio*, these themes of the colonization of Africa and of the eroticism of the female body buoy the narrative. The issue of reproduction, as discussed in the physical birthing of many babies, is paralleled in the narrative. N—, as the narrator and main character, pontificates to the men on the ship:

'This ship, with its uncertain destination is much like this women's sex,' she begins, pointing to the spot just below her navel. 'For, herein lies the potential for many things,
and yet they are all conjecture, fantastic ideals for our new future set up by right-thinking men and their well-meaning wives.42

Walker references the importance of the female in terms of her reproductive capacity, she is a vessel (ship), full of possibility. She also highlights the female’s role as the creator of life, a role mediated by “men and their right thinking wives.” However, she almost immediately reclaims power for the female, explaining that the female sex has a will of its own. N— continues:

‘But this sex, despite all outside expectations, no matter the damage done to it previous or present, has quite the will of its own, creating juices where at first there were none and creating disease and vitality from the same brew.’43

Walker refers to both the positives and negatives that emerge from the “brew” that is women’s sex. The inclusion of two possible outcomes and the ambiguity that is associated with it is a common theme in Walker’s work. More often than not, she leaves the viewer questioning and/or unable to reach a single, stable conclusion.

Narrative

Walker ends the narrative by presenting the thoughts of the other passengers on the ship in response to N—’s words. The final phrases read: “They did not care to know about their impending doom. They considered whether she should be tossed to the floating boys, or would her body maybe provide sustenance for them all?”44 The ending is ambiguous and several completions to the story are possible. There is the initial thought that N—’s body will be used for consumption, whether sexually or as food, but

43 Ibid, 8.
44 Ibid.
either way, as she will be a form of meat for the men on the ship. The passengers may also dispose of her entirely, throwing her into the ocean. However, Walker specifically writes “their” impending doom, not “hers,” possibly implying that N—s elimination will spell doom for the remaining people on the ship. By leaving the ending unclear, Walker is once again forcing the viewer’s involvement in her work. There is no way of knowing which ending Walker is predicating, or if there is in fact a single ending at all. It is this ambiguity in part, which draws the viewer back.

**Appropriation**

In like fashion, Walker plays specifically on the ambiguity of appropriation, so that what could be a negative is a positive, and vice versa. As a technique, appropriation can be dangerous. One runs the risk of reusing an image, but failing to reclaim it in a positive way. The original meaning of the form, material, event, or image being appropriated can overpower the new interpretation. This danger is partially the issue feeding the aforementioned controversy—her detractors claim that she merely reinforces negative stereotypes. However, I argue that Walker is successful in supplanting her appropriated ideas into a new concept which forces farther evaluation. One might also say that her critics’ reactions reveal their limitations, not hers.

The appropriative nature of this work also allows for its effectiveness as a gender and racial critique of accepted history. As English says, “this is not an appropriation that alienates, but rather historicizes and supplements its objects.”45 According to English, Walker’s method of appropriation does not isolate the subject matter from its historical framework, both the original construct and Walker’s new creation. Walker is taking

negative imagery and giving it a place in an historical tale of her own creation, while still containing the original meaning. In particular, Walker appropriates events through an examination of the history of slavery and appropriates form through the use of the silhouette form and its place in art history. While the initial response may be one of alienation, Walker is using appropriation to reframe historical narrative in what can perhaps be described also as a more honest telling of accepted history. Thus her aim is not alienation, but the transfer of negative historical fact into an equally negative situation, but with the opportunity for a different outcome. Her use of appropriation positions her objects in her rewritten historical narrative. Walker is challenging the accepted understanding of the slave trade and simultaneously forcing the viewer to confront his/her own prejudices, misunderstandings, and confusions, via the use of shocking and provoking images and words. The use of appropriation allows Walker to retell accepted history. Not only does she reuse the traditional silhouette form, she presents her narrative in a format unfamiliar to the story she is telling.⁴⁶

**Untitled**

In this image (Figure 16), completed in 2000, Walker uses paper cutting and collage techniques to create a humorous, caricature-like representation of a black maid and a white master. The gender and race roles have been completely reversed, and thus so has the power. The maid is in the position of power, using her feather duster to sodomize the master, whose pink-cheeked face appears young and confused. In contrast,

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⁴⁶ Ibid, 151. English explains that Walker "make[s] visible the presentation of stereotypes in ostensibly raceless—or, more properly, race-leveling—historical formats. Both silhouettes and the bookish book that Freedom is, in part, are only possible after a primary appropriation and resignification that empties the contents and affects once belonging to these media and replaces them with the very subject matters formerly deemed untreatable in them."
the expression of the maid’s face is stern and focused. Here the traditional views of
gender roles have been upset. The woman has replaced the man as the phallic part of the
relationship, and the man has become the receiver. The historical assumptions of power
in the racial relationship between white master and black slave have been reversed,
placing the control in the scene firmly in the hands of the black slave. Again, Walker is
rearranging and retelling accepted history. By providing a beautiful image that is
shocking, Walker is toying with the viewer’s response; the simultaneous attraction to the
beauty and repulsion to the shocking stimulate the viewer’s continued return.

Untitled is one of several images combined into a larger collage piece with the
same name. The image is comprised of eight smaller images positioned on a light black
background with a darker black bridge arching across the width of the piece. Some of the
other images include a Negress figure who whips two crying young white girls, a Negress
figure bottle-feeding a white master, a black man in shackles, and a white family waving
the American flag and looking extremely gleeful. Each smaller image can be seen on its
own and alone can be interpreted differently than it is as a part of this larger image.

Untitled when seen on its own, contains the element of humor. Humor as an underlying
concept of Walker’s work is represented by Michele Wallace’s description of Walker’s
images as a theme park, “Walker hypothesizes the antebellum south as a kind of
repressed theme park, a riotous, operatic, hyperactive brothel of the brain that lurks
barely hidden behind our more polite and publicized racial arrangements.” 47

There are many opinions on the humor of this scene. For me, the humor comes
when I am forced to voice what is occurring in the scene. The appearance of a feather
duster in an otherwise serious scene is somewhat comedic. Also, the reversal of roles

into a sexual dynamic that is in conflict with traditional and accepted sex roles creates a nervous humor. In this way, Walker is again encouraging audience interaction and forcing the viewer to examine his/her position and understanding of stereotypical race and gender roles. However, it is simultaneously violent; depicting what could easily be analyzed as a rape scene. When included in the larger combination of works, it loses some of the humor to the appearance of the other scenes; the violence however, remains, perhaps even becoming more pronounced with the lessening of humor. The use of humor and reversal of traditional gender and race roles is also created in Ringgold’s *Picnic at Giverny* via her use of narrative and imagery. Despite the fame and importance of Picasso, and perhaps because of it, it is difficult not to laugh when seeing him posing nude for a group of women. While both artists use humor, there is not necessarily a connection between the ways in which they do. However, both artists link humor and violence. How do violence and humor relate to each other? Is humor created through violence? Thus I come to realize that there are categorical questions to be asked if not answered definitely at this time.

**Kara Walker: The End of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven**

**Material and Scale**

Walker’s immense silhouette installation works combine various techniques that embellish her gender and race commentaries. *The End of Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (Figure 17) is such an example. The appropriation of material and images, the relationship with her audience, the narrative she
creates, and her use of humor provide a venue in which Walker challenges easy and accepted narratives of history by developing her own.

As I touched upon earlier, Walker explains her use of silhouettes in contrast with her choice of scale. She states:

What I love about the small scale of traditional silhouette cutting is that it’s not really considered art. It was a craft that ladies and invalids could practice. I figured I was close enough: females and sort of second-class somehow, but striving to be something more than what it is. At the same time I wanted to make the cyclorama—that sort of overblown, pompous gesture that this is about truth and this is about history.\textsuperscript{48}

The scale also resonates with the European concept of large scale history paintings. History painting is a style of narrative painting which commemorates and romanticizes the figures involved. Scenes for such paintings often stem from Greek mythology and the Bible. During the nineteenth-century, history painting reiterated the ideal that painting was the representation of perfect forms of “human passion and intellect.”\textsuperscript{49} By referencing this grand history, Walker is inserting her characters into a canonized form as well as challenging the very idea of human perfection. This larger than life installation piece depicts scenes of what Shaw calls, “racially coded mayhem.”\textsuperscript{50} In a satirical and humorous way, Walker is problematizing the aesthetic and intellectual perfection of history painting, and thus she suggests that the history we value may not be as perfect as we think.

In essence, \textit{Uncle Tom} is a political satire presented in the form of a large-scale history painting. The large scale installation format draws the viewer into a room referencing that of a nineteenth-century cyclorama, referred to as an “endless cycle of

\textsuperscript{48} Kara Walker, \textit{The Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture: 60 Years}, (Maine: Colby College Museum of Art, 2006), 74.
\textsuperscript{50} Shaw, 18.
history” by Walker in a 1996 interview. 51 The creation of a theatrical setting provides the space for a revision of characters, gender and racial relationships, and the historical ‘fact’ in which the scene is set. It is truly, as Wallace notes, “an alternative world vision.”52

*Uncle Tom* shows four main groups of figures separated by blank wall. The first grouping shows three slave women and a child in a moment of mutual nursing. The women simultaneously suckle each other, and the child hangs in the forefront from one woman’s breast, unsupported by her arms. The women wear fabric holding back their hair; this characteristic is one of few identifying elements. This image can have many interpretations. Does it reference the sexual nature of women rather than the nurturing nature of women, or does it conflate them?53 The child hangs forgotten and ignored by the women who are caught up in their sexual exploration. The second grouping shows three slave children each holding different objects. The two male children hold a tambourine and a basket, and the girl holds a spike. Her positioning is directly behind a young mistress with an ax raised above her head. The spike points towards her backside. The ax, positioned as if about to chop wood is pointed in the wrong direction, so that if it fell, it would chop into its bearer.

The third grouping shows a rotund and crippled master figure with his belly propped on the back of a prepubescent slave girl as he sodomizes her. Her leg functions as one of his supports and the rest of his weight is balanced on a peg leg, and on the sword he holds down stuck through an infant’s body beneath him. The slave girl is taking the body of the oppressor onto herself. As is *Untitled*, the image in itself is

51 Ibid, 39.
53 Shaw, 39.
completely unreproductive. The sexual act of sodomy is infertile, and in addition, the man is killing the infant beneath him. This image references the potential for violence in relationships between European American masters and mulatto children as well as the traditions of sexual violence between master and slave.\textsuperscript{54}

The fourth grouping shows a balding slave man actively praying. He is connected to a baby lying on the ground by a cord which comes from his anus. Directly to his right are two women, partially obscured by the white wall because their silhouette is cut through. Far in the background is the manor house, tiny and far from the forefront or center of the work, but positioned on the same plane as a shack and outhouse, obviously representative of a slave’s quarters.

By grouping her images in this way, Walker presents the audience with a series that is, based solely on the positioning of the images, a narrative. The size of the installation forces the viewer to follow life-size scenes and interpret them both separately and as a larger whole, while actively being a part of the performance. Ringgold sets the stage in much the same way in \textit{The French Collection}. By creating a character who travels throughout Europe, visiting famous people and places, Ringgold is writing a story with the intention of challenging proscribed historical gender and race roles. By reusing famous artists works, images of the artists themselves, and famous places, Ringgold is imposing her alternative world vision through her narrative.

\textbf{Violence}

\textsuperscript{54} This image references fertility control over female slaves by their Masters, both in terms of reproductive capacity as an economic commodity as well as the possession and control of female body through rape and sexual assault.
While violence is present in all of Walker’s works, the scale of *Uncle Tom* emphasizes this violence. The violence comes from several visual interactions. Through the individual relationships among the four grouping of images, Walker presents a terrifying view of companionship, rape, motherhood, religion, birth, race, and power. The images of murder, violent sexual acts, and weaponry (axes), as well as the appearance of blood, are all violent. The undercurrent of sexual deviancy evident in the erotic, satiric, and violent positioning of the figures establishes strong mental and emotional acts of violence. The use of the silhouette figure, and thus the removal of identity from the figures is in itself a violent separation. This separation is evident in the main character in this panorama, the Negress. English explains her role in this piece as a multidimensional character. Her femaleness epitomizes negative associations of prostitution and sexual immorality, while her mastery of and disinterest in each event seems to present her as a figure in control. English states:

[The] Negress is a kind of superheroine for racial and sexual pragmatism. She bandies about the work, indiscriminately pleasuring herself, expelling feces, and doling out punishments, appearing quite bored, in fact, with the constraints of the whole anti-white, anti-phallic imperative.

Walker describes the nigger wench as a “young and pretty black girl whose function is as receptacle—she’s a black hole, a space defined by things sucked into her, a ‘nigger-cunt,’ a scent, an ass, a complication. She is simultaneously sub-human and super-human.”

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55 The Negress character is an amalgamation based on a character from the pornographic novel *The Master’s Revenge*, written in 1984 as part of the Slave Horrors series and a character from *The Clansman*, a Thomas Dixon historical romance from 1905. Dixon describes the character—“No more curious or sinister figure ever cast a shadow across the history of a great nation than did this mulatto woman in the most corrupt hour of American life.” Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan*, (New York: Doubleday, 1905).
56 English, 153.
57 Shaw, 19.
Walker describes the silhouette in similar terms as a “blank space that you project your desires into. It can be positive or negative. It’s just a hole in a piece of paper and it’s the inside of that hole.” This idea represents a merging of formal elements, form and material, with discursive elements. In fact, the technique Walker employs, the cutting of a hole in paper, is a physical manifestation of this idea. The identity of the material and the identity of the subject are linked based on the commonality of absence. Paradoxically, the lack of identity serves to identify the figures. Thus, Walker is making a statement on issues of identity, in relation to formations and definitions of black identity, throughout history. The figures are all portrayed in silhouette form, and identity is determined by the viewer with a few leading clues from Walker. As such, the characters have a common thread, they are the same, in terms of material used and the technique that they portray, but very different in their actions and social and racial positions. Regardless of class, race, or gender however, each character plays his/her own role in the vulgar and tasteless story.

This concept of identifying characteristics and reevaluating the history of identity is explored by theorist Diana Fuss. In many ways, Ringgold and Walker are retelling and rewriting history, and a part of what they are reworking is the history of identification. Fuss examines the definitions of identification though the writings of philosopher Franz Fanon, who states that the black man is subjugated to the white man through the process of racial othering. As Fanon says, “for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.” However, it does not work

38 Ibid, 23.
this way for the white man. Thus, the definition of being black is dependent on being the
definition of the white, and thus defines black as the other. Walker’s work is addressed
in similar words by Miles Unger (managing editor of Art New England):

One of the virtues of [Walker’s] work is to demonstrate the extent to which the very
concept of race is a powerful fiction based on the construction of a mythical Other upon
whom we project out irrational fears and compulsive desires.\(^{61}\)

Walker directly challenges this concept, forcing identifications to be made by the viewer
based on stereotypes. As Unge states, she is problemetizing Fanon’s original description
of the identification of race. The viewer must than make assuming identifications based
on the stereotypes he/she generally attempts to avoid.

**Confrontation of Self (s)**

Walker’s images attract and repulse the viewer; by using the slavery issue as a
theme, she taps into the guilt of the viewer, forcing him/her to react both to the graphic
images she creates and his/her own stereotypes and misunderstandings of race, gender,
and slavery. As Shaw says, “Walker’s tableau ensures that the act of viewing is the
moment in which the viewer, regardless of racial self-identification, is allowed to
confront his or her guilt over the traumatic legacy, the dismembered and the unspeakable,
the real and imagined of slavery.”\(^{62}\) *Uncle Tom* is solely image; there is no written
narrative. However, the separations and placement of sets of images create a series,
providing movement through a space which the viewer is forced to follow. The lack of
text forces the viewer creates her/his own story to go along with images. Walker believes
that, “…what is sort of satisfying about the cut-paper image or the all-black image is the

\(^{61}\) Shaw, 27.

\(^{62}\) Ibid, 64-65.
Rorschach quality of it. Even though there seems to be a very clear narrative, people read them in all sorts of peculiar ways.”

Walker is forcing the viewers, regardless of race, social position, or gender, to write themselves into a narrative, and one that can easily be described as loathsome and vile. Not only is the viewer expected to recognize himself/herself as a part of the narrative, he/she must confront the real historical basis that Walker’s images portray.

Walker’s use of material is an integral part in creating this dynamic. It forces intense interaction between the work and the viewer, for example, because every figure is in shadow, racial identity can only be determined by the figure’s profile or actions. The identifying characteristic of the master figure is his protruding stomach and profile. This method forces the viewer to assume racial identity, perpetuating the stereotypes Walker is addressing in her critique. This technique extends Walker’s subjects into the minds of the viewers themselves. Walker explains her reaction to the strong racial themes in her work as well as her expectations of the viewer, stating that:

> It’s interesting the way stereotypes of black people give us very visceral reactions, but I think it’s kind of troublesome if you only have visceral reactions to them. Like there’s a point where you start to realize that maybe you actually like it, maybe you kind of want it that way, and that if you don’t have a visceral reaction, that makes you somehow less of whoever it is you think you are… The work for me always has this kind of ambivalence to it: am I loving this, or am I hating this?64

Walker is directly challenging the viewer to go beyond his/her initial instinctive response, in many cases that of revulsion or discomfort and begin to explore the complexities not just of the images themselves, but the viewers complicity in them. This process can be traumatic for the viewer if he/she is unwilling to be challenged. Ultimately, Walker is destabilizing the proscribed identity of her characters, as well as forcing the viewer to

63 Kara Walker, Skowhegan School, 74.
64 Ibid, 74.
threaten his/her own idea of identity in terms of where he/she fits in the narrative Walker has created. Clearly, the critics who accuse her of merely reinforcing stereotypes are missing her point, and ironically, in so doing, are themselves reinforcing the negative narrative. Not only is she challenging prescribed identities and stereotypes of history, she expects the viewer to recognize and establish his/her part in the narrative.

Kara Walker: Controversy and Peer Criticism

As already noted, while Walker's work has received much praise and recognition, it has also had a high level of criticism from many in the art world. Well-known African American artist Betye Saar (b. 1926) is perhaps her strongest critic. Emphasizing the generational differences between the two artists, Saar describes Walker's work as young and foolish. In a public statement in 1997, directly following Walker's award of the MacArthur genius grant, Saar spoke against Walker and artist Michael Ray Charles.65

'Today there are young black artists such as Kara Walker and Michael Ray Charles who claim to be political because they satirize the most cruelly racist images of black people, Anyone can do what they like as an artist . . . (but) these two artists are benefiting from work that's not funny, not satirical, not ironic -- it's a form of betrayal.'66

As I have suggested, such reactions themselves are examples of that which they condemn. Walker strains against African-American attempts to control negative images

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of blacks by blatantly presenting imagery that cannot be described in a positive light based on the content of the images themselves.

One of Walker’s most outspoken critics, artist Betye Saar, believes Walker’s work perpetuates negative stereotypes and representations of African-Americans. In addition, the fact that it is clear who launches these critiques is fascinating. Saar, born in 1926, appropriates images of Aunt Jemima and other mammy figures in her works, figures which are among the most recognizable and most problematic in African-American history. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (Figure 18), completed in 1972, shows her holding a broom in one hand and a gun in the other. Saar’s characters are revolutionary in that they put a negative stereotype in a situation where it is fighting back. Lopez and Roth note that “Saar worked on dismantling crude, popular racist representations of African-American found in advertising and kitchen utensils”\(^{67}\). In order to accomplish this, Saar takes negative imagery, reclaims it, and presents it in a violent scene. Her Aunt Jemima’s carry explosives and guns along side their pots and pans. Saar’s commentary on the position of Jemima as an example of negative stereotyping of African-American women presents an important race and gender critique.

Many, however, feel that Walker’s interpretations are in fact a positive force in the dialogue of race throughout history and today. Charles Reeve comments on Walker and Saar:

Kara argues that things aren’t as simple as Saar thinks when she tries to empower her Aunt Jemima with guns and hand grenades. Kara wonders if blacks are actually colluding with whites in the perpetuation and romanticization of slavery.\(^{68}\)

\(^{67}\) Lopez and Roth, 146.

Walker appropriates imagery with a negative connotation, but does not turn it into a positive image or reclaiming of past inequalities of representation. According to Reeve, Walker takes the critique a step farther, making the issues of slavery and race relations not just the fault of whites, but the fault of blacks as well. Walker is challenging the negative associations and discomforts that slavery provokes, throughout history and today. She thus treads on an issue that is both personal and political, and which remains highly divisive.

**Conclusion**

In this thesis I have explored the many points of intersection between Faith Ringgold and Kara Walker, including appropriation (both material and conceptual), use of narrative, material choices, interpretation of the body and identity, and interaction with audience. I have also shown the divergences, including the differing audience interactions, and the subtle violence of critique used by Ringgold in contrast with the obvious violence in Walker's works.

I previously discussed the issue of violence and non-violence in the works of Ringgold and Walker. Because of the violence inherent in the issues and subject matter that Ringgold and Walker choose, their use of appropriation brings this violence into the work. Not only do they incorporate and challenge this violence, Ringgold and Walker, in order to critique effectively the narratives in question, are violent to preexisting narratives, those of art history and history. Walker forces a conversation others want to avoid through her use of negative imagery and visceral depiction of slavery, such as in *Uncle Tom*. In *The French Collection* Ringgold does not create a segregated history, but
inserts Willia Marie into that which already exists, claiming her position within the preexisting narrative. While the methods of insertion and evaluations differ in the works of Ringgold and Walker, the effectiveness of critique is quite similar.

For this reason, the works of Ringgold and Walker create the opportunity for discourse and discussion. Both artists work from the perspective of the black female, and these gender and race experiences are apparent in their works. However, neither artist stops with the creation of commentary. Through effective usage of narrative, appropriation, and material, the two artists engage the viewer in an interactive experience, which often leaves the viewer with more questions than answers. Thus, in the works of Ringgold and Walker, it is not necessarily the answers, but rather the questions, that create opportunity for continued discourse. The works of both artists challenge the audience to move beyond their complicity in viewing the image. Thus both reveal the importance of dialogue and responsibility in society as well as in the interpretation of their images.
Figure 1


Figure 2

Figure 3


Figure 4


Figure 7


Figure 8

Figure 15

Edouard Manet, *Le Dejeuner sur l' Herbe*, 1863. Oil on canvas, 82 x 104 in. Musée Orsay

Figure 16

Figure 18

Appendices

Appendix One
Text to *Picasso's Studio*

Dear Aunt Melissa,

I really think modeling is boring. Standing, sitting, or laying down. Peu importe! Doesn’t matter. You may know what to do with your hands, your feet, the look on your face. But what do you do with your mind, with your misplaced or mistaken identité? What do you do with time? Et l’artiste, what do you feel about him?

2. I started hearing voices from the masks and paintings in Picasso’s studio but your voice, Aunt Melissa, was the clearest. “You was an artist’s model years before you was ever born, thousands of miles from here in Africa somewhere. Only you’’all wasn’t called artist and model. It was natural that your beauty would be reproduced on walls and plates and sculptures made of you beautiful black face and body.”

3. “Europeans discovered your image as art at the same time they discovered Africa’s potential for slavery and colonization. They dug up centuries of our civilizations, and then called us savages and made us slaves. First they take the body, then the soul. Or maybe it’s the soul, then the body. The sequence doesn’t matter, when one goes, the other usually follows close behind.”

4. You asked me once why I wanted to become an artist and I said I didn’t know. Well I know now. It is because it’s the only way I know of feeling free. My art is my freedom to say what I please. N’importe what color you are, you can do what you want avec ton art. They may not like it, or buy it, or even let you show it; but they can’t stop you from doing it.

5. Picasso’s first cubist painting was called barbaric, la mort, the death of art! But that didn’t stop him. In fact, it started le movement moderne du art. The European artists took a look at us and changed the way they saw themselves. Aunt Melissa, you made me aware of that. “Go to Paris, Willia Marie,” you told me, “and soak up some of that Africana they using in those cube paintings.”

6. It’s the African mask straight from African faces that I look at in Picasso’s studio and in his art. He has the power to deny what he doesn’t want to acknowledge. But art is the truth, not the artist. Doesn’t matter what he says about where it comes from. We see where, every time we look in the mirror.

7. “The masks on Picasso’s walls told me, “Do not be disturbed by the power of the artist. He doesn’t know any more than you what will happen in the next 5 seconds—in your life or his. The power he has is available to you. But you must give up the power you have
as a woman. No one can have it all. What do you want Willia Marie? When you decide that, you can have it,” the masks said.

8. Les Demoiselles d’Avignon, with their tortured, twisted faces Europeanized in Picasso’s brothel theme, made a contre-attaque on the wisdom of the African masks. “You go ahead, girl, and try this art thing,” they whispered to me in a women-of-the-world voice straight from the evening. “We don’t want HIM to hear us talking, but we just want to let you know you don’t have to give up nothing.”

9. “And if they throw your art back at you, te fais pas de bile. Don’t worry, ‘cause you got something you can sell. You was born with it, just in case. Every woman knows that. Some women will ask a high price and some men will pay it, all depends on the deal. Their wives don’t have to know anything about it. That’s been going on since Adam and Eve,” the ladies of the painting said.

10. “I can hear you now Aunt Melissa. “Willia Marie, modeling ain’t so-o boring you have to talk to masks and paintings. The only thing you have to do is create art of importance to YOU. Show us a new way to look at life.” “You betta listen to Aunt Melissa, girl” the ladies from Avignon whispered. “She’s the only one making any sense.”

Appendix Two
Text to Dinner at Gertrude Steins

Dear Aunt Melissa,

Last night I had dinner at Gertrude Stein’s. She is a genius Auntie, not just because she wrote “A rose is a rose is a rose” or “There is no there, there” about Oakland, California or “Pigeons on the grass, Alas.” She is a genius because she has us all repeating her words and wondering—is it is, or is it art?

2. There were 10 of us for dinner at Gertrude Stein’s. Six were being men and four were being women. One of the four women being Gertrude and another one being Alice. Both living ad being women, though one (Gertrude) smokes a cigar, and has a wife being Alice. Alice was always living and working for Gertrude and cooking and typing “the daily miracle” which is being what Gertrude calls her daily unedited manuscript.

3. Of the six men being and talking with Gertrude, three of them (Richard Wright, James Baldwin and Langston Hughes) were being colored, and three of them were not. The three colored me were all being and knowing they were great writers and poets and who were geniuses and thinkers of great thoughts about being and living and dying as colored men in America.

4. Of the three men who were not colored (Pablo Picasso, Ernest Hemingway and Leo Stein) one was a great painter, and one was a great writer and journalist but not quite as
great as the great painter who was a great genius as well. The other one was being a brother of a genius who was living and being Gertrude Stein.

5. Two of the four women were colored (Zora Neale Hurston and myself, Willia Marie Simone) and two were not. Of the two colored women one was a great writed and genius and was being being colored and the other was listening and learning. The other two women (Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas) were always being together. One was always knowing and being an American but living and being in Paris. The other one just being listening and quiet.

6. The colored writers read from their books and challenged each others points of view on issues concerning race and politics. The others were being quiet and sometimes saying a word or two but mostly being listening and not saying. I was being listening and quiet and standing so that I would not miss anything from being sitting. I was living in deep thoughts and being listening and silent.

7. One of the colored men was being and reading an essay he wrote about the other one. In it he describes the other one as living and being a “Mississippi pickaninny.” A pickaninny that was being so threatening that no one could see that he was really living and being “a fantastic jewel buried in high grass.”

8. I wanted to speaking and explaining what was being a pickaninny. But I was more listening than speaking. So I just thought about knowing that a pickaninny from Mississippi or any other place is a very sad but young colored person who no one loves enough to comb their “picky” hair or feed them. So they are alwaus being needing loving and caring and feeling hungry for nursing their mama’s “tittle.”

9. The pickaninny who was being “a fantastic jewel buried in high grass” in Mississippi was now being a pickaninny who was being in Paris out of the grass and wanting and being angry enough to be doing what a pickaninny can do so well to the other one who was really very small. It was then that dinner was served and the men went to being in separate corners of the room.

10. My favorite event of the evening was Zora Neale Hurston reading from her comedic play, Mule Bone. Zora is being and making a classic of the black folk culture and language we are always being so ashamed of. It is the way we be being talking when there are no white people around. W.E.B. Du Bois said, “Zora’s Mule Bone speaks in a...lyrical language that is as far removed from mistrelsy as a margaux is from ripple.

11. Zora was being and telling the story of the “bama nigger” who stuck his rival with the hock bone of an ole yaller mule. De man was arrested. De case went to trial in de Macademia Baptist Church. De argument was “Can a mule bone be a criminal weapon? If so de man is guilty if not innocent. De donkey is de father of a mule. Samson slew 3,000 Philistines with the jawbone of an ass. Now what kin be more dangerous dan uh mule bone?”
Appendix Three

Text to Picnic at Giverny

Dear Aunt Melissa,

Today I was invited to paint in the garden of the celebrated painter, Claude Monet at Giverny. There, in an area of the garden composed of water-lily ponds, with weeping willow trees and beautiful flowers everywhere, there was a group of American women artists and writers having a picnic and discussing the role of women in art.

2. I strolled through the beautiful jardins, taking in the fantastic, beautiful flower beds and trees, passing over the matrix of Japanese bridges that connect the wildly wooded areas of jardins with the fields of flowers near Monet’s house. Then I settled on the same area near the water-lily ponds flanked by weeping willow trees near the American women who were picnicking.

3. I kept seeing Manet’s Le Déjeuner Sur L’Herbe, the painting that caused such a scandal in Paris. It was not allowed at the Salon because it showed Manet’s brother-in-law and a male friend having a picnic with two nude women, all of whom were recognizable. I kept thinking: Why not replace the traditional nude woman at the picnic with Picasso in the nude, and the 10 American women fully clothed?

4. That would be crossing Monet’s Nymphées with Manet’s scandal, and a reaction to the conversation of the American women about the role of women artists to show powerful images of women. They were discussion female nudes in the company of fully clothed men in paintings like Manet’s The Picnic. Seeing in and wondering what to paint, this seemed a good idea to begin ma nouvelle conscience.

5. What to paint has always been my greatest problem as an artist. And then how to paint it? These were the questions I looked hard for answers to. Now there is the role of women artists? Some special niche we can occupy. Like a power station? A woman artist can assume the rights of men in art? And be seen? I am very excited to meet these women. This may be the very first day of my life.

6. They are speaking of la liberation et la liberte for women. Sometime we think we are free, until we spread our wings and are cut down in mid air. But who can know a slave by the mere look in her eye? Ordinarily I would just paint he jardin and include in it some of these women at a picnic. That was before the question of freedom came up. Is it just the beauty of nature I am after?
7. Monet painted his most wonderful masterpiece, *Decorations des Nymphéas*, of the garden and the water-lily ponds. Those paintings hang in the circular galleries of the Musée de l’Orangerie in the Tuileries Gardens in Paris. That must be wonderful, to have your work so approved and revered by people to have it hanging in a space specially made for it. What does that amount of respect feel like?

8. Can a woman of my color ever achieve that amount of eminence in art in America? Here or anywhere in the world? Is it just raw talent alone that makes an artist’s work appreciated to the fullest? Or is it a combination of things, la magie par une exemple, le sexe par une autre, et la couleur est encore une autre, magic, sex, and color.

9. One has to get the attention one needs to feed the magic. There is no magic in the dark. It is only when we see it that we know a transformation has taken place, a wonderful idea has been created into art. If we never see it we never know, and it didn’t happen. Isn’t that why I and so many other negro artists have come to Paris- to get a chance to make magic, and find an audience for our art.

10. Should I paint some of the great and tragic issues of our world? A black man toting a heavy load that has pinned him to the ground? Or a black woman nursing the world’s population of children? Or the two of them together as slaves, building a beautiful world for others to live free? Non! I will paint something that will inspire—liberate. I want to do some of this WOMEN ART. Magnifique!

11. What will people think of my work? Will they just ignore it or will they give it some consideration? Maybe tear it apart and say that it is the worst ever and this artist should have her brushes burned and her hands, too. And isolate me as a woman artist because I am no longer trying to paint like, or to be like a man. Paris is full of these women artists who have no first names, wear men’s trousers and deny they are married or have children.

12. I paint like a woman. I always paint wearing a white dress. Now I have a subject that speaks out for woman. I can no more hide the fact that I am a woman than that I am a Negro. It is a waste of time to entertain such subterfuge any longer.

13. There are enough beautiful paintings of nude women in the world. I now want to see nude men painted by women, or nude men in the company of fully clothed women. C’est de la fantaisie pure. The men are expressing their power over women. But I am not interested in having power over anyone. I just want to see nude men in the company of fully clothed women for a change.

14. I am deeply inspired by these American women and their conversations about art and women in America. It makes me homesick for my country. And for their women’s movement, I have created this painting Picnic at Giverny par le tribute. They have given me something new to ponder, a challenge to confront in my art, a new direction. And pride in being a Negro woman.
Appendix Four
Text to Freedom: A fable

Page 1:
Thinking her deed done she soundly settles into a deep meditation on the nature of her world.

Page 2:
In it she knows she need not fear an insurrection. “Why, surely my people will understand that my knowledge of pairs in opposition and their operation in America will make me great.”

She thinks.

Page 3:
She has taken to referring to these unknown Africans as her people. She would like to claim ownership, “But not with papers or deeds or laws or such-like, but with undying devotion, and when I’ve earned myself that then I’ll work on the White people as well!”

Page 4:
“This ship, with its uncertain destination is much like this women’s sex,” she begins, pointing to a spot just below her navel. “For, herein lies the potential for many things, and yet they are all conjecture, fantastic ideals for our new future set up by right-thinking men and their well-meaning wives. But this sex, despite all outside expectations, no matter the damage done to it by previous or present, has quite the will of its own, creating juices where at first there were none and creating disease and vitality from the same brew.

“This woman’s body is like our history, starting from places of darkest mystery and capable of bringing to light New Worlds. The boat between,” her hands drifted down and merge into a V pulling faded calico taut over her thighs, “our ancestors filled with the murky slime of death.

“And our history is now like the death of the father, whose death we fear more than our uncertain lives. Our father, that peculiar institution, has left us here to rebirth our own bodies without benefit of conflict, love or land.

“Is this rebirth, or is this a slow death for which one can only seek life’s blood – although we know not whose? This woman’s ship-shaped sex casts a wide net, seeking to incriminate or absolve all that inhibits our rebirth. This ship will swallow us and regurgitate our remains in some new form. We are --- on Liberty’s black charms, our bodies are reborn at the hour of our --- demise. (Here the text is obscured by silhouette).

Page 5:
The group listened for a while, then grew irritable at N—‘s ravings. They did not care to know about impending doom. They considered whether she should be tossed to the floating boys, or would her body maybe provide sustenance for them all?
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