Ugly America:
The Grotesque in the Works of Kara Walker

Critics and scholars often describe Kara Walker’s work as “grotesque,” meaning, in context, disturbing, gruesome, or overly exaggerated. However, the grotesque is more than just a bizarre form; it is a representation of that which is subversive, illogical, liminal, in a constant state of transformation. Analyzing the grotesque in a theoretical framework highlights the specific role it plays in the development of Walker’s artistic visual narratives that she creates in her silhouette installations. In these narratives that are based on the romantic historical memory of the antebellum South, the grotesque acts as a set of characters and actions that highlight the complexities and (literally) darkness of race relations in American culture. As Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw points out, Walker’s work “plumbs the unspeakable regions of our American collective memory as a way to confront spectators with their own psychological repression of negative historical imagery.”¹ Specifically, Walker uses the grotesque to expose the repressed elements of the historical memory in the American psyche and forces the viewer to confront those demons and ultimately calls to reshape traditional perceptions of American cultural and racial identity. This paper will look at a few specific examples of these theories to illustrate how different types of grotesque representations can be read in the context of Walker’s silhouette installation works.

The grotesque is, quite literally, a marginalized form. Its historical presence in visual art has been in the borders of manuscripts and in the corners of architectural space.

Walker brings the grotesque figure from the margin to the center to create a fictionalized narrative of American history. In *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) [Figure 1], Walker uses romantic icons of the antebellum South—the southern belle, the gentleman, the swampy trees and gives it a title that reinforces its reference to *Gone With the Wind*. We can see in this example Walker specifically referring to an American literary tradition of the romantic south, but one that is also inhabited by the grotesque, as we can see through the exaggeratedly long girl in the boat, the horned child, and the extra pair of legs that emerge from under the belle’s skirt. The grotesque is not unusual in the tradition of the American imagination or its literary tradition. William Van O’Connor claims that American literature is “filled with the grotesque, more so probably than any other Western literature.”² Paula Uruburu suggests that the conflict between pragmatism and romanticism in American thought and the tension between ideology and reality in American life are rich grounds for the development of the grotesque. She believes that the grotesque, in the context of literature, captures the split between the practical and pragmatic American reality and the romance and idealism of the American imagination. Thus, it represents the fragmentation of the American psyche.³

The presence of the grotesque in literature keeps it contained within the realm of the imagination. But, by visually representing these romantic American narratives, Walker takes this notion a step further and realizes the images of the imagination in

physical space. She makes manifest the disjunction between reality and imagination and forces the viewer to physically confront it in the gallery space. Not only are these grotesque forms representative of the imagination, but they are also used as symbolic references to real people. Walker uses the grotesque to describe the indescribable harsh reality of American life during a period that heavily affected the ways in which many Americans define themselves and others. By populating these narratives with grotesque characters, Walker brings to the forefront marginalized figures of American history to tell a story that has been pushed to the side and subjected to repression in our cultural psyche.

The grotesque is not limited to figural representation, but, according to Wolfgang Kayser, is also a structure. He defines the grotesque as “the estranged world” in which we recognize familiar and natural elements of our own reality. But these elements have been transformed into strange and ominous objects. Walker states that she purposefully projects fictions into the facts of our national history, merging images of the American antebellum South with the grotesque. In this view of Slavery! Slavery! presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery of “Life at ‘Ol’ Virginny’s Hole’ (sketches from Plantation Life)” See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause! (1997) [Figure 2], one can easily identify the outline of the swampy trees, the plantation mansion in the distance, the eaves of what may be slaves quarters, the moon, a Southern belle with a mask, and two young girls. But, the moon is disproportionately large and unnaturally low, the Southern belle is

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followed by a dwarf figure (who may be looking up her skirt). One may read the two young girls as standing next to each other, but, because there are no definite lines that separate the figures due to the opaque nature of the silhouette, the girls may also be read as conjoined twins. Similarly, the girl on the left may be turning her to the front, creating an outline of a wider head with her hair cascading around her face. However, the outline could also be read as an outline of a disproportionately large head of a man. Other figures are equally as unidentifiable, such as the woman holding or shaking the ambiguous object just to the right of the center.

This composition of natural and unnatural makes our world unreliable as laws of logic, established categories and identities, and historical order are broken down and conflated. Kayser states that the absurdity prevents us from positioning ourselves in the alienated world, and that it is ultimately a manifestation of “our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe.” These images create what Sander L. Gilman identifies as an alternative reading of cultural images that exist in the unconscious that make up the construction of our world. Hilton Als describes America as “literally, incredible, fantastic—a freak show that is almost impossible to watch, let alone to understand.” It is precisely this perception of America that Walker forces her viewers to confront and recognize as their own history and environment, regardless of racial identity. Walker challenges the viewer to reevaluate the cultural history of America, to confront the repressed images and taboo characters, to expose the darkness that has been marginalized.

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6 Kayser, 185.
by the romantic icons. Her works suggest that the grotesque representations lie closer to the truth of American history that affects contemporary cultural identity.

The grotesque is unsettling and alienating because it does not exist within the established categories that we use to understand our world. Fritz Gysin explains that the grotesque exists between two regions, such as between fantasy and reality, tragic and comic, human and non-human, living and dead, demonic and ludicrous.\(^9\) The grotesque does not exclusively belong to one of these realms, but rather it encompasses elements from two or more regions. We can see these elements in play in Walker’s image of the banjo player in *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) [Figure 3]. The banjo player, slouched with ambiguous fluid emitted from his body while seemingly playing the banjo, exists between life and death. The object in his back may be read as scissors or as a key, rendering him either human or non-human. The floating figure on the right conveys a sense of fantasy and comedy, which creates a tension with the reality of the environment and the tragedy of the banjo player. The tensions between the figures of the narrative give the grotesque its intensity, energy, and vitality, as well as highlight its dynamic quality.\(^10\)

Generally, the grotesque is not a finalized product. It constantly permeates the borders of incompatible realms that situate it in a state of continual transformation and perpetual movement, the shifting which alters the interpretation of the scene. Robert F. Reid-Pharr offers a reading of the banjo player scene as the girl on the left rushing to

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\(^10\) Ibid, 28.
remove the scissors from the man’s back, which she may have even planted there herself. Or, she may be moving to turn the key to reanimate him. This inability to determine a set reading, according to Mark Reinhardt, translates perceptual play into conceptual, forcing the viewer to translate the unidentifiable image into a reflection on forms of thought that are coded in everyday ways of viewing. By using the grotesque in her work, Walker enables the transformative movements of distortion, alienation, reduction, and expansion to challenge the static and romantic notions of American collective historical memory.

While the grotesque takes many forms in Walker’s silhouette works, the hybrid is one that appears repeatedly throughout. In recurring images of the hybrid swan, such as in scenes 20-23 of *The Emancipation Approximation* (1999-2000) [Figure 4], the division between the coded bodies is clear. The black head is of an African American woman, identifiable by physiognomy of, literally, racial profiling. This head is attached to the body of a white swan, which may symbolize the idealized white body. The unmistakable demarcation between racial bodies represents the split between two cultures—American and African, white and black, as well as suggests the forced attempt for the African American to try on the identity of a white individual. Given the context of the image within its narrative, specifically the woman in scene 20 tossing the heads into the lake and the bowed heads of all of the swans, that creates a sense of discomfort and

disjunction, this hybrid seems to illustrate the perpetual divisibility of racial identity, a fusion that doesn’t quite work.

Most other hybrid grotesques are not so easily decipherable. With the exception of the swan, Walker’s hybrids are a fusion of two bodies that, as David Wall points out, are often separately racially coded within the same silhouette form, thus violating the categorical structures of individuality.\(^\text{13}\) Howardena Pindell has criticized Walker for supposedly staging bestial fantasies about blacks that have been elicited by racism and white supremacy.\(^\text{14}\) In *Success* (1998) [Figure 5], one may understand how such accusations may be founded by reading codes of “racialized vision” that Walker presents.\(^\text{15}\) The woman is identified as African American by her exaggerated African physiognomy and the tied handkerchief on her head. The ends of the handkerchief, though, may also double as horns, ears, or antennas, eliciting the stereotype of the black as bestial, a reading that is further highlighted by her tail and hooved hands. This image also depicts the black woman as highly sexual, as evidenced by her engagement in fellatio. However, the reading is far more complex than simply stereotyping the African American. The male in the composition is represented more animalistic than the female with his ape-like hands and clawed feet. This figure may be interpreted as a southern gentleman by his attire. One may read the end of his sleeve and the animal tail as a coattail, suggesting a jacket, and the slightly squared shape by his hock as pant cuffs. The


\(^\text{15}\) Reinhardt, 113.
two projections from his neck may be some sort of tie, but the outline also doubles as that of a hand or second mouth reaching out from his throat.

The various readings of the grotesque silhouette, due to the movement of the grotesque between multiple realms and the silhouette only giving the viewer the formal outline as visual information, evokes a psychological struggle to understand the grotesque. Darby English states that the fantastic nature of Walker’s silhouettes means that they conjure, rather than describe, which elicits a psychological experience. It is up to the viewer to make the figures intelligible as “re-presentations of anything at all.”

This notion draws attention to the tradition of racial profiling that has been instilled in the American psyche and to read Walker’s grotesques based on connotations of racial stereotypes. It is also worth noting that the grotesque itself is an invention, a form not found in nature. Likewise, the figures that they represent highlight the equally inventive use of stereotypes used to categorize individuals into racial categories. But, because of the constant movement of the grotesque across borders of multiple realms, the scene lends itself to various readings. Walker uses the grotesque to challenge the viewer to change the way in which one sees and understands racial identity and relationships.

Robert Hobbs points out that the unstable abject body permeates the hierarchical boundaries of social order, which is realized in Success by making bodies of both sexes and black and white races into grotesques. The stability of race and gender categories

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17 Corris and Hobbs, 425.
are broken down and are left up to the viewer to redefine and remap these traditional orders and their relationships to each other.

Walker uses the silhouetted grotesque to not only draw attention to the way of understanding profile and form, but also to the emotional relationships. Because of the nature of the silhouette, the figures’ emotional state can only be read through gestures due to the lack of depicted facial expression. In *Success*, it is unclear how the female feels about the situation she is in. Thus, it is up to the viewer to project onto the work whether the female finds her circumstance pleasurable or horrible. Depending on the emotional reading that the viewer chooses, the scene may shift from a mutually enjoyable sexual encounter to a depiction of rape. As Reid-Pharr points out that African American subjectivity is extraordinarily complicated, resulting from the survival of harsh forms of slavery through heroism, humanity, and a degree of acclimation that suggests a certain amount of willing participation in “the horror that was all around them.”  

It is then up to the viewer to determine at which point on this spectrum of seeing, interpreting, and internalizing the African American subjectivity one lies and to identify ones own relation to that history. This variable subjectivity allows the level of tension that the grotesque creates to be personalized for each viewer and question their perspective of and relationship to American racial and cultural identity on an emotional, as well as a formal, level.

Likewise, the grotesque action, such as acts of digesting or expelling materials into or from the body are used as a way of visualizing the process of transgressing cultural codes. In his discussion of the grotesque through the reading of Rabelais, Mikhail

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18 Reid-Pharr, 37.
Bakhtin describes the grotesque mode of representing the body as one that “fecundates and is fecundated, that gives birth and is born, devours and is devoured, drinks, defecates, is sick and dying” to illustrate the theme of mockery and abuse. As Walker’s figures consume debased fluids into their bodies, so too the viewer is also consuming images of grotesque actions that must be digested. In this detail of *Camptown Ladies* (1998) [Figure 6], the woman seems to be a willing participant in consuming excrement, as suggested by her gesture of her hands clasped together. The lack of nourishing value that the woman is receiving parallels that of the value of truthfulness perpetuated by romantic epics of the antebellum South in the American imagination. Linda Nead notes that bodily fluids are indicators of the interior, which represents not only the interior of the body, but also the psychological interpretation of the body that corresponds to one’s identity. Thus, the fluid emitted from the child may be read as a way to encourage the viewer to note the characters’ interior, or conceptual identity, in addition to considering the exterior.

The act of excreting represents a process of sorting and disposing of excess. Walker herself describes excreting as “finding one’s voice in the wrong end; searching for one’s voice and having it come out the wrong way.” This may be most obviously illustrated in *Slavery! Slavery!* through the kneeling male character’s fart that is shaped like a speech bubble. Bakhtin points out that the mode of representing the grotesque body

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has a long history of prevailing in forms of speech and verbal expressions. Walker inverses the tradition by representing speech through the grotesque body in order to visually express the themes of mockery and abuse that arise through attempts to find one’s voice. The figure in *Slavery! Slavery!* is bowed and kneeling, which indicates a position of victimization. The identity of this figure is difficult to read. He does not have exaggerated African features in his profile, which Walker often uses to identify African American characters. Thus, one may assume he is a white figure. Although, he may be an African American who is able to pass as a white man. If so, the cloud of passing gas may double as a visual-verbal pun on the identity of passing. It should be noted, though, that no surrounding context helps the viewer identify the man. Just as the viewer struggles to understand who this figure is, so too does the figure struggle to find his own voice, through the speech-like bubble of gas emitted from his body. This action represents the man’s attempt to take in, through his body, his social and cultural environment through which he can construct his identity, but has nothing solid to produce as his own. Rather he is a victim of mockery.

The act of defecating as a form of excreting and leaving a trail of shit piles, such as in *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) [Figure 7], may also be understood as a record of process—sorting through that which has been ingested, then digested, and left behind. While for the child in the narrative, this is represented through bodily processes, it mirrors the creation of, passing down, and assimilation of racial identity and relationships in American culture from generation to generation. The child’s defecation also represents the way in which she is trying to find

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22 Bakhtin, 318-319.
her own place in the American social structure. Wall points out that it may also be understood as an action that is made public in order to transgress and violate dominant social codes.\textsuperscript{23} Because the grotesque action represents a step in a process, it illustrates the body in a perpetual state of transgression, regardless of the form. While the child in the image defecates, the figures on the left nurse each other. This silhouetted tier of nursing figures illustrates Bakhtin’s identification of the events of the grotesque as developing from points of intersection, merging the forms in a two-bodied image.\textsuperscript{24} Because the silhouette does not define dividing lines between the figures, they offer points of transgression, moving from one body to another using orifices as points of intersection. These figures illustrate Bakhtin’s notion that “the body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits” in the processes of consumption and excrement as seen in these examples of Walker’s work.\textsuperscript{25} They represent the development of identity by working through, or digesting, notions of American history and racial relationships that have been passed down and fed to the cultural psyche.

In addition to the formal qualities of the grotesque on the wall, Walker further manipulates the viewer’s experience of and relation to the work by transforming the bright gallery into a dark, cave-like space. The cave emphasizes the grotesque, the etymology of which comes from “grottesca,” referring to grotto paintings.\textsuperscript{26} In the installation of Darkytown Rebellion (2002) [Figure 8], the grotesque silhouette changes
from a painting to a shadow that has been cast onto the “grotto” wall. This environment recalls Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave,” which is a metaphor for the level of education. The viewer in the gallery gazes at the silhouettes as the prisoners who are kept in the cave look at shadows cast by people carrying artifacts between them and the fire. The question is: at which point in the story is the viewing taking place? The viewer recognizes the grotesque form as one that does not exist in reality, which suggests that viewer is not at the first stage where the prisoner accepts the shadows as reality because he or she knows no differently. Thus, the viewer must have ascended upward and accepted the reality of things on the earth’s surface in full light, which Plato states is the metaphor for the “mind’s ascent into the intelligible realm.”

Returning to the cave to view the cast shadows is a way of registering this process, of applying that which has been learned. It may be a journey that the viewer may not have even realized has been made; the grotesque figure is, then, a way of making the viewer aware of his or her own cultural consciousness.

If the grotesque is understood as the unreality, then one must ask what is generally believed to be a shadow of reality. Before making the ascent in “Allegory of the Cave,” the prisoners accept the shadows as reality. By applying this metaphor to Walker’s silhouette installations, one may interpret the romantic icons and historical narratives of the antebellum South to be that which Americans generally accepted to be images of the truth. As Professor Patricia Hills commented in a seminar session on May 2, 2011, just as Plato is suspicious of art, so too may be Walker. Inserting grotesques into

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these romantic and historical contexts allows Walker to draw attention to the inaccuracy and misleading nature of these stories that have become part of the American historical memory. It creates a tension in the truthfulness between the realistic romantic icons of history and the fantastic images of the grotesque. While the figures in romantic narratives may be seen as part of a stable, identifiable reality, the grotesque draws attention to the suspicious, unreliable nature of those icons and highlight the dark parts of history that have been passed over or fictionalized in favor of the romantic. Therefore, the grotesque gets closer to the truthfulness of history than do those natural figures of the romantic antebellum South. By underscoring the inaccuracy and instability of the historical memory from which many Americans have built their cultural identity, the grotesque also calls into question the reliability of the viewer’s own identity.

The viewer is not relegated to simply a passive role of viewing and contemplation, but is also engaged as an active agent in the narrative of the installation. As the viewer walks around this gallery, his/her body is caught in the light of the projector and casts a shadow onto the walls, making the viewer part of the narrative.

*Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On)* (2000) [Figure 9] tells the story of a slave revolt using utensils from everyday life in the antebellum South. In this installation view, we can see how the shadow of the viewer is cast into the narrative. By casting shadows onto the same surface as the figures, the viewer becomes a character in the slave narrative and is “implicated” in rebellious and even murderous actions.²⁸ The viewer, then, becomes part of a historical counter-narrative, one that he or she may not have considered to be part of before.

²⁸ Walker in “Stories,” *Art 21*. 
The engagement in these actions, with the grotesque characters, and in the narrative of a whole forces the viewer to negotiate one’s own cultural and racial identity as a participant in an alternative historical memory. Hobbs states that the lack of definition of the self occurs before the formation of a new ego and is an “insubstantial domain of vacancy lying beneath the surface of stereotypes.” Projecting the viewer’s shadow among grotesque figures and narrative highlights the vulgarized sense of self with which the viewer of Walker’s installation works must physically confront. Naomi Slipp noted in a seminar session on May 2, 2011 that the glossiness of the gallery floor also reflects the silhouettes in the projection installations, which is most easily seen in the image of Darkytown Rebellion. By analyzing the context of space and reflection, one can see that the viewer not only become implicated in the historical narrative by casting a shadow onto the wall, but one also physically walks on the reflection of the past. The viewer is, therefore, engaged in the historical narrative in multiple dimensions. The shadows on the wall highlight the implication and engagement in historical narrative, while walking on those reflected images emphasize the building of one’s own identity on top of stories from American history.

It is worth noting that Walker’s installation narratives are not linear—they have no decisive beginning or end. We can see in this view of Slavery! Slavery! from the Whitney Museum (2007-2008) [Figure 10] that even the doorway, an architectural marker of arriving or exiting, beginning or ending, does not interrupt the narrative. Immediately upon arrival into the room, the viewer is immersed in the story. The roundness of the room also highlights the continuous cyclical nature of the narrative. This

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29 Corris and Hobbs, 425.
composition breaks down the temporal logic of the story, which transforms the narrative of historical memory into a narrative of living memory, particularly one that includes the viewer as his or her shadow is projected onto the wall. By conflating time and space, Walker reminds her viewers that the ugly past is not dead and buried; rather, it lives on in a grotesque present. In order to survive in this alienated America, the viewer must redefine notions of individual and stereotypical identity and renegotiate relationships among them in order to establish a new place for the self.
Bibliography


Figure 1

Kara Walker

*Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*

1994
Figure 2

Kara Walker

*Slavery! Slavery! presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery of ‘Life at ‘Ol’ Virginny’s Hole’ (sketches from Plantation Life)’* See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause!

1997
Figure 3

Kara Walker

_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
Figure 4

Kara Walker

*The Emancipation Approximation* (scenes 20-23)

1999-2000
Figure 5
Kara Walker
*Success*
1998
Figure 6

Kara Walker

Camptown Ladies

1998
Figure 7

Kara Walker

*The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*

1995
Figure 8

Kara Walker

Darkytown Rebellion

2002
Figure 9

Kara Walker

*Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On)*

2000
Figure 10

Slavery! Slavery! presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery of “Life at ‘Ol’ Virginny’s Hole’ (sketches from Plantation Life)” See the Peculiar Institution as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause!

Installation view, Whitney Museum of American Art

2007-2008