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Excerpt

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“How can this image contain for you all the secrets of the re-enactment of history in the arena of Desire?”

Kara Walker¹

HISTORY IN THE ARENA OF DESIRE

In a 1997 exhibition of Kara Walker’s black-paper silhouettes, one of the life-size cutouts features a woman leaping joyfully through a field (see Figure 1). Antebellum dress billowing, body aloft in the stylized abandon of dance, the woman seems a picture of innocent pleasure. Yet the graceful lift of one arm directs us to the decapitated head perched atop her own like a trophy. We come belatedly to the realization that the image is not sentimental but gothic, the postponement of horror made possible by the way the head’s shape and significance emerge slowly, reluctantly, out of our disbelief. Its meaning arises as from a Rorschach blot, the head assuming all sorts of shapes – the figurehead of a ship’s prow or an elaborate bonnet. Or perhaps, most convincingly, it seems to bloom like a strange flower from the woman below it, her own head nodding gently under the deadweight of the other’s, precisely as the grass stalks at her feet bow under the heavy pods topping them. With the organic symmetry between plant and person, Walker naturalizes a most unnatural sight: decapitation seems as ordinary and inevitable as grass gone to seed. This kind of subtle aesthetic conspiracy invites us to forget for a moment the violence necessarily preceding the dismemberment – for who gives up one’s head willingly? Or should we ask: what, perhaps, had the woman who lost her head done to warrant losing it? In short: on whose head rests the burden of violence?

Walker’s silhouette begs such questions about the how and why of this racial parting of ways. But it also, even in this image of violence’s aftermath, suggests the *centripetal* as well as centrifugal forces of interracial intimacy. Because the profiles are both silhouetted black (even as only one woman

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Race, Work, and Desire

Figure 1 Kara Walker. Detail from 'Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, Missus K. E. B. Walker, Colored', 1997. Cut paper and adhesive on wall. Complete installation 12 × 155 feet. Courtesy Brent Sikkema, New York City.

appears phenotypically “black”), the image creates the illusion of corporeal continuity between the two women – we cannot tell where one body begins and the other leaves off; they are yoked as one black image laid against, in both spatial and political senses of the word, an almost oppressively boundless white backdrop. Yet these women are clearly sisters neither in body nor in spirit. The seamless blending of their bodies works against what emerges in profile as their distinct racial identities: the thin lips and sharp nose of the dead woman imply she is white, the broad nose and

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full mouth of the leaping woman suggest she is black. But within the terms of the image, the validity of these visual cues is thrown into question even as they are thrown into relief, because they make sense only in context and by comparison: one woman's nose looks "rounder" here only as much as the other woman's looks "straighter," and one appears white only as much as the other's blackness seems apparent. In other words, we can describe one only in terms of the other – a kind of Heisenberg principle of race in which racial difference is situational, provisional: it depends on who is looking and who is next to whom. And, as I suggested, who and whom in this image are always already joined; black and white are mirror and tain. In effect, then, Walker's profile both performs and burlesques racial profiling. Thus even as we attribute race to each woman, the act of attribution itself becomes questionable, reminding us that racial difference does not exist *a priori*, but arises out of the collision of expectation and circumstance – or, put another way, out of desire and history.

So just how, in Walker's terms, *is* history enacted in the arena of desire? In part, it is enacted in the way this individual portrait of raced identities also reveals, more generally, the historical face of race relations. That is, their specificity as women is not the sum of their relationship; we are invited to identify them further as "slavegirl" and "mistress," and thus to place them among the racial types emerging from the literal prison and figurative prisms of slavery. We are familiar with the genre, its tropes, its working scripts: the white woman as a mistress of the Big House for whom the slave was forced to labor; the slavegirl, the probable object of not only abuse but lust and jealousy. The decapitation becomes the denouement of a narrative in which white mistresses and black slave women appear as generic characters in their working roles.

Walker's scene, therefore, is not simply a crisis of individual desire, the result of what one woman would or would not be to the other, needs and expectations required or not – a so-called "crime of passion." Desire and its discontents seem exclusively personal, a function of the affective and local rather than the political and historical, but this image of a black woman carrying a white woman's head gains full significance only when understood as both emotional climax *and* historically significant gesture. In fact, we might consider history best represented as the accumulation not of dates but of acts of desire. Walker explains: "It's as though the life of a living breathing moment were best suited to rearticulation via historical romances . . . beginning with slave narratives and abolitionists' testimonies which established the cast of characters, and subsequently reduced all truths to a language best suited to the readers . . . Living

becomes romance, History-adventure . . . the boundaries are drawn” (16). Racial history writ in the arena of desire means recognizing both that desire has a literary-historical context, and conversely, that the narration of history itself reflects a form of collective desire.

In Walker’s image we see this latter sense of history – as a complex of social fantasy and desire – functioning both as reflective memory and as imaginative projection. Walker retrieves the history of race relations only to propose simultaneously a revised story. She resuscitates this antebellum plot in less obvious ways, as well: the image creates, and then plays on, audience reluctance to let go of the initial impression of the image as a black woman dancing in the field – the default preference for the pleasant rather than the painful replicates the pull of white nostalgia for the “happy darkie,” regardless of the racial identification of the audience. Arguably, then, audiences in this sense find themselves unwittingly, if only momentarily, drawn into the fantasies of the Old South.

Yet even as Walker proposes the outlines of the historical relations of slave and mistress, she reverses the symbolic content filling in those lines. The reversal reminds us that this symbolic content consists of attributions of certain gender and class characteristics based on race, and through its reapportionment of those same racial characteristics, the image reminds us, too, of their arbitrariness. The fingertips exquisitely poised before the mistress’ still lips, for example, suggest the white woman is merely inhaling the delicate fragrance of her own living flesh. In that frozen moment the representative gesture of white refinement seems forever counterpoised to the careless motion of the black woman bounding beneath her, a classic bust of white composure apparently set against – and literally above – black animation.

But, in fact, the sensitive touch belongs not to the white corpse but to the triumphant black woman. The historical signature of the white woman’s sex and superiority – her brow smooth and complacent, her countenance serene – marks only death’s rigor mortis. Instead it is the black woman here who owns the feminine grace and gentility considered the racial possession of her white mistress. As Hazel Carby and bell hooks have argued, the pedestal on which the white woman in the nineteenth century rests is balanced on the laboring backs of black women, and further, that “true womanhood” itself is determined by these work relations.² Black and white women’s roles under slavery were structured both by the physical work they performed (or not) in relation to each other, and by the cultural work that each performed in determining gender itself. By fashioning the black woman as “wearing” her mistress’s head – the synecdoche of white women’s

status – Walker reiterates these historical racial and sexual hierarchies only to creatively refigure them in her two-headed creature.

The nineteenth-century popular culture that Walker's art engages offers some curious precedents for this racial Hydra. Her image's double head, for instance, is curiously akin to the double hips of the antebellum Topsy-Turvy doll, which also give (mis)shape to the twinned desires of white and black. The doll is racially reversible: two girls joined at the crotch so that children could play with the stuffed "Dinah" or, if one flipped her skirt over, with her forbidden counterpart, the white "Miss." Created within slave communities as a response to slaveholders' ban on black children possessing "white" dolls, the paired forms of Topsy-Turvy offered a way of possessing and manipulating that which was denied – namely, the privileges and power associated with those they served.³ Ironically, in the postbellum era the Topsy-Turvy came to represent not an uncomfortable reminder of racial separatism but rather, for white collectors of Americana, a symbol of national unification. Its commercial success depended on the image of joined bodies as an idealized vision of interracial harmony. The symbols of racial desire, therefore, are not historically fixed, but rather continuously obliging, accommodating – even, as in this case, reversible.

Race, Work, and Desire suggests that these and other fictions of close relations across the color-line are attempts to fulfill various narrative goals in writing the history of race relations. If we lift the skirt to peer at the seams of the Topsy-Turvy doll, at the knit and purl of black and white, we glimpse the obscene embodiment of highly racialized desires, what I would like to call more simply "racial desire." Racial desire is that suspended – and thus perpetually renewable – moment of antipathy and attraction on the color-line that is at once personal and historical. This desire, arguably, is realized and acted out most forcefully in "intimate" relations, by which I mean one-on-one relations; it mimics and seems confined to the patterns and gestures of the purely personal. But such private moments do not exist unto themselves; they form part of a crowded gallery of black-white portraits in which mutual need and fascination cannot be explained merely in terms of domination and abjection.

Ralph Ellison offers us an opening salvo and perhaps the most compelling language with which to explain white investment in blackness. Against their white backdrop, Walker's silhouettes deepen to three-dimensionality, for example, suggesting the limitless black field of white fantasy and projection that, as Ellison put it, "forms the stage and the scene upon which and within which" the drama of "American life" is acted out.⁴ But the projectionists can be both white and black: racial desire is not only what

George Frederickson has called the black image in the white mind nor what Mia Bay sees as the white image in the black mind,⁵ although this study is indebted to both their work. Neither does racial desire only concern the white “love” and “theft” of black expressivity or white “racial masquerade.”⁶ As I argue in this study, the racial desire at the core of Ellison’s American drama goes beyond both a black investment in whiteness – what Langston Hughes in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” critiqued as a will to whiteness – and white investment in blackness – what Toni Morrison identifies in *Playing In The Dark* as the “metaphors; summonings; rhetorical gestures of triumph, despair, and closure dependent upon the associative language of dread and love that accompanies blackness” for whites.⁷ Racial desire, as intended here, is not pathological, psychological, or unilateral but instead, as I will explain, is a tandem negotiation of the historical differentials informing black-white affective relations.

RACIAL DESIRE IN THE WORKPLACE

Part of my rationale for selecting texts that represent some form of working relation across the races is based on the fact that racial desire arises perhaps most frequently, if almost counterintuitively, in the context of work relations. The races share the most extended and close contact – routine, cumulative, mundane – in the workplace. Just as early nineteenth-century black wet-nursing of white babies or black domestics’ washing and dressing white persons involved an extreme familiarity that was also nonetheless predicated on racial distance, so the postbellum workplace can create a familiar “intimacy” of sorts that paradoxically both collapses and sustains racial dissociation. A *New York Times* 2000 front-page series on late twentieth-century race relations makes a case for this focus on working relations that I would argue can and should be applied much earlier in the century: “Race relations are being defined less by political action than by daily experience, in schools, in sports arenas, in pop culture and at worship, and especially in the workplace.” Thus, note the *Times* reporters, we must examine “these encounters – race relations in the most literal, everyday sense . . .”⁸

Their distinction between “daily experience” and “political action,” on the one hand, is useful in suggesting that it is in the less noticeable everyday, as well as in the more public civil rights alliances or national political gestures, that blacks and whites meaningfully engage each other. But we see in Booker T. Washington’s 1895 Atlanta Exposition speech the way in which “daily experience” in the workplace is also, historically, political:

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Washington calls for those on either side of the color-line to interlace “our industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life” in the name of “mutual progress” while keeping “all things that are purely social . . . as separate as the fingers.”⁹ Washington’s famous image metaphorically resolves white racial anxiety about the risk of social contact that laboring side by side might inspire by suggesting that just as the hand’s digits share fraternal proximity without friction, as it were, so can the races. Indeed, the workplace, he says further, justifies close interracial contact in the name of national “progress.” But since the advancement of national interest was one of several passing justifications for slavery, and since slavery is the birthplace of labor relations between blacks and whites in the United States, the workplace remains often symbolically fraught and historically freighted.¹⁰ The workplace for this reason can be both banal and volatile, for some a possible refuge, for others the very reason to seek one.

Race, Work, and Desire suggests that the relations developed under the aegis of “work” represent a particularly charged subset of daily communication between races. The “work” in my title concerns work environments and protocols, and, even more importantly, how interracial relationships are themselves “worked out,” “worked over,” “worked up” within those contexts. Rather than a social history of labor, this book is an exploration of literary representations of working correspondences as they acquire intellectual and imaginative leverage. It is essential to point out that the variety of working relations these texts represent makes for certain asymmetries – domestic servants’ relations with their employers are distinct from patients’ relations with their doctors and from artists’ with their patrons. Those distinctions are many and apparent; my interest is in the subtler but more compelling resemblances, the way these relations afford and regulate interracial contact through some “intimate” dimension. The intimacies that I refer to in the texts include representations of the *modiste’s* or *bonne’s* knowledge of the white household’s dearest secrets and lies, the physician’s access to patients’ every physical nook and psychic cranny, and the artist’s participation in his or her patrons’ deepest artistic and civic ambitions.

I must emphasize that my aim is not to reify taxonomies of the public or private, nor to account for some slippage between the two; rather, my point is that in these representations of professional relations, affective discourses are both textually defined against, and then subtly imbricated with, workplace discourses such that business partners or colleagues function at times simultaneously as lovers, friends, intimates. My interest is not in the ability of a character to inhabit multiple roles, but in analyzing the political and rhetorical effects of this shifting between discursive

registers, a shifting that often goes undocumented but is neither innocent nor accidental. As the later-era slavery's trope of the family gave cover for economic exploitation and black "social death,"¹¹ for example, so Mary Todd Lincoln can call her dressmaker Elizabeth Keckley her very dearest friend (for whom insistence on payment would too grossly commercialize their companionship) and on that basis justify bankrupting her. Such an instance makes clear that my references to intimacy in the workplace should not be mistaken for unfettered closeness, though it may be represented as such by a particular character in a novel; intimacy is qualified, conditioned, and continually adjusted by the shifting terms of their professional arrangements.

This does not always mean that such forms of intimacy are always exploited for nefarious ends. Of particular interest to *Race, Work, and Desire* are representations from around Reconstruction through the Harlem Renaissance in which both African and Anglo Americans also make professionally usable or politically significant this variable dimension to "laboring" relations. In the writings of the black authors Elizabeth Keckley, Frances E. W. Harper, and Langston Hughes, and in the work of whites such as Grace King, Kate Chopin, William Dean Howells, Amy Spingarn, and Carl Van Vechten, the symbolic boundaries of racial conjugation become a compelling site for the arbitration of Anglo- and African-American interests. My selection of literary works produced between the 1860s and the 1930s is more historical than literary: three of the most dominant venues for interracial exchange after slavery – the service industry, medical practice, and arts patronage – developed during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Apart from military service and marriage, the professional relations increasingly institutionalized during these decades have provided recurrent frameworks for close contact across the color-line. These both historically situate the works and thematically link them within this study, loosely grouping the individual chapters: domestic service (Chapters One and Three), doctor-patient negotiations (Chapter Two) and artistic collaborations (Chapter Four).

Chapter One, "Dressing down the First Lady: Elizabeth Keckley's *Behind The Scenes, Or Thirty Years A Slave And Four Years In The White House*," analyzes Keckley's 1868 exposé of her white employers – most especially Mary Todd Lincoln – in the context of postbellum work relations. Keckley's narrative was received with great hostility by whites; this chapter argues that much of that controversy arose from her historically untested and vexed status as self-employed ex-slave. Her narrative emerges as the nation as a whole made its troubled move from slavery to "free" black labor, from

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compulsory relations to putatively consensual work arrangements. This move disrupted (largely late antebellum) arguments that proposed slavery as a civic good rather than a necessary economic evil. In the service of this particular pro-slavery argument, whites characterized black servitude in terms of family obligation. In the manifestations of enslavement on plantations (though it persisted in urban slavery as well), “uncles,” “aunties,” and “boys” were expected to show filial loyalty, and white slave owners “owed” their slaves the reward of paternalism. As many have noted, the language of debt and recompense for forced labor was familial rather than monetary; the “peculiar institution” was coded as just another form of filial allegiance. Much more critical attention needs to be brought to bear on the way emancipation ended slavery’s law but not its languages.

To that end Chapter One attempts to trace slavery’s word into the postwar era, arguing that racial discourses of family and filiation subtly fuse with emerging workplace codes of interracial conduct. I argue that the power in and the protest over Keckley’s *Behind The Scenes*, lie in its exploitation of the overlapping rhetorics of family and work that were imported from domestic slavery to domestic service at mid-century. Keckley’s narrative was in no small measure banned because of its suggestion that after the Civil War interracial intimacy would not come cheap. The ban signaled labor pains in the birth of a new nation, and, with them, the painful reconstruction of personal and social exchange between the races. Chapter One’s coda, “Servicing Marie in Grace King’s *Monsieur Motte*,” offers a brief analysis of the largely unexamined role of affective relations in these political reconstructions.

Meant as suggestive rather than exhaustive, this section examines the way King uses “love” to keep working black women in their place – and in *Monsieur Motte* (1888) that place is beside white women (as their guardians and, as importantly for King, their hairdressers). A New Orleans native, King interpreted postwar conditions as nothing less than an assault on what she called the “Kingdom of Womanhood,” perceiving them as such, the coda argues, because the new economic tensions in domestic arrangements specifically affected the rites of female adolescence dependent upon black women’s services. Translating duty into desire, the novel represents the devotion of the servant as the ardor of the lover; the *bonne’s* faithful service thus becomes as binding as sexual fidelity. In this sense the homoerotic interest between the mistress, Marie, and the emancipated slave, Marcéline, functions to reinstitute slaveholding bondages and, by implication, to preempt further apostasies such as Keckley’s. In its urgent longing to conjure once again the antebellum order, *Monsieur Motte* offers not simply nostalgic

reflection but historical hallucination. Contemporaneous with the rise of Jim Crow legislation, novels such as King's suggest that "separate but equal" rulings to keep black and white apart existed alongside and in conjunction with no less reactionary "intimate but unequal" propositions keeping black and white yoked.

Historically, domestic service both enables and adjudicates interracial contact, particularly between women. The medical industry, newly organized through the American Medical Association at the turn of the nineteenth century, provides another regulatory model for race and gender relations. Chapter Two, "Off-color patients in Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy* and William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*," considers to what ends race politics and theories of female pathology merge in the literary tropes and medical terminology of the period. Both published in 1892, Harper's and Howells's narratives seek to transplant the "tragic mulatta" from the dusty pages of abolitionist literature to the modern clinic. The literary type is made a patient: the sentimental angst of her "condition" is scrutinized, diagnosed, and finally cured (though quite differently in each novel) by marrying the doctor treating her. Thus, monitored simultaneously by medical and marital institutions, race loyalties and desires represented as warring within, the mulatta proves the means to control the race wars without.

Kate Chopin's famous 1899 novel illustrates another form of racialized "female trouble," but hers cannot be cured by either marriage or the good Doctor Mandelet. "Alien hands' in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*" explores Edna Pontellier's investment in the manual and sexual services of ethnic or racial Others, "alien hands" who are important to her because, in her employ, they do all her domestic labor but, even more so, because she can employ their alterity. In them she locates a "warm-blooded world," new shores that she then claims for herself. In short, she makes possible an erotics that capitalizes on the serviceable equation of color with sex provided by the novel's darker and less fortunate women. Their literal and figurative work goes remarkably unacknowledged: those who serve receive no narrative payback – once used, they are effectively written off and out of the story. Whereas Marcélie's alias, Monsieur Motte, at least assumes titular status and memorable presence in King's novel, *The Awakening* involves a white woman's forgetting of figures precisely like Marcélie. Her "Marcélites" are "let go," to use the polite euphemism; they are hired for jobs that are unmentionable and therefore go unmentioned, and then discreetly shown the door once their literal and figurative resources have been exploited. Chapter Three examines this as a significant variation in the politics of