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FICTIONAL ROUTES TO RECOVERING BLACK ROOTS: ZADIE SMITH, KARA WALKER AND BLACKFACE MINSTRELSY

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines Zadie Smith's novel* Swing Time *(2016) and the black paper silhouette murals of Kara Walker (since the mid-1990s) as works that demystify cultural practices underpinned by white stereotyping of black people and generally challenge mainstream historiography of slavery. The two artists do not create alternative historiographies, but, by critically re-viewing cultural products and attitudes, propose a route to retrieving the lost past which simultaneously casts a new light on the present too. Smith and Walker challenge complacent audiences to finally see (*sic*) the white ventriloquism of black voices within cherished cultural practices and traditions which have sanitised or displaced racism sometimes under the guise of humour. One such tradition is blackface minstrelsy, which the artists either analyse against the grain (Smith) or mimic most exaggeratedly (Walker) to reveal minstrelsy's long shadow over the post-slavery collective imagination in the West. However, unlike the Jamaican-English novelist, the African American artist walks a step further than unmasking traditional historiographic representations of the black or faux white acknowledgement of black cultural contribution. Walker demythicises the western Enlightenment myth of rational humanity and unimpeachable civility. Her grotesque compositions featuring antebellum slavery scenes reveal all characters involved as equally driven by instincts, hence as perfectly interchangeable. Walker, I submit, uncovers the "dark" roots of humankind, which no process of civilisation has ever "reformed" but only abjected (in Kristeva's sense) and projected onto the social other.*

KEYWORDS: Swing Time *(novel, Zadie Smith),* Swing Time *(film, starring Fred Astaire), paper silhouettes (Kara Walker), racist stereotyping, blackface minstrelsy, identity roots, abjection*

> One night I dreamt of the Cotton Club: Cab Calloway was there, and Harold and Fayard, and I stood on a podium with a lily behind my ear. In my dream we were all elegant and none of us knew pain, we had … never been called ugly or stupid, never entered theatres by the back door, drunk from separate water fountains or taken our seats at the back of any bus. None of our people ever swung by their necks from a tree, or found themselves suddenly thrown overboard, shackled, in dark water – no, in my dream we were golden! No one was more beautiful or elegant than us, we were a blessed people, wherever you happened to see us, in Nairobi, Paris, Berlin, London, or tonight, in Harlem.
>
> (Smith 100)

Thus unfolds (if only partially, in the above excerpt) the dream of the then eleven-year-old protagonist of Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* (2016). Although insignificant to the plotline, the Cotton Club is no incidental setting to her dream. The Harlem club's fortunes (Jerving 256–7) rose and fell with the Harlem Renaissance – and with segregation. In its heyday (1922–35), the Cotton Club boasted hugely popular jazz singers, the bands of Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway or Jimmie Lunceford, dancers like Fayard and Harold Nicholas (aka the Nicholas Brothers), and comedians. One of the club's most celebrated performers, tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, features in an explicit reference in Zadie Smith's Prologue (Smith 5), in connection with another entertainment scene: Fred Astaire's

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"Bojangles of Harlem" tap dancing in the musical film *Swing Time* (1936), which has lent the novel its title.

According to one reviewer, Zadie Smith's fifth novel is her first attempt to address identity issues. The "quest for an authentic encounter with blackness – its origins and culture – feels more urgent in *Swing Time*" than in her previous novels; here, "interpersonal tensions give rise to smart observations – about identity, dance, women's work, and cultural appropriation, and about two themes … central to Smith's work: blackness, and the fantasy of pure and discernible roots" (Tortorici n.p.). Smith's "encounter with blackness" in *Swing Time* has sparked my own interest in how her novel at large – if not the young protagonist's dream – pulls the historiographic and cultural curtain to look behind the glittering appearances of the golden days of Hollywood (rather than of the Harlem Renaissance). What lurks there is the sanitised version of the past – a past purged of racist segregation – which people typically (are encouraged to) entertain.

This paper compares and contrasts *Swing Time*'s concern with black roots to that in Kara Walker's early artworks. What grounds this comparison is not simply the hyphenated identity of the two creators.[1] Rather, certain features of both artists' works, with their differential echoing of blackface minstrelsy, suggest the urgency of re-visions of black identity at the turn of the millennium. Smith's novel's response to Fred Astaire's "Bojangles" number accompanied by three shadows (in the film *Swing Time*) and Walker's paper silhouettes do not simply re-view blackface minstrelsy. In working with shadows of one sort or another, the works invite a fresh analysis of how mainstream historiography, cultural practices and cherished traditions sanitise or displace their racism.

Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*: Routes Back to Blackface Minstrelsy

The Prologue reveals Zadie Smith's title's indebtedness to the musical comedy *Swing Time*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Freshly fired by her employer and returned to London, in late October 2008, the novel's unnamed mixed-race protagonist (and autodiegetic narrator) needs a distraction. Therefore, she attends a lecture by an Austrian film director who, at one point, plays a clip from *Swing Time*, a film familiar to her since childhood (Smith 3). The scene shows Fred Astaire tap dancing alongside three larger-than-life shadows – his, yet not quite his. For a while all four dancers synchronise perfectly; then Astaire has to catch up with the shadows; finally, the shadows lose momentum and pace and quit. However, the "Bojangles of Harlem" number is more complex than the triple doppelgänger figure Zadie Smith focuses on. Astaire blacks his face (*Swing Time* 01:12:43–01:12:50) for the upcoming "Bojangles" number (01:13:05–01:20:34); onstage, Astaire, initially hidden behind a gigantic pair of shoes – which caricatures a black face (01:14:21–01:14:29) – dances before or with a chorus of twenty-four female dancers; then the camera cuts to his tap dancing with the shadows (01:17:51–01:19:51), crowned by his triumphalist solo dancing.

The film's "Bojangles of Harlem" number *pays tribute*, critics contend (Lott 5; Riley 50; Macaulay n.p.), to the famous Harlem tap dancer. Or does it? Indeed, Fred Astaire (Frederick Austerlitz, 1899–1987), the *aristocrat* of tap dancing[2] (in Gene Kelly's words), found his inspiration, like Kelly himself, in the tap dancing of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson (Luther Robinson, 1878–1949), the black artist who danced for Harlem's segregated and dispossessed blacks, not just for the Cotton

[1] Celebrated British novelist Zadie Smith (b. 1975) is of Jamaican and English stock; the highly acclaimed, highly controversial visual artist Kara Walker (b. 1969) is African American.

[2] Not only in *Swing Time*, Astaire, whose "carriage is sometimes the epitome of ballroom elegance," becomes, through tap dancing, "the subversive American whose gunfire-like feet and jazzy rhythms undermine the well-ordered politeness of English high society" (Macaulay). Such entwining of ballroom dancing with tap dancing owes to Astaire's inspirational encounters with the ballroom dancers Vernon and Irene Castle and later with "Bojangles" (Riley 49).

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Club's white audiences. Face blacked, the Austrian-German American tap dancer (of Jewish-Catholic stock) appropriates, in *Swing Time*, the *signature* stair dance of the African American tap dancer, and triples and warps the latter's shadow to demonstrate he, Astaire, can outclass dancing shadows (or "Bojangles"?). For Riley or Macaulay, the number is racially unproblematic: "though the 'dummy' face that becomes the feet is blackface," Astaire does not properly achieve blackface, for "[n]either his makeup [which doesn't feature the blackface minstrels' contrasting white circles around the mouth and eyes] nor his style of dancing is intended to caricature African Americans"; simply put, his routine *differs* "in essence" from blackface performances (Riley 220, n. 19). Indeed, Astaire's dancing is not openly disrespectful to African Americans. Nevertheless, the mature protagonist of Smith's novel cannot ignore the *legacy* of minstrelsy to both the film's "Bojangles" *number* and Astaire's white gloves[3] and make-up in it:

> … I was looking [on Google] for that clip from *Swing Time*. I wanted to show it to Lamin [a Senegalese dancer]…, but he said he had never seen or heard of Astaire, and as the clip played he sat up in bed and frowned. I hardly understood what we were looking at: Fred Astaire in black face…. But none of this [the film scene's opening long shot and Smith's protagonist's seat in the auditorium] really explained how I'd managed to block the childhood image from my memory: the rolling eyes, the white gloves, the Bojangles grin.
>
> (Smith 4–5)

Smith's description is not malicious. The first seconds of the number sans the chorus (*Swing Time* 01:17:51–01:20:34) – like those when the dancers reveal Astaire behind the gigantic shoes and comically long striped trousers (01:14:38–01:14:42) – show him with an unnaturally large *grin* – hardly Bojangles's joyous *smile* in the staircase dance of *The Little Colonel* (1935) – and a rather caricatural face expression. Astaire's Bojangles performance strikes me as strained and deliberately silly, at least initially – hardly a *tribute*. Furthermore, whatever the role of the three shadows in Astaire's number, they ostensibly trigger Smith's protagonist's *epiphany* (Tortorici's term):

> I saw all my years at once, but they were not piled up on each other, experience after experience, building into something of substance – the opposite. A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. *I experienced myself as a kind of shadow*.
>
> (Smith 4, emphasis added)

The personal epiphany of the adult mixed-race protagonist as a *shadow of history* (I would add), not merely of other individuals, triggers the "collective" epiphany – hers, her Senegalese friend's and vicariously black people's – regarding Astaire's blackface minstrelsy in the *Swing Time* Bojangles number, with its elusive shadows. It is, moreover, an epiphany which resonates with Kara Walker's when Walker took up the silhouette medium, in the mid-1990s, to (dis)incarnate her own shadows that portray antebellum slavery.

Yet, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson himself was also renowned for his early twentieth-century roles in New York's minstrelsy. He debuted as a pickaninny in choruses of African American children

[3] Philippa Jones traces the origins of *the computer hand icon as an icon of the white race* to Mickey Mouse's white glove (on black skin) – a minstrel's (238–40). See Sammond on the indebtedness of American animation – such as Disney's *Mickey's Mellerdrammer* (1933) – to blackface minstrelsy. Sammond examines "how fantastic performative relationships between animators and their minstrel creations *modeled larger social and discursive formations in the United States*, especially those perdurable racial fantasies that linked caricatures of African American bodies and behaviors to concepts of enthralled labor and its resistance to domination" (3, emphasis added).

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in white minstrel shows; later, he "further popularized the cakewalk, a dance that whites, for their blackface minstrel shows, had appropriated from enslaved blacks, who in turn had been mocking the pompous strutting mannerisms of whites" (Hanna 290–1). After 1914 Robinson started to act as a solo performer in white theatres; eventually he refused to perform in blackface and later turned to Hollywood, to be eventually honoured in the 1943 musical film *Stormy Weather* (Scolieri 1067–9; Batiste 233, 245). Unfortunately, in *The Little Colonel* (1935), *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm* (1938) and *Just around the Corner* (1938), Robinson portrays "thinly veiled minstrel characters" (Scolieri 1068) in subservient positions (including a slave), whose task is to smilingly entertain the others. The films which brought him national celebrity did not further the blacks' cause; his acting with Shirley Temple – the first interracial couple to dance onscreen – merely endeared him to white audiences nationwide.

Regarding the Hollywood production of black stars during segregation times, it is noteworthy that Zadie Smith's protagonist has another bleak (black?) epiphany. The fifth chapter of Part IV focuses on Eddie Cantor's dream of blackface minstrelsy (Smith 189–92) in the Hollywood film *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937). As elsewhere in Smith's novel, "[o]nly on replaying the tape does she [the protagonist] notice what she overlooked in her excitement: the blackface performance of the lead, Eddie Cantor" (Tortorici). The child protagonist's subsequent comment sounds more like her mature self: "The Arabs are Hollywood Arabs, white, in Aladdin costumes. The Africans are black Americans dressed up – loincloths and feathers, outlandish head-dresses – and they play primitive musical instruments, in a parody of their future Cotton Club incarnations" (Smith 191). See as she may through the Hollywood masquerade of socially constructed identities of the Other(s), the protagonist ignores it socially.

Smith's child protagonist's dream is in many respects but a figment of imagination. Whilst the historical Cotton Club was *designed* as "a brazen riot of African jungle motifs, Southern stereotypology, and lurid eroticism" (Singer, qtd. in Jerving 256), the dream's "we had never graced the sad pages of … history books" (Smith 100) is no less surreal. The dream's *make-believe* – a time of elegance and non-racism – may be the young girl's; yet, it is also the mature narrator's polemical variation on the ancient Greek "golden ages" myth of western Europe, with jazz as the quintessential early twentieth-century black contribution to the entertainment arts, hence Smith's black artists' golden sheen. At the time the novel is set in (1982 at the earliest), for African Americans "the roaring twenties" of jazz were much of a taken-for-granted cultural root.

Nor does Smith's novel ignore the racial identification possibilities, albeit disavowed by the young protagonist, opened up by the jarring difference between Astaire's typically elegant dancing outfit and manners and this number's Bojangles travesty:

> If Fred Astaire represented the aristocracy, I represented the proletariat, said Gene Kelly, and by this logic Bill "Bojangles" Robinson should really have been my dancer, because Bojangles danced for the Harlem dandy, for the ghetto kid, for the sharecropper – for all the descendants of slaves. But to me a dancer was a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without a nation or people, without obligations of any kind, and this was exactly the quality I loved.
>
> (Smith 24)

Unlike her dance class friend, Tracy, with "her rigid notions – black music, white music" (Smith 25), Smith's child protagonist believes in the universality of positive feelings and attitudes dancing fosters. Nonetheless, taken *together*, the Cotton Club dream of the child protagonist and Astaire's "Bojangles of Harlem" number which Smith's mature protagonist dissects, undermine nostalgic appraisals of "the roaring twenties" and misguided beliefs that dance fosters kindness.

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Not even in college can Smith's protagonist ascertain race or class historically as barriers between humans.[4] Her excitement about the supposed origins of tap dancing in the Middle Passage triggers her radical black boyfriend's mock minstrel performance. Rakim "stood up, rolled his eyes, stuck his lips out, shook his hands like a minstrel, and said: *Oh massa, I's so happy on this here slave ship I be dancing for joy*" (Smith 290). How much do we (care to) know about the historical reality behind the minstrel stereotype Rakim mocks?

White Displacement of Black Identity through Ventriloquist Blackface Minstrelsy

History shows that various groups produce deliberate misrepresentations of the other, in discourses that seek group self-legitimation. One pernicious form of misrepresentation, *ventriloquism*, purports to give voice, within one's own discourse, to the other. When ventriloquism is performed by the hegemonic group, rather than by the subaltern(s), denigration through ventriloquial portrayal works in tandem with social repression of the subaltern.

Minstrelsy furnishes one such case of ventriloquism, if a complex one as regards the hegemony–subaltern polarity. It originates in the eighteenth-century, according to Cedric Robinson (132, 142–3), rather than in the early nineteenth-century, as usually thought. Already in 1750 in black annual street festivals like Pinkster, Election Day and John Canoe the slaves "perform[ed] ribald stories, dancing, and making music" in the streets of New York, Albany, Boston, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Louisville (Robinson 142; see also Lott 47–8). New England's city records suggest that Election Day emerged as a *carnivalesque* imitation of the white masters' political customs and hierarchy (Robinson 142–3, n. 40), such as in *parmateering*, or *parliamenteering*, by which "candidates for king or governor solicited votes" in a discourse "tinged with burlesque" whereby "blacks lampooned whites" (White, qtd. in Robinson 143). According to Shane White, "[m]instrelsy's stump speech may have been a white parody of blacks who were already parodying whites" (ibid.) on such carnivalesque occasions.

According to W. T. Lhamon, David Roediger or Noel Ignatiev, blackface minstrelsy owes to historical circumstances: slaves and Irish immigrants worked together in canal building (Robinson 133–5, 140). The generally illiterate Irish workers, prone to drinking and rowdy conduct, "staged their imitations of Blacks for entertainment" so that "[b]y the 1830s, blackface minstrel performances were an integral part of this immigrant culture" (Robinson 135). Conversely, Eric Lott argues that "racially integrated theaters, taverns, neighborhoods, and waterfronts" (42), not shared labour sites, brought the Irish and slaves together. Furthermore, early minstrelsy was "based … firmly on the association of 'blackness' with the white working class" rather than strictly with racialised blackness (Lott 91).

From early solo performances in a "predominantly a 'white' male working-class entertainment – riotous, raucous, and participatory" in the commercial setting of the public music hall (Robinson 135), American blackface minstrelsy changed radically in the 1850s. With the emergence of blackface minstrel bands, theatre entrepreneurs geared the shows such as to appeal to middle- and upper-class audiences, through the suppression of class antagonisms in favour of white identity qua bourgeois respectability (Robinson 136, 144). Deliberately caricatured representations of the blacks were framed ideologically by the misrepresentations that undergirded racial science, then in its heyday, and co-occurred with diverse other social practices that put the racialised body on display,

[4] Such inability may also owe to the fact that Smith's Bildungsroman (Golban 3:n.p.) takes its time to present the protagonist's identity formation, a process necessarily textualised by such novels as diachronic and large-scale and rendered "as development – spiritual, psychological and moral, rather than physical – leading to the formation of personality" (Golban 1:18). Many thanks to Petru Golban for sharing ideas from his third-volume manuscript with me.

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whether in the fairs organised between 1876 and 1897, on postcards, in books and illustrated magazines, in dime museums, amusement parks, or as children's toys (Robinson 136–41).

A dynamic and equivocal phenomenon, by the end of the nineteenth century American blackface minstrelsy – now commodified, most often grounded in proslavery sentiments and flaunting unambiguous racism – spurred audiences to take for granted its grotesque racist jokes and stock characters as "authentic" black expression. It resorted to ever more rigid, self-referential conventions that stereotyped the "defining" traits of African Americans as sloth, mendacity, baseness, uncouthness, linguistic and practical ineptitude, stupidity, a patent inability for nurturing one's family, insatiability of bodily appetites, and unrestrained enthusiasm for music and dancing (Dunson 248–50; Nowatzki 3–4, 35–7; Huggins 251).

Formalised by the end of the Civil War in elaborate forms that endured past the mid-twentieth century (without ever disappearing),[5] blackface routine concealed a twofold mystification. It *displaced black identity* through its caricatural performance by whites, which, moreover, surreptitiously *displaced white national identity*:

> Jim Crow (the rough, coarse, barbarian) is clearly a part of the backwoods and riverboat tradition, a blackfaced Mike Fink or Davy Crockett. Jim Dandy (urban, dandified, almost effeminate), on the other hand, is the blackfaced counterpart to Yankee Doodle. In short, *these supposed mimics of slaves were really standard American comedy types underneath the burnt cork.*
>
> (Huggins 249, emphasis added)

Notwithstanding the mimicry of *white* stock types, blackface minstrelsy "served important emotional needs" (Huggins 249): to vent dreams of carefree self-indulgence – allegedly the blacks' – which the WASP denied to themselves through their ascetic Protestant discipline; to assuage self-doubt; and to permit fleeing from one's normative self to an alleged natural self, which includes embracing vulgarity, otherwise abjected as definitory for the other (Huggins 253–7). Furthermore, the carnivalesque licence of minstrelsy – experienced vicariously by the white public – transformed the childish black *persona* of the blackface minstrel into a childish, irresponsible, appetite-driven black *person*.

The minstrelsy paradox runs beyond onstage performative intertextuality and racial ambivalence, offstage colonial condescension and slave pornography, and political struggle for African-American socio-economic emancipation. Blackface minstrelsy emerged as the whites' backlash response aimed to *undermine* the claims of black Shakespearean actors, in the 1820s, to be able and especially entitled to *represent themselves authentically on the stage* in the interpretation of classic black roles such as Othello. The successive appropriations of blackness-in-representation, with their attending tensions to be defused, including low-/high-brow performance of Shakespeare and thereby the advent of the white dramatic and dialectal canon in the US, resulted in the whites' jubilant proclamation that "America" had just created a native popular culture distinct from anything European (Nowatzki chap. 4, esp. 114–24). Such touting of blackface minstrelsy ignored both the white appropriation entailed therein and various European traditions: the blacking up in the English mummers' plays and at the Stuart court, or *commedia dell'arte*'s Clown and Harlequin characters, let alone the American success of Englishman Charles Mathews's blackface performances and songs during the early 1820s (Nowatzki 71–2, 123–4). Rather, American blackface minstrelsy soon became

[5] See Robinson (chap. 5) on the transference of blackface minstrelsy from stage to screen in the "golden age" of Hollywood, and Weaver (256 and passim) on the popularity of minstrel entertainment in the UK from the BBC radio show *The Kentucky Minstrels* (1933–1950) and the television programme *The Black and White Minstrel Show* (1957–1973) to the contemporary Ali G shows created by Sacha Baron Cohen, a British Jewish Cambridge graduate.

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the contested arena for "parod[ying] the literary and musical high culture of Europe" (Nowatzki 116) as no standard of excellence for the US. Home-grown blackface minstrelsy "enabled white American performers and audiences to define themselves against their English forebears *without* acknowledging African American contributions to American culture" (116) or the contradiction of touting national identity by drawing culturally precisely on the nationally dispossessed (Michael Rogin, qtd. in Nowatzki 121–2). It also inflamed passions against the blackening of American culture, which James Kennard, Jr. decried in 1845 in his "Who Are Our National Poets?" (qtd. in Nowatzki 120).

A different kind of blackening – and black colonisation – of American culture was also suggested, in the mid-1990s, by Kara Walker in works that have brought her both (white) critical accolades and (black) artistic repudiation. Black and white represent both the dominant stylistic contrast of most of her early works and their topic: antebellum plantation life stripped of any idyllic notes. Two aspects are noteworthy. Walker has repeatedly referred to her silhouettes as dramatising blackface minstrelsy. What they do, moreover, is to evoke "the performativity of race in minstrelsy" (Nowatzki 25) – *performativity* in Judith Butler's sense[6] – as it manifests itself in the blackface minstrels' stage(d) parodies and/or equivocal renditions of black identity.

In Butlerian terms, race as represented in blackface minstrelsy suggests its performativity and theatricality. "'Race' is performable, if not always already performed," J. Martin Favor contends, as soon as "with the proper makeup, a white person could be 'black,' and by removing pigmentation, a black person could become 'white'" (qtd. in Nowatzki 25). In practice, however, the whites' blackface minstrelsy harked back – admittedly, for very few spectators – to the medieval European onstage practice of blacking the faces of actors impersonating the evil or demonic characters especially in the Doomsday plays of biblical drama. Given the centuries-long blame European Christianity had attached to the black race, could at least a few white spectators of blackface minstrelsy have realised, in its heyday, its exposure of *all* racial concepts as masquerade – one which should conceivably allow *interchangeability* of racial roles? Perhaps not. Yet an astute African American artist, Kara Walker, has seen through such racial interchangeability – and even beyond it.

Kara Walker's Silhouettes: Routes Back to Antebellum Slavery to Uproot the Enlightenment Human Species Myth

Fred Astaire's three shadows in the tap dancing of *Swing Time* are, "unruliness" and all, coterminous with the "shadow" characters portrayed by Kara Walker[7] in her 1990s cut-and-pasted "romances." Walker uses the silhouette medium and a grotesque technique[8] on her visual route to the antebellum slavery years, to retrieve fictionally the New World roots of the African Americans – and hers – and re-write the history of slavery bottom up. Due to both technique and quest for ghosts of the ghosts of the past, her early black paper silhouettes look *ontologically*, not just visually, like Astaire's shadows. If, moreover, the film's shadows appear to be whimsical "projections" of Astaire with a life of their own, Walker's paper silhouettes are her projections of a historical past with a life of its own, typically obliterated in mainstream historiography of southern slavery. As Walker

[6] For Butler, the gendered body exists in and through *the public performance of rules of gender identity* (xiv–xv, 32–3, 41–4, 143, 170–80).

[7] See Bernier on the African American artistic context in which Walker emerged in the 1990s.

[8] Various commentators (Shaw 13–14, 122 and passim; Raymond 35; Bernier 193, 210 and passim; Miyamoto 240–2; Corris, Hobbs 107–8; Raengo 701) have addressed the grotesque and carnivalesque, the abject and the transgressive in Walker's works. See Bakhtin for a seminal theorisation of the grotesque (in conjunction with the carnivalesque) and Swanepoel (34–49) for the term's historicisation. On the abject, see Kristeva and, applying her theory to ethnic, racial and homosexual ostracism, Young; on transgression, see Stallybrass, White (furthering Bakhtin's carnivalesque) and Jenks's sociological historicisation.

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confesses, "I couldn't really name [the silhouettes] … characters or caricatures. These are phantom-like; they're fantasies, just the end-result of so many fabrications of a fabricated identity" (in Sollins 71). If the ghosts of the past haunt the present as racist legacy, their own ghosts are the *muted stories of slavery*. The latter, Walker explains, she has "dredg[ed] out of [her] own subconscious" and *projected into facts* (in Sollins 71).

In a 2003 interview, Walker reveals certain key elements of her early fictional metahistoriographic art[9] and their cultural roots. One is the *silhouette*, "an iconic thing" which struck Walker in the mid-1990s as a far better medium than historical painting for her artistic project (in Sollins 60). Furthermore, the ontological masquerade entailed in cut-outs, whereby the eighteenth-century French aristocracy and the nineteenth-century British and southern US gentry played at projecting another self, reminded Walker of the *grotesque* representations of blackness in *blackface minstrelsy* (ibid.).

Walker reminisces about the *catharsis* she experienced on discovering the silhouette's appositeness to her artistic project: "I was tracing outlines of profiles, thinking about physiognomies and racist sciences,[10] and re-inscribing the identity based on white male parameters, and minstrelsy, and that being the opposite – the shadow and the dark side of the soul" (in Sollins 64). Walker implicitly refers to the *profiling* – as in both police records and the eugenicist's files – of African Americans (Musiol 162, 165–6; Raengo 706). However, insofar as late seventeenth-century "American slave traders used silhouettes as 'bill of sale' identification for slaves and 'a mug shot' that would facilitate identification in the case of escape," Walker's silhouette medium extends "explor[ing] race and its means of representation … into consideration of the origins of racism itself" (Miyamoto 232). Walker, moreover, identifies the silhouette's capacity to re-inscribe, through its hole–ground tension, the *shadow* as both the doppelgänger of mainstream identifications of race (associated with worth) and the true colour of the (whites') soul.[11]

Yet the silhouette, with its interplay of *hole* (by cutting out, itself an "evisceration") and *wholeness* (by creating a new "identity," however indistinguishable), in Walker's words (in Sollins 64), and the grotesquerie in the representation of black identity in both minstrelsy and Walker's works it inspired, revolve around the body. Walker regards her fictional metahistoriographic works explicitly "in terms of the body" (ibid.) and also

> in terms of this act of excavating that's been such a current and recurring theme, particularly in the histories of feminist artists, feminist writers, African-American people of color, *investigating and eviscerating this body of collective experience* ... sometimes to the point of leaving nothing intact. I entered into this project, this idea of being a black woman artist, from the perspective of a person who has been presented with a pre-dissected body to work from. A *pre-dissected body of information*.
>
> (Walker, in Sollins 69, emphasis added)

[9] My coinage draws on Hutcheon's *historiographic metafiction*.

[10] As in blackface minstrelsy, the silhouette claims to capture the essence of the person thus represented, in accordance with the arguments of the pseudo-science of physiognomy. Invented by Johann Caspar Lavater and copiously illustrated in his four-volume *Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beforderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe* (Zurich, 1775–8), translated as *Essays on Physiognomy for the Promotion of the Knowledge and the Love of Mankind* (London, 1789–98), physiognomy became highly influential in fiction-writing and the arts (Stemmler 151–2; Stoichita 157–67).

[11] Walker's shadow qua silhouette, yet also shadow qua shadow qua invisibility fabricated by the racist mainstream, if not qua phantomatic presence (Raengo 704–6), resonates with Ralph Ellison's famous analysis of racial blindness in *The Invisible Man* (3–4).

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History, for Walker, is *embodied*: it unfolds as the *experiences* of flesh and blood people. At the same time, history is also a matter of *information* about such past experiences. However, the latter is not an innocent *informational corpus*. Relating to, and re-visiting/re-viewing, the historiographic account of the past entails, therefore, analysing/dissecting the received corpus to expose its fabrication and attempt to retrieve truth from mystification as best one can. Getting acquainted with the history of slavery meant, for the very young Walker, exploring her consciousness as a black female artist, groping for her roots. In the early 1990s, she searched, therefore, not only for historiographic and fictional accounts of slavery (Walker, qtd. in Bernier 212), some mythicised, such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) or the popular contemporary Harlequin Romance novel (Corrie, Hobbs, 115), but also for accounts of black female identity (Shaw 13; Jegede 248).

If white historiography of antebellum slavery cannot convince the slaves' descendants of its truthfulness, why doesn't Walker's re-vision appeal to them either? In the late 1990s, African American artists Betye Saar, Howardena Pindell and Angela Davis denounced Walker's works as *undignified* depictions of the slaves (Shaw 114–15) redolent of "racist complicity" (Corris, Hobbs 112).

Walker has become (in)famous with her panoramic cut-paper silhouette murals whose scale replicates late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historical *tableaux vivants* and cycloramas (Raymond 349). Hers is, Walker explains, the "painterly conceit" to regard her painted characters "as characters on [the] stage" (in Sollins 60). The *narrative* proclivity of her works – borrowed from historical painting – evolves, nonetheless, as an anti-narrative and anti-history (Shaw 39; Bernier 212, 220) which intertwines "the epic scale of history painting, the caustic bite of political satire, and the scopophilic draw of pornography" (Shaw 13).[12]

Her first silhouette mural, *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994; *c*. 50 x 13 ft), brought Walker instant fame. Its southern pastoral scene offers a bitter parody of Margaret Mitchell's novel, hence the thirteen characters' slightly larger than life-size depiction for *veracity* (Raymond 349). The left foreground juxtaposes the heterosexual romance between two young, somewhat idealised white characters with the "unspeakable" and (as yet) un-showable sexual liaison between the Southern belle and her young black fe/male lover hidden beneath the overflowing crinoline skirt. In Yasmil Raymond's apt description, the ever-present hoop skirt in Walker changes from the symbol of southern white women's unimpeachable morality to a garment which "disguise[s] … [the] repressed desires" of both mistresses and slave women (349). Unsurprisingly, in *Gone* the disclosure afforded by the belle's skirt "unleashes a series of lustful events" (349): symmetrically, her suitor's rapier virtually sodomises a black child who strangles a duck; a prepubescent girl fellates the master's son; a young black woman lifts her left leg to deliver (indeed, discard) twins; a thin naked boy with a balloon-like swollen penis hovers above her. In the right foreground, a young black woman with a broom enjoys (?) a piggyback ride by the master, whose head may be just as busy – symmetrically – as the child's under the belle's crinoline. Could the inclusion of children amongst those engaged in proscribed sex be an "evisceration" of the ills of social abuse, from the abstract institution of slavery to its most minute acts? Other installations arguably corroborate the "evisceration" interpretation.

Slavery! Slavery! (1997), another monumental piece (12 x 85 ft) of over twenty slightly larger than life-size figures, is devised for installation in a circular room, in pure historical cyclorama fashion. The installation's full title – *Slavery! Slavery! presenting a GRAND and LIFELIKE Panoramic Journey into Picturesque Southern Slavery or "Life at 'Ol' Virginny's Hole" (sketches from Plantation Life). See the Peculiar Institutions as never before! All cut from black paper by the able hand of Kara Elizabeth Walker, an Emancipated Negress and leader in her Cause* – begs

[12] See Wood (chap. 2, esp. 88–101) for a review of theorisations of pornography and the historicisation of pornographic depictions of slaves as alleged abolition propaganda.

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attention. Not only does it introduce the medium, subject matter and author (via one of her related personae as emancipated black woman, as in *Gone*), but its indebtedness to the advertising discourse of nineteenth-century fairs, with its pretence of novelty, causes a metahistoriographic breach. Whilst parodically acknowledging her intertextual reference to a famous antebellum mystification of plantation life, Eastman Johnson's 1859 pastoral painting *Old Kentucky Home* (Miyamoto 242–4), Walker proclaims that her panoramic work offers a view of "the Peculiar Institutions as never before": hers is a recuperative historico-artistic project.

In *Slavery! Slavery!* afternoon leisure becomes "a carnivalesque nightscape in which unsettling events take place under a crescent moon," organised in three vignettes: under the moon, around the fountain and outside the slave quarters (Raymond 351). The crescent moon partially hidden by fragmented clouds witnesses, from close quarters, (to the left) a young black man whose upward gaze, whilst struggling with his burden, misses the efforts of a younger black boy to discard a toddler girl in his way. Behind the latter boy, two black women pursue their chores oblivious both to him and to a toddler boy sitting behind. To the right, under the menacing-looking tree canopy on the horizon, a very young belle strangles a toddler girl turned upside down.

Neither does the fountain vignette (which continues the moon vignette to the right) convey any serenity the setting would have evoked. A lady strutting towards the fountain, minstrel mask in hand and pickaninny behind, is symbolically soiled by a farting male slave knelt down.[13] The rococo fountain *is* a young naked female slave spurting blood from her back wound, mouth and vagina, and milk from her breast. She shares her ontological agony with the squatting female figure forming the pedestal and oozing blood. To the right of the sublime abject fountain (*sic*), a white trader with his shackled male slave heads to the slave quarters and soon past a gentleman whose finger seemingly checks the teeth of, and literally lifts from the ground, a black child, in metaphoric displacement of paedophilia.

In (or rather outside) the slave quarters, a vignette which I examine from right to left, unlike the previous two ones, there is relatively little black-and-white mingling, for much of the depiction suggests *clandestine* plans (Raymond 351). To the right, rooftop sexual intercourse – actually the rape of a young black woman by her young master – defies gravity, reason and white (pretence at) decorum. Beneath, two young belles relish voyeurism: they gaze through the gate keyhole at a young black man bending down perhaps to grab a watermelon. His buttocks are oriented such that the peeping Toms might also experience his flatulence any time. Ahead of him, an elderly black woman dances with a small black boy; the knife hidden behind her back remediates Eastman Johnson's painting in ominous terms. The latter pair introduces what I would call a *slaves' dance of death*: "strid[ing] along in oversize pointed-toe shoes" (Raymond 351), rather than dancing, a decapitated boy, who "hold[s] tightly with both hands the severed head of a chicken" (351), seems to lead the four frenzied dancers, the foremost of whom is the drummer. To the decapitated boy's left, however, another group plays to a different tune. Determined to escape, an elderly slave has hidden his children inside a hay wagon; he has accidentally pitched with his pitchfork a boy, whose comic somersault in the air makes his makeshift bag drop. A young woman, infant strapped to her back, leads this clandestine "procession" (Raymond 351); she trudges through a pile of faeces whilst eating an apple seemingly unperturbed. Slave ineptitude and appetites! The cyclorama format, I submit, provides for an unforeseen ending: the fugitives risk crossing paths – or rather faeces – with the slave-master busy with the young boy. "To be buried in shit" – the phrase which epitomises a scene in Walker's *Presenting Negro Scenes* (1997) – resolves in *Slavery! Slavery!* as "there's no way out of shit" – slave ineptitude?

[13] The graphic flatulence here matches the imaginary one likely to affect two young voyeuristic belles in the extreme right of the slave quarters vignette.

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Other works also configure Walker's "rememory of slavery"[14] as the memory of abject debasement. Such is *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995), which, as Gwendolin DuBois Shaw (37–8) argues, signifies, however obscurely, on Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Many scenes share with other Walker installations abject concerns with defecation (here slave children), sadomasochism (a white girl) and sadistic sexual intercourse (master with slave girl). *The End of Uncle Tom* dramatises "the difficulty of seeing the unspeakable, of adequately articulating [the] trauma" of slavery – hence, Walker replaces words metonymically with faeces (Shaw 49).

Such undignified substitution may echo diverse black-related experiences. One concerns writerly suppression in the past: The abolitionist amanuenses of illiterate former slaves who wished their memoirs recorded, hushed certain, often sexual, details which struck the former as indecorous, viz., incommensurate with the white-devised memoir genre (Shaw 49–51). Another one concerns the "association of blackness with excrement" in the past–present (Walker, qtd. in Raymond 361): "Every time I enter a flea market, I see something like a pickaninny with its head in a toilet" (ibid.). Yet another one, though not black-centred, relates Walker's works' obsession with defecation to Freudian theory. For Freud, Christianity's demonisation of defecation but thinly disguises anal compulsion as sinful thirst for material possessions (Raymond 364).[15]

Walker "plays off these associations between material possessions and fecal matter" (Raymond 364) 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). Walker's persona mocks the nineteenth-century self-identification by emancipated black women writers (Shaw 51–2): this "Missus" is hardly decorously coy in what she re-produces – "reconfigure[s]" – for public visual consumption. Furthermore, it enables a critical *distance* between the artist and her imagery (Corris, Hobbs 115).

One of the vignettes of *Presenting Negro Scenes* depicts a naked slave woman who defecates atop a pile of excrement (wherein she is buried knee-deep) and reaches out to eat from it. Nearby, a male figure, with a broad hat and long jacket, bends down to hoard some of the excrement into his capacious bag. Walker repurposes the idiomatic "to be buried in shit" to describe the condition of slavery. Nonetheless, not only does the evoked phrase denote here a "vulnerable situation" which leads Walker's character to a "state of desperation" from whence, as Raymond (364) argues, the slaves could only escape by committing suicide through eating dirt. It also connotes, I suggest, being buried in *abject* stereotyping – which, once internalised, either makes one miserable or, in Walker, can be thrown at those responsible for such abjection. Closely involved as he is with slavery-related business, the faeces-hoarding character becomes himself a "piece of shit" – a despicable slave trader. Here the condition of abjection (Kristeva 1–4, 65) unfolds as a process which forever connects the abjector and the abjected as interchangeable within the composition (the black woman / the white man) and mutually depending without (the excremental work / the horrified public).

If Walker's characters are unpalatably violent and grotesque, how do viewers experience the works? In Hanna Musiol's apt terms, whilst Walker's "caricatures of human subjects remain static," the traditionally "empowered audiences … are transformed into captive objects" (163). Drawing on Musiol, I argue that the paradoxically "spatially liberated" *profiled* cut-outs (Musiol 165) – where the profile outline becomes coterminous with a racist society's screening and profiling of its others – return larger than life to haunt later-generation spectators blind to manifold other-suppression: through physical repression, representational ventriloquism or debasement, or assimilation. Who are the captive spectators? Precisely the middle-class black as/and white museum patrons.

[14] Shaw's title of chapter 2.

[15] The anal stage as one pre-genital libidinal organisation, which Freud associates with sadism, rivets together defecation and the symbolism of gift, hence money (Laplanche, Pontalis 35–6).

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Walker's grotesque depiction of antebellum slavery recalls a spectrum of related strategies variously named *reverse discourse* (Foucault 1:101), *mimicry* (Irigaray 76–7) or *signifying* (Gates xxii–xxiii). Such strategies entail appropriating and turning back on the oppressor his/her categories (and vocabulary) of marginalisation, so as to reinvest them with positive meaning. Drawing on Henry Louis Gates, Jr, Bernier (14, 218) suggests that Walker's artworks *signify* on the visual and historiographic tradition, as well as on theories of "history, truth, reality and conscious subjectivity" (196). Indeed, Walker's is a resonant accent which borrows both a genteel white medium (the silhouette) and boorish white practices (blackface minstrelsy) for re*vision*ist purposes. Her mimicry of the memory of slavery challenges blacks' as whites' black-and-white sensibilities of good and evil, us and them. Defending Walker's work as "an act of artistic exorcism" (Corris, Hobbs 118), Henry Louis Gates, Jr avers: "only the visually illiterate could mistake this post-modern critique as a realistic portrayal, and that is the difference between the racist original and the post-modern, antiracist parody that characterizes this genre" (qtd. in Corris, Hobbs 118).

Nonetheless, mimicry may backfire. Here is Linda Hutcheon on postmodernist parody, a mode that subsumes Kara Walker's signifying: "Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak TO a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it"; it has become, therefore, "the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology" ("Politics of Postmodernism" 206). Postmodernist parody – as both *practice* and *historical memory* – entails "*repetition with critical distance* that allows *ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity*" ("Politics of Postmodernism" 185, emphasis added). Parody, therefore, "paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity" (ibid.) due to the "tension between the potentially conservative effect of repetition and the potentially revolutionary effect of difference" (Hutcheon, *Parody* xii). Yet such self-conscious double move – reinforcement and ironic debunking – may be ideologically slippery: the *contradictory* – and necessarily *political* (Hutcheon, *Politics* 1–4) – mode of postmodernist practices indicates a "commitment to doubleness, or duplicity" (*Politics* 1), a "complicitous critique" (*Politics* 2) or "authorized transgression" (*Parody* xii).

Hutcheon's analysis of the double pull of postmodernist parody may explain why black practitioners of one-time revolutionary art denounce Walker's resistance imagery through mimicry[16] as reinforcing racist taste. The tension between Walker and her African American detractors is not just historic/*generational* – concerning the experience of segregation and involvement in the Civil Rights movement – and geographic/*regional* (Schur n. 9). It is also cultural/*temporal*: Walker belongs with the postmodern deconstructivists of Enlightenment identity myths (Corris, Hobbs 113, 115; de Souza 364) – myths also evolved, in postcolonial times, by oppressed groups. One effect of the poststructuralist "dismantling of binary racial categories in favor of multiply determined and positioned subjects" (Lott 8) has been "to trouble the notion of 'racial' representation itself" (ibid.) and thereby undermine the "essential black subject" sought in self-representation by the blacks (Stuart Hall, qtd. in Lott 8).

According to cultural historian Sander Gilman, Walker's black (artistic) community repudiates her art on account of its overt (and perverted) depiction of sexuality (qtd. in Farrington 40). Yet, "sexually-charged content and black stereotypes" also occur in the works of other black artists, but haven't triggered a similarly "widespread and bitter denunciation" (Farrington 40). The answer must lie elsewhere, i.e., in Walker's peculiar depiction of human excrement and often murderous violent acts perpetrated by *whites and blacks alike* (40–1). Drawing on Lisa Farrington, I

[16] See Von Blum (45–8) on forms of African American visual resistance to racist (mis)representations through images of black dignity, black protest activity, and mimicry intended for satirical critique. Walker's black detractors fear the effects of a "New Black Aesthetic" or "post-soul aesthetic" (in Trey Ellis's terms) that "flout[s] the official, positivist black party line" (Ellis, qtd. in Schur n. 6).

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submit that Kara Walker's masters and slaves – male and female, middle-aged and very young – become *interchangeable* on a continuum of *bestial humanity*, with violence and (emotional, sexual or civilisational) perversion as central principles. Walker's is here more than a fictional retrieval of the "unspoken" history of slavery: it is a de-mythicisation of humanity itself, anathema for the deeply religious blacks, especially the middle-class accommodators.

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Blackface minstrelsy did not die in the early decades of the twentieth-century – thus suggests Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* on un-masking Fred Astaire's minstrelsy in the eponymous film's "Bojangles" number. The novel's protagonist's wishful thinking – to create a world of goodness, without class or race boundaries – is doomed to failure. Painting the past with a golden sheen, as do Smith's young protagonist and certain African American artists, may only heal an elderly generation's wounds. On the contrary, in Kara Walker's early installations, the subject matter, the grotesque approach and the silhouette medium collude in de-modernising the subject, in postmodern double-edged vein. Her works challenge complacent spectators to position themselves vis-à-vis slavery, racism, skewed historiography and selective collective memory. From another standpoint, the challenge telescopes to reappraising humanity beyond rigid Christian dogmas or Enlightenment ideals of human emancipation.

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