

## PRECARIOUS DIALOGUES WITH “INNER PLANTATION” IN KARA WALKER’S SILHOUETTE AND SCULPTURE INSTALLATIONS

Valeriya Sabitova

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**Abstract:** With reference to the traumatic legacy of slavery, this article analyses two works of American contemporary painter, silhouettist and installation artist Kara Walker: *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) and *A Subtlety, or The Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plan* (2014). The article, through the analysis of capitalization on stereotypes as an artistic strategy, argues that Walker not only moves beyond common cultural and representational paradigm of dealing with trauma and violence of slavery but also targets the process of internalization of a paradigm per se. Positing historical references against the ambiguity of her images and against the reaction of contemporary audience, Walker uses the theatrical potential of gallery and installation space, not merely immersing the viewers into her artwork but exposing the trauma and violence of slavery as subsumed by their representation. Such elusive boundaries which Walker terms “inner plantation” are taken as a point of departure for the analysis.

**Keywords:** culture, representation, stereotype, trauma, violence, Kara Walker, audience, silhouette, installation, affect

Having brought the archive of her drawings and writings to Basel and Frankfurt for the exhibition *Kara Walker: A Black Hole Is Everything a Star Longs to Be* in 2021-2022, American contemporary painter, silhouettist, print-maker and installation artist Kara Walker (1969), in conversation with Anita Haldemann, a curator at the Kunstmuseum Basel, refers to an artistic endeavour as a form of colonialism. The artist’s control over the page or the canvas makes him, according to Walker, “the holder of a kind of manifest destiny [with] colonialist attitude” to canvas whose

space is at the artist's complete disposal.<sup>1</sup> According to Walker, it is exactly the desire to overcome this artistic colonialism that has brought her beyond drawing and painting to cutouts and installations: "I also wanted to understand in what ways the painting or the paper or the substrate might come after me, might resist my attempts to ensnare it in my own sort of grand design."<sup>2</sup> Walker also refers to her turn to silhouettes as "a game" played to maintain "control over having a voice and improvisational resistance to doing what is expected or necessary."<sup>3</sup>

Having found for herself a unique medium in silhouette in the 1990s, Walker claimed that making silhouettes "simplified the frenzy [she] was working [herself] into [and] created the outward appearance of calm."<sup>4</sup> However, the calm that the artist seemed to derive from the medium was by far the affect that Walker's silhouettes produced. In regards to Walker's 1997 exhibition of *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) spread across the gallery space in cycloramic fashion, Shaw notes that an attack on

the cliches and stereotypes about plantation life [as] a part of the popular understanding of the past [was] a moment of communal visibility in which the act of viewing within the space of the gallery became a spectacular spectacle, a cyclical scopic activity in which museum patrons watched other museum patrons watching them back.<sup>5</sup>

Kara Walker's capitalization on the racist stereotypes of the "Mammy," the "Uncle Tom" and the "Nigger Wench" re-positions the readings of slave's and master's bodies against the fringes of the critical discourses focused on slavery. Affective economies associated with the representation of these, to some extent, not only evolve at the boundary of the unrepresentable but also between what Jacques Rancière terms representative and aesthetic regimes of art.<sup>6</sup> It is from this

<sup>1</sup> Kara Walker, "Artist Talk with Kara Walker," interview by Anita Haldemann, Kunstmuseum Basel, 4 June 2021, 22:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7jZyg7nOkcc&t=6s>.

<sup>2</sup> Walker, interview 22:38.

<sup>3</sup> Walker, interview 23:10.

<sup>4</sup> Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004) 13.

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 1.

<sup>6</sup> In the essay "Are Some Things Unrepresentable," Jacques Rancière distinguishes among the "representational" and the "aesthetic." The representational regime of art is based on the relationship of *mimesis* to *poiesis* and *aesthesis* necessary for the adjustment of the visible (experienced) to speech (means of representation) and of the reality to the image.

perspective of seemingly neat distinction of two regimes of art that Walker's work launches its own regime of indeterminate nature, a fringe, which transcends not merely representational economy (a part, if not an essential space of culture) but the notion of economy and regime per se in the movement towards the interstices and liminal connections between the allowed and the prohibited, the conceivable and the imaginable, the accepted and the rejected, the praised and the condemned. Dwelling at the very heart of traumatic historical heritage and, therefore, of cultural presuppositions and stereotypes, these precarious interstices capitalize on the reference to such history but in doing so, Walker attempts to demolish what she refers to as "inner plantation" – "a godlike game we artists play with our canvases forcing color and figures and allegories to do our bidding, as if they had no will of their own."<sup>7</sup> In other words, "inner plantation" represents culturally mediated stock categories – those of trauma, victimization and testimony – that are part and parcel of the colonizing attitude towards art.

It is within this "inner plantation" that the liminal connections within multiplicity become bound to the unifying dynamics of cultural production. It is within such "inner plantation" perspective that Walker's fellow artists and critics have initially reacted to her work with outrage. One of the most infamous responses to Walker's works is that of the once avant-garde African-American assemblage artist, Betye Saar. Her letter campaign against the display of Walker's works characterized the latter as "derogatory and racist," questioning the "validity of a black person's attempt to reclaim and reverse racist imagery through irony" and claiming that "Kara is selling us down the river."<sup>8</sup>

Over time, the critical discourses surrounding Walker's œuvre have evolved towards, in Darby English's terms, the necessity to perceive art in its multiplicity and avoid generalizations.<sup>9</sup> Vouching for such multiplicity through the dialogues

The notion of "unrepresentable" is only conceivable within this regime, which poses the issues of compatibility of "the surplus of presence" of the repeatable representation versus the gravity of the actual and singular event. On the other hand, the aesthetic regime of art, poses "an equality of the visible" making "all subjects [available] for any artistic form whatsoever." See Jacques Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2007) 112-18.

<sup>7</sup> Darby English, "A New Context for Reconstruction: Some Crises of Landscape in Kara Walker's Silhouette Installations," *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2007) 97.

<sup>8</sup> Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 15.

<sup>9</sup> Darby English writes about the dangers of generalization in art, and in the works of Black artists, in particular: "Assessments of what Black artists do overwhelmingly boil

to “inner plantation” of her own and of the audience, the materiality of Walker’s art, according to English, calls for opening up “a remarkably capacious blackness: quite literally discolored, commingled with contraries, contradictorily populated, the yield of certain theatricalization [...] not, at last, by reference to a foreknown certainty such as ‘the black artist’ or a ‘black experience.’”<sup>10</sup> Thus, referentiality to “blackness” as a discursive construct and theatricality in its performative connection to the visual launch in Walker’s work what Gwendolyn Shaw refers to as “a cyclical scopic activity.”

I would like to suggest that Walker’s art as “a game of resistance” strives beyond paradigms in a broader sense: the paradigm of historicized slavery and historicization, the paradigm of culturalized notions of trauma and victimization, and the paradigm of cultural production. What allows for this “game of resistance” and what consequences it bears is thus a focus of the present consideration of Walker’s two installations – *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), hereafter *The Grand Tableau*, and *A Subtlety, or The Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant* (2014), hereafter *A Subtlety*.<sup>11</sup> Through the analysis of these works, it is argued that Kara Walker’s use of referentiality and ambiguity in the case of *The Grand Tableau* and the point of contact in the case of *A Subtlety* foreground culture as the medium of one’s “inner plantation.”

### **Staging Ambiguous Referentiality in *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven***

*The Grand Tableau* is a black and white wall-size silhouette installation featuring six scenes. The first from the left is described as featuring three similarly looking

down to one or two things: they show us things about ourselves, or they show other things about us. Once upon a time, this discursive bondage, this limitation, was externally imposed: it was a way for anti-Black racism to keep the conceptual and practical ranges as narrow as possible. Today we produce it internally, replicating in our own image a situation where the range of subjects Black artists can speak to is shockingly narrow – far narrower than their actual engagements indicate [...].” In this sense, English already foregrounds the reductive frame of cultural discourses imposed on Black artists. Darby English, “Art Historian Darby English on Why the New Black Renaissance Might Actually Represent a Step Backwards,” interview by Folasade Ologundudu, *Artnet*, 26 February 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/darby-english-1947080>.

<sup>10</sup> English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness 2*.

<sup>11</sup> Images of Kara Walker’s works are available at <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com>.

bare-breasted slave women mutually nursing each other and ignoring the infant trying to get fed. This act of self-indulgence and neglect, if not rejection, of maternal action, according to multiple critical readings, counteracts female slave body stereotype at the origin of the “Mammy” image. Another scene with the motives of sadomasochism and defecation depicts a woman, usually described as a young mistress, with an axe blade turned backward and surrounded by a slave girl with a sharp-ended stick, a naked boy holding a small basket and a boy in the far left midstride in the act of defecation. Next scene features the silhouette of a bent adolescent girl described as being raped by a legless master character whose enormous belly rests on her back. The merging of two figures whereby the legs of the slave girl substitute the man’s missing limbs is interpreted by Shaw as the victim’s “taking in the body of the oppressor [and] becoming one with him.”<sup>12</sup> In the fourth scene, the mature male slave bends in prayer as a cord connects his anus to the baby underneath him. The scene itself is characterized by Shaw as uncanny mirror reflection of the previous one, whereby the praying slave mirrors the master who preys on his victim.<sup>13</sup> Critical interpretations of these scenes point towards transgression within clearly preserved boundaries of the spaces of victimhood and perpetration. Preservation of such boundaries is at the origin of cultural stereotypes and reductive attitude to representation of victimhood and perpetration, which are seen only content-wise rather than in their wider discursive implications for posing questions regarding cultural production.

To make a move from the content of *The Grand Tableau*, its several features should be noted in addition to the ones widely analyzed. First and foremost, it is the semi-cycloramic shape and wall size dimensions of this installation. The latter makes the silhouette figures either life-size or larger than the figures of the audience. The cycloramic shape of the installation functions by analogy with cyclorama curtain in theatre forming a partial background for the stage and by such an enclosure bringing the stage to the full visual focus. Analogously, it may be argued that cycloramic shape in this particular case creates a so-called stage decoration for the gallery where viewers do not simply behold the work of art but are also positioned side by side with the silhouette figures on almost equal footing, as for example, an actor’s body will be positioned against cycloramic background stage decoration depicting other figures. Finally, the juxtaposition of the scenes involving black silhouettes on the white canvas does not prescribe any direction of reading the scenes or connecting them into a sequential narrative. With a certain degree of reservation, it may be claimed that the scenes of child sexual abuse by

<sup>12</sup> Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 58.

<sup>13</sup> Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 58.

the armed adults are in the centre of the installation, but such an attempt may already be an imposition of a certain reading. These three significant features – the shape, dimension, and fragmentary nature of scenes on the tableau foreground the mechanism of Walker’s attempt to transcend the paradigmatic cultural conception of slavery and her work representing it.

The notion of the paradigm becomes an essential element in approaching Walker’s work. Zygmunt Bauman in *Culture in a Liquid Modern World* (2011) notes that culture “[as] a catch word and a call to action” had evolved from Enlightenment’s project of being “an agent of change” and currently reached the stage of “liquid modernity [when] none of the consecutive forms of social life is able to maintain its shape for long” and none of them are, no matter how solid or improved, “resistant to melting.”<sup>14</sup> For Bauman, culture today – resembling Lyotard’s conceptualization of the metaphysics of development<sup>15</sup> – is a post-paradigmatic phenomenon with the dynamics of a game.<sup>16</sup> The concept which unites the two theorists of culture is the mediating nature of the point of contact between the elements in a network making such point of contact an element in itself. According to Bauman, “it is praiseworthy and in itself admirable quality of cultural supply in a society in which networks replace structures, and an uninterrupted game of connecting to and disconnecting from those networks and the never-ending sequence of connections and disconnections replace determination, allegiance and belonging.”<sup>17</sup>

For a network to function in the mode of connecting and disconnecting sequences, it should be based on the points of contact and referentiality. Herein, Bauman’s notion of “uninterrupted game of connecting and disconnecting” networks mirrors Walker’s attempt at “a game of resistance” to what is expected from her as an artist. The way to resist such expectations initially presupposes bringing them to the spotlight, then blending them into the art, and finally theatrically exposing both actions, i.e., showing, not telling. These steps – referentiality, ambiguity and theatricality – are exemplified by critical responses

<sup>14</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture in a Liquid Modern World*, trans. Lydia Bauman (Oxford: Polity Press, 2015) 3-7.

<sup>15</sup> Lyotard claims that “[d]evelopment is not attached to an Idea, like that of the emancipation of reason and of human freedoms. It is reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone. It assimilates risks, memorizes their informational value and uses this as a new mediation necessary to its functioning.” Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 8.

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, *Culture* 11-13.

<sup>17</sup> Bauman, *Culture* 14.

to Walker's "game of resistance" when transgression and violence in art are welcomed because they reveal the horrors of slavery, yet there is a certain demand for adjustment of the representation of trauma to the boundaries of cultural perception of such trauma as being unrepresentable. Here, referentiality and ambiguity sustain "inner planation" of the cultural stereotype; in Walker's "game of resistance," they attack it.

In the essay "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" Rancière claims that the concept of the unrepresentable appears within the representational regime of art as a result of unavailability of "a form of material presentation [...] adequate to the idea; or, conversely, a scheme of intelligibility equal to its material power."<sup>18</sup> Since the phenomenon of slavery is now reconstructed by historical documents rather than the witnesses, it is hardly possible to access the gravity of the already unmediated event. Therefore, the benchmark of incommensurability of traumatic event and its image turns into the benchmark of incommensurability of the images of traumatic historical legacy and the artistic images.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, Rancière's proposition of the unavailability of a form of material presentation is not a static and self-enclosed phenomenon. It can be conceivable as such only if the event is still temporally accessible with the limited degree of mediation and the high degree of the experiential, i.e., through the witness or a victim. Otherwise, it already represents the residual cultural by-product of an ongoing process representational in nature and at several removes from the experiential. Noting that "ongoing experience frames [one's] understanding of the world," Nevitt points towards such a product claiming that the analysis following the reception of violence representation re-configures the meaning of violence consequences based on the consensual agreement of "readability."<sup>20</sup> This readability underlies the operation of the stereotype which English speaks about in relation to reductive readings of "blackness."<sup>21</sup> In other words, silhouette as an artistic means in Walker's case should be seen, due to iterability and recursion, as reductively

<sup>18</sup> Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" 110.

<sup>19</sup> This radically revises Rancière notion of the "surplus of presence" which stands for repetitive and recursive presence of the image of a traumatic event counteracting the singularity of the event itself by the "status of unreality" and affective residue of pleasure "incompatible with the gravity of the experience it contains." Rancière, "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" 110.

<sup>20</sup> Lucy Nevitt, *Theatre and Violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 15, 19.

<sup>21</sup> "Today we [replicate] in our own image a situation where the range of subjects Black artists can speak to is shockingly narrow—far narrower than their actual engagements indicate [...]." English, "Why the New Black Renaissance Might Actually Represent a Step Backwards."

downplaying the event at the origin of representation. However, it downplays the dynamics substituting the representation of trauma with trauma itself. This is not only at the core of quasi-unrepresentability but also at the origin of the mechanism blending sanctification of the victim and sanctification of the representation of the victim. This is the expectation Walker plays against through referentiality, ambiguity and theatricality.

Gwendolyn Shaw places Walker's works against multifarious historical contexts of slave discourses – Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly* (1852) and J.K. Lavater's (1741-1801) pseudo-scientific physiognomic theory using silhouettes for character reading – and against the experience of negative critical responses shared with other artists. These allow Shaw to read Walker's tableau as a transformation of “the elegant silhouettes of southern aristocracy into monstrous specters destroying their cultures in cycles of sadistic anarchy” signifying self-repressed culture of the black bourgeoisie.<sup>22</sup> It certainly also justifies David Wall's reading of Walker's work as the exposure of “grotesque racial stereotypes [which] engage the taboo-laden territory of racial representation [in] an unsettling confrontation with images of [violence, depravity, and] repeated transgression of sexual, social, and racial codes.”<sup>23</sup>

However, the nature of such referentiality comes to light if seen alongside the discomfiting and alienating but irrevocably captivating ambiguity of the scenes. For example, the first scene interpreted by many viewers as a circular self-indulgence of three women ignoring an infant who needs to be fed, may be read in quite the contrary way: the infant is fed by one of the women who are not involved in circular, but rather in sequential, self-indulgence. The furthest and the closest women do not complete the circle but incorporate the child into the sequence. Additionally, the third scene most often read as the depiction of the sodomized girl is interpreted analogously to the last scene where the child lies on the ground connected through cord to Uncle Tom's anus. However, in addition to the fact that no indication is given that the bent figure is a girl, the figure may also not be considered as bent but rather as appearing out of so-called master's body – still an analogy with the fourth scene, but a different one. I want to argue that through such ambiguity, Walker, despite the violent nature of depiction,

<sup>22</sup> As such Shaw claims that Walker's “carnavalesque vision of an abject world consumed by violence and perverse sexuality flies in the face of the self-repressed artistic culture of the black bourgeoisie represented by the Friends of African and African American Art in Detroit.” Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 122.

<sup>23</sup> David Wall, “Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking in the Art of Kara Walker.” *Oxford Art Journal* 33, no. 3 (2010): 279.



abandons discursive discrimination of borderlines and uses the figures to foreground that violence and trauma are part and parcel of a cultural myth for both the master and for the slave. According to Shaw, Walker's art points towards the "lack of solidarity with the aims of a specific segment of the African American middle class," as well as towards the "complicated distortions of cultural history [which *The Grand Tableau*] resurrects and reenacts [as] a phantasm of inherited guilt over slavery that many Americans have long tried to reconcile in a rush to declare a race-free society."<sup>24</sup> Walker seems to refuse discursive and cultural boundaries in relation to perpetrators and victims of violence, placing out in the open the operations of cultural stereotyping through the ambiguity of these scenes.

Theatricality can be seen in Walker's use of exhibition space. The gallery space itself becomes the exhibition through the use of wall which blends with the dimensions and the shape of the canvass. I have already mentioned the theatrical implications of the latter. In addition to it, the size and dimension of the wall installation immerse the audience into a variety of terrains by blending the boundaries between the space, the artwork, and the audience. Enclosing the gallery wall, the installation interferes with the gallery space. Not framing the scenes individually as a painting would do using frame as a boundary, and instead juxtaposing the scenes on uninterrupted canvas blended with the wall of the gallery, *The Grand Tableau* subverts the temporal abyss separating the modern viewer from the traumatic legacy by immersing one into the stage set of the gallery and then upsetting the concept of witness. Through reference and ambiguity, the theatrical use of the gallery space turns the witnessing of the representation of slavery into the questioning of the mechanism of cultural production of stereotypes and art, refracting these two through the prism of each other. The white space of the wall as an absence of the ground requires active imagination and clear understanding of the borderline between the event and its cultural mediation.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, Walker's work calls for realization of the difference

<sup>24</sup> Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 121.

<sup>25</sup> This is what Darby English implies by claiming that "Walker's removal of the ground is in effect what separates the inner plantation from the real one. It is how the tableaux's characters escape actual confusion with subjects located concretely in the world [...]. Too, it is how the tableaux escape the perjury charge so frequently levelled at their 'distortions' of the slaves' truths. It is how Walker's tableaux organize themselves into a strikingly appropriate way to depict a contemporary cultural landscape where the most pleasurable, terrifying, and consequential relations that occur between subjects do not take place on the ground at all. It specifies the tableaux's critique by grounding its object in the domain of the symbolic, in its generative play of surfaces." English, "A New Context for Reconstruction," 129-30.

between an image, albeit trauma-related one, and the event. According to English, a wall in Walker's silhouette installations "starkly mocks 'selfless' picture of culture as stopped time" when it foregrounds that representation is merely a set of "choices put forth in the constantly mutating plots and possibilities of self these choices represent."<sup>26</sup>

Culture code, no matter how ideological or discursive by nature, is a kind of a "revelatory process" aimed, in Homi Bhabha's terms, at the exposure of otherness. While Bhabha speaks of the stereotype, his definition well fits a codification of culture as an exposure of otherness in the knowable and visible way and then as a further reduction of such visibility to a certain social relation to things.<sup>27</sup> A set of national, ethnic, social, traditional assumptions acquire the status of cultural code once they undergo visualization and are endowed with embodiment. When the encoded boundaries are visualized in terms of adherence or transgression, a possibility of allegiance or disenfranchisement gives rise to a variety of culture patterns. Through referentiality, ambiguity and theatricality, Walker references the code, distorts it and brings it on stage for the audience to be involved in the process of reflection. Therefore, as English notes, Walker's art is "a formidable challenge to an old, widely adopted, and ever more cleverly disguised interpretive paradigm, one that sees its defining task as that of establishing or indicating a proper relation between black artist and black art."<sup>28</sup> English writes that Walker's tableaux cannot be said to constitute images of slavery or images *per se* but they should rather be seen as "delicate and precarious holdovers of an image lost to the 'play of surfaces' [through which we have to come to terms with the possibility that slavery] may be no more real – for us, now – than it can become within the terms of this 'play,' [hence, it means] curbing the urge to restore the tableaux to the realistic mode that they evacuate precisely in order to distinguish themselves."<sup>29</sup>

That is where Shaw's reference to audience affect from Walker's work, as to "a cyclical scopic activity" in which one watches the other watching one back, is valuable. What is visible is re-circulated by Walker with the spiralling effect. A strong sense of awareness of seeing and being seen launches a range of questions: is one a part of the exhibit subsumed by or surfacing out of it? Is the mass audience

<sup>26</sup> English, "A New Context for Reconstruction" 122.

<sup>27</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question," *Literature, Politics and Theory: Papers from the Essex Conference 1976-1984* (1986), ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen and Diana Loxley (London: Routledge, 2003) 23-27.

<sup>28</sup> English, "Introduction" 3.

<sup>29</sup> English, "A New Context for Reconstruction" 89.

yet another part of the show? How many such parts are there? What about borderlines: are these borderlines between or within these elements? The range of such questions cyclically unfolds the internal dynamics of culture and representation in Walker's precarious dialogue with her own "inner plantation" staged for viewer to participate in. Such questions are further raised almost two decades later by *A Subtlety, or The Marvelous Sugar Baby: an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plan* (2014).

### **Mediating the Points of Contact in *A Subtlety* and *An Audience***

*A Subtlety* (2014) is the exhibit of a large white sphinx surrounded by several life-size figures of children placed in the warehouse of Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn for the exhibition that run from May to July 2014. The sphinx made of white sugar with the head almost touching the warehouse ceiling stands in stark contrast to fifteen brown human-size statues of children, three of which are completely made of brown sugar. The walls of the refinery dripping with solidified molasses and the breathing of the hundreds of visitors around the statues made the sugary cover of the statues drip,<sup>30</sup> which created a sense of temporal and referential movement from the history of slave and sugar trade to the modern sugar refinery condemned to demolition.

The visitors to the exhibition were asked to share their own pictures of the statues and with them through Instagram via the launched hashtag. After the exhibition, the factory workers who moulded the sculptures from sugar using Walker's sketches, demolished the exhibit. A week later, an after-exhibition documentary titled *An Audience* was produced featuring full range of audience responses to the exhibit, including those sexualizing and fetishizing the sphinx by visitors posing as though licking or touching exposed parts of her body. The 27-minute documentary-style film was released six months later, having made the sphinx and the overall exhibit a part of the larger intermedial artwork. This work extends the use of the exhibition space already foregrounded by *The Grand Tableau* through the medium of filming: while the sculpture itself is no longer extant, it has become a part of the documentary, blending the ephemerality of the exhibit and the recorded audience reaction, and raising an issue of mediation. Therefore,

<sup>30</sup> For the detailed description of the exhibit see Laura van den Bergh, "Exhibitions of the Stereotype in Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*," *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change* 3, no. 2 (2018): 1-3.

reflecting on the sculpture exhibited in the refinery warehouse and yet unmediated into the documentary becomes, in a certain sense, reductive. Alison Herman points out that “photos of an empty warehouse [...] don’t convey the full work, because the work wasn’t complete until it had an audience to interact, pose, and yes, take selfies with it.”<sup>31</sup> As a result, Herman posits *A Subtlety* as a work of performance; nevertheless, the use of film medium also foregrounds mediation at the core of this artwork.

The point of contact between two media, therefore, also underlies the consideration of *A Subtlety* and *An Audience*. Since the audience was allowed to touch the exhibit,<sup>32</sup> which is not commonly the case, the contact with the surface of the sculpture and specifically the choice of which part of it to touch or to point to should also be deemed essential. Hence, the two layers of the point of contact: the direct contact of the visitors with the sculptures and the contact between two media – the exhibition space and the documentary featuring the audience reaction.

On the one hand, the sphinx’s sugary and white surface link the point of contact with reference-laden material of sculpture and its shape. As van den Bergh notes, the abundant references to sugar – in the dessert known as “subtlety” (served to nobility and burghers in the late Middle and Early Modern Ages) and in slave trade, as well as the allusions to the colour of the sphinx, its facial features of the Mammy and corporeal features of the Hottentot Venus, all point in the direction of established stereotypes.<sup>33</sup> The giant size of the figure, whose dominating presence overrides the multiplicity of the crowd, makes the audience look like a colony of ants moving around sugar attraction at the level of the sphinx’s limbs.

As a result, the juxtaposition of the sphinx’s and visitor’s respective sizes and dimensions brings forth the latter’s awareness and, therefore, materialization, of bodily boundaries. The contingency of contact and body boundaries, as theorized by Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), is linked to the notion of

<sup>31</sup> Alison Herman, “New Kara Walker Video Shows ‘A Subtlety’ Was Performance Art All Along,” *Flavorwire*, 20 November 2014, <https://www.flavorwire.com/489699/new-kara-walker-video-shows-a-subtlety-was-performance-art-all-along>.

<sup>32</sup> According to Herman, “the majority of the clip focuses on audience interactions of all kinds: kids playing with molasses, families posing for group shots in front of the sphinx, couples touching its side and marveling at the texture. The obnoxious pictures make an appearance, but the video spends far more time focusing on the full range of responses from the audience – an audience that’s both predominantly non-white and far more respectful than not.” Herman, “New Kara Walker Video Shows.”

<sup>33</sup> van den Bergh, “Exhibitions of the Stereotype” 2-4.

“intensification,” i.e., an intense experience of pain and injury.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of size and dimension of *A Subtlety* and its audience allows to extend Ahmed’s notion of “intensification.” Through the dependence of “intensification” on other elements external to the body, the point of contact becomes for Ahmed both economic and performative in nature. On the one hand, “the economic nature of intensification [whereby] one is more or less aware of bodily surfaces depend[s] on the range and intensity of bodily experiences, [which in turn] points to dynamic nature of surfacing itself.”<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the point of contact acquires the performative implications as feeling at the origin of body boundaries, and as Ahmed notes, functions bilaterally, both making and unmaking these very borders: “what separates us from others also connects us to others.”<sup>36</sup> This links the points of contact and mediation, i.e., not only the encounter with the giant sphinx but also the sphinx itself is “ascribed meaning and value.”<sup>37</sup> Hence, the encounter with the sugar figure primes the visitor to accommodate the vast dimension of stereotypes signified by its dimension, material, shape and colour.

The human size of the child figures, on the other hand, remediates this relationship on a different plane. Dimensional accessibility of the figures accompanied by the change of their colour to black and representing children presumably exploited on sugar plantations, as the baskets they are holding could signify, literally allows the audience to look in the eyes of these figures. The plane of the sphinx’s vision, inaccessible to the audience, levels with the latter in the case of the children’s figures. Here, the point of contact launches a different performative economy and two levels of contact remediate one’s body boundaries depending on proportional or disproportional size of the figures. In contrast to *The Grand Tableau*, where referentiality is refracted through the prism of ambiguity, *A Subtlety* refracts referentiality through the prism of body boundaries materialized by the point of contact. The contact thus becomes what Jean-François Lyotard calls a regulating element with the capacity of “better regulation” due to its being both within and

<sup>34</sup> Ahmed’s work discusses such materialization of boundaries and contact through pain as “materialization” through “intensification” whereby “bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, [and] the effect of boundary, surface and fixity is produced.” Intensification brings the body which, albeit present, tends to disappear from the view, back into view since. Therefore, Ahmed’s concept of intensification linked to pain can be extended to any experience bringing the body to awareness of itself. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014) 24-26.

<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, *Politics of Emotion* 26.

<sup>36</sup> Ahmed, *Politics of Emotion* 25.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed, *Politics of Emotion* 28.

outside of two interacting objects.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, *A Subtlety* undertakes referentiality both in its literal and in its mediating dimensions by initially bringing original sources into view but then turning tables on the artwork itself, its audience, and its critics.

Furthermore, the documentary *An Audience* encloses the exhibition space in the film medium, thus producing this work across the media of first sculpture, then installation, and finally film, making all three interact and produce certain tension. Marshal McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) notes that “the hybrid or the meeting of two media is a moment of truth and revelation [...], a moment of freedom and release” producing “tension” at their boundaries.<sup>39</sup> The further it is from the spaces where several territories verge on each other, the clearer and easier it is to exist within the designated space. However, the closer it is to the boundary, a frontier or a wall, in McLuhan’s words, the higher the tension: “mere existence side by side of any two forms of organization generates a great deal of tension.”<sup>40</sup> Such tension, according to McLuhan, is present not only in the social or economic spheres but also in “mental image-making and – breaking,” which is particularly relevant both to *The Grand Tableau* and to *A Subtlety* considering McLuhan’s reference to “the pleasure of being among the masses.”<sup>41</sup> It is this numerical composition of the audience and the tension at boundaries that launch “cyclical scopic activity” when one is seen in the act of seeing.

Almost two decades after *The Grand Tableau*, which, as Shaw notes, reveals the suppressive vision of cultural conservatives, *An Audience* (with *A Subtlety*) foregrounds Walker’s attempt at “cyclical scopic activity” targeted at the

<sup>38</sup> Jean-François Lyotard posits that “between two elements [...] it is always possible to introduce a third term which will assure a better regulation,” which is not merely a function of this element, rather, it is a point of connection: “the ‘richer’ [...] the mediating term, the more numerous the possible modifications, the suppler the regulation, the more floating the rate of exchange between the elements, the more permissive the mode of relation.” Lyotard, “Introduction” 6. The abstract nature of such regulating capacity is also counteracted by Lyotard’s consideration of the body as “the hardware” of the thought because “thought borrows a horizon and orientation [...], from the corporeal.” Jean-François Lyotard, “Can Thought Go On Without Body?” *The Inhuman* 13.

<sup>39</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1994) 55.

<sup>40</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 69.

<sup>41</sup> “In the theater, at a ball, at a ball game, in church, every individual enjoys all those others present. The pleasure of being among the masses is the sense of the joy in the multiplication of numbers, which has long been suspect among the literate members of Western society.” McLuhan, *Understanding Media* 103, 107.

multiplicity of “inner plantations.” Laura van den Bergh’s reading of *A Subtlety* suggests that Walker challenges stereotypes by “representation of the audience’s diverse responses to these stereotypes,” i.e., doing away with selectivity. Even considering the remarkable and uncanny closeness of the sugar sphinx to Saartje Baartman, known as the Hottentot Venus, van den Bergh notes that “the sphinx was never the main attraction after all [but rather] a setting in which Walker documented the audience’s encounter with historical stereotypes” prompting “a triangular line of vision” – a space of multiple gazes reversed in multiple directions to scrutinize the interface between the space, the artwork, the audience, and the representation of each of these. In van den Bergh’s words, “rather than documenting either the superficial or the critical reactions, *An Audience* demonstrates that both reactions – and everything in between – were equally represented.”<sup>42</sup>

On the one hand, visitors fetishizing the sculpture mirror the audience flocking to the Hottentot Venus shows two centuries ago; on the other hand, such reactions reveal a similar tension that prompted Walker’s critics to condemn her early works. Yet, refusing to focus solely on such reactions, Walker refracts the point of contact between the exhibit and the audience through the contact between the media of exhibition and film. As a better regulator, the point of contact between the adjacent territories of *A Subtlety* and *An Audience* becomes the litmus test of false solidarity, internal cultural subjugation and self-perpetuating cultural mythology because Walker, in Shaw’s words, radically rewrites “a profound legacy of signification.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, while arguing that *A Subtlety* challenges the notion of traumatic memories as stereotypical imagery, van den Bergh claims the “necessity of a stereotype” for culture to be socially viable and functional.<sup>44</sup>

However, such necessity is also a matter of artistic strategy. Playing with and around the audience’s preconceptions of slavery, trauma, and history, Walker’s artworks place in the spotlight the mechanisms which sustain cultural production and reception. The artist uses the understanding of the exhibition space in order to participate in the “play of picturing and erasures, desires and violences that are endemic to culture formation.”<sup>45</sup> The audience, presumably merely the spectators at the onset, eventually become the actors producing the image on a par with silhouette and sculpture, staging the “cultural process that integrates imaginative, artistic, and political picturing practices.”<sup>46</sup> This artistic strategy can, to some

<sup>42</sup> van den Bergh, “Exhibitions of the Stereotype” 9.

<sup>43</sup> Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable* 26.

<sup>44</sup> van den Bergh, “Exhibitions of the Stereotype” 8.

<sup>45</sup> English, “A New Context for Reconstruction” 96.

<sup>46</sup> English, “A New Context for Reconstruction” 97.

extent, pave the way towards the condition of pluriverse posited by Mignolo as “a universal project aimed not at changing the world (ontology) but at changing the beliefs and the understanding of the world (gnoseology).”<sup>47</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Placing the discourse of slavery in dialogue with artistic representation, Kara Walker creates a very specific cultural product: an a-paradigmatic image whose tensions and intensities capitalize on discursive stereotypes of racial and colonial narratives but through such capitalization stage the resistance from within. Using discursively and stereotypically burdened media of colour (black and white) and material (sugar), along with culturally and historically laden phenomena of trauma, victimization and violence, she aims at liminal connections between the allowed and the prohibited at the origin of the substitutive impulse equalizing traumatic historical heritage to its representation. Using the notion of “inner plantation” for culturally internalized expectations, the artist places herself, her work, and her audience within the boundaries hard to discard, then pushes towards the disposal of such boundaries, and eventually translocates these processes onto the stage of gallery space and a warehouse. Being a ‘colonizer’ within such artistic space is an option neither for the artist nor for her audience.

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<sup>47</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Foreword. On Pluriversality and Multipolarity,” *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge*, ed. Bernd Reiter (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2018) x.



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