of multicultural acceptance that I grew up with in California. Blackness became a very loaded subject, a very loaded thing to be—all about forbidden passions and desires, and all about a history that’s still living, very present... the shame of the South and the shame of the South’s past; its legacy and its contemporary troubles.”

After receiving a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art in 1991, Walker moved to Providence, Rhode Island, to pursue an MFA at the Rhode Island School of Design. Significant changes in race relations and gender politics were taking place in the United States at this time. In 1991, Anita Hill testified before Congress on sexual harassment by then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas; this was followed by Rodney King’s infamous beating and arrest by the Los Angeles Police Department later that year, which led to the Los Angeles riots of 1992.

While Walker’s early works did not specifically illustrate these social and political events, her satirical use of pre-Civil War images and language presented a biting commentary on the fragile status of civil rights and freedom of speech in contemporary American society. Keeping a finger on the pulse of current events, Walker began to develop a distinctive drawing style that found its origins in the exaggerated features and derogatory attitudes found in minstrel shows and racist paraphernalia, which she combined with the Eurocentric exaggerated depictions often found in Walt Disney’s cartoons. In her earliest experimentation, the solid black contour shape of the silhouette mimicked the reductiveness of a stereotype, a negative characterization intended to oversimplify a particular group or behavior. As the artist observed:

“The black silhouette just happened to suit my needs very well. I often compare my method of working to that of a well-meaning freed woman in a Northern state who is attempting to delineate the horrors of Southern slavery but with next to no resources, other than some paper and a pen knife and some people she’d like to kill.”

To create a silhouette, Walker draws her images with a white grease pencil or soft pastel crayon on large pieces of black paper, which she then cuts with an X-Acet knife. As she composes the imagery, she thinks in reverse, in a way, because she will flip the cutouts over when assembling the final work. This reversal, like a cast shadow or mirrored image, echoes the nature of the silhouette as both alluring and deceptive. The cut pieces are then adhered to paper, canvas, wood, or directly to the gallery wall with wax.

The history of cut-paper portraits dates back to the court of Catherine de Medici in the late sixteenth century in France. This decorative practice, which grew increasingly popular during the second half of the eighteenth century, was named for L’etienne de Silhouette (1709–1767), Louis XV’s widely disliked French finance minister who cut black paper portraits as a hobby. Beginning in the 1700s, silhouette-cutting gained credence as an art form in the United States because of its popularity among the aristocracy and haute
bourgeoise. However, by the mid-1800s "shadow portraits" had lost most of their prestige. Being deemed a craft rather than an art form secured this portraiture technique a place at carnivals and in classrooms devoted to the training of "good ladies." During the early twentieth century, silhouettes gained favor as sentimental keepsakes and souvenirs at fairs.

Such imagery was also tied into the eighteenth-century phenomenon of physiognomy, a pseudo-science claiming that one's character and intelligence were inscribed on one's profile (fig. 2). This reduction of human beings to their physical appearance presented the artist with a tool, a Trojan horse from which to deploy other such characterizations found in the history of racial representation:

"The silhouette speaks a kind of truth. It traces an exact profile, so in a way I'd like to set up a situation where the viewer calls up a stereotypical response to the work—that I, black artist/leader, will 'tell it like it is.' But the 'like it is,' the truth of the piece, is as clear as a Rorschach test."

TEXT WORKS 🧑‍🎨 NARRATIVE 2

Letter from a Black Girl (1982) is one of the artist's first works that focuses entirely on text. Its vinyl lettering refers to the wall text commonly used in exhibitions, but here it is blown up into an open letter recounting, with twisted humor, the troubles of the heart and mind of an "enslaved" woman artist. In using the letter format Walker appropriates the sentimentality of love letters, but what she writes is a first-person account of the troubled relationship between a "Black Girl" and her lover, who can be read as her master, an art collector, and even the viewer.

In Walker's work, writing is an extension of her imagery that captivates as much as it provokes the viewer. The artist's initial explorations into incorporating text took the form of elaborate titles for her cut-paper silhouettes and exhibitions, culling their inspiration from sources ranging from testimonial slave writings to harlequin novels. Walker's words later appeared as captions and ironic speech bubbles in her ink and watercolor drawings, where the immediacy and intimacy of her handwriting lends biting social commentary to the images.

Walker has continued to use writing as a formal element in her work, including typewritten messages on index cards, vinyl texts, intertitles in animations, and scripts for live performances. The artist's wordplay and verbal strategies reveal her use of language not merely as a means of communication, but as a platform to voice provocative commentaries on racial precepts, cultural prejudices, and political correctness.

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE 📚 NARRATIVE 3

Walker's first large-scale tableau entitled Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart was made in 1994. This imposing gathering of cartoonlike characters, such as the innocent Southern belle aiming for a kiss from her gallant gentleman, creates the illusion of a genteel pre-Civil War romance.

The 50-foot-long piece, consisting of black cut-paper silhouettes that are slightly larger than life-size, is installed as a panoramic mural reminiscent in scale of the historical cycloramas that emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Two famous examples of this pictorial entertainment still exist in the United States: The Battle of Gettysburg (1884) and The Battle of Atlanta (1886). The spectacularly large paintings intrigued the artist because in glorifying the battles, they bade the unpleasantness of Civil War politics and had a seductive visual form, much like the silhouette.

Early on, critics acknowledged this double nature in Walker's own work, describing her aesthetics as "looking like a cross between a children's book and a sexually explicit cartoon." Walker wanted her drawings to go beyond shock value and evoke a response from her audience: "I didn't want a completely passive viewer. Art means too much to me. To be able to articulate something visually is really an important thing, I wanted to make work where the viewer wouldn't walk away; he would giggle nervously, get pulled into history, into fiction, into something totally demeaning and possibly very beautiful, I wanted to create something that looks like you. It looks like a cartoon character, it's a shadow, it's a piece of paper, but it's out of scale. It refers to your shadow, to some extent to purity, to the mirror."
NEGRESS NOTES

“One of the things that’s happened here with the work that I’ve done is that because it mimics narrative, and narrative is a kind of given when it comes to work produced by black women in this country, there’s almost an expectation of something cohesive . . . a kind of Color Purple scenario where things resolve in a certain way. A female heroine actualizes through a process of self-discovery and historical discovery and comes out from under her oppressors and maybe doesn’t become a hero but is a hero for herself. And nothing ever comes of that in the pieces that I’m making.”

In her series of drawings entitled Negress Notes, Walker addresses many of the same themes that appear in her large-scale paper silhouettes. In the latter, all of the figures are rendered “black,” but her watercolor and gouache drawings fully disclose the race, authority, and status of her characters. Here again, the artist employs the fictional persona of the Negress: “The name had popped up a few times in school, and really I was just calling it from one source, which was The Clansman by Thomas Dixon, Jr. There is a reference to a ‘tawny Negress: would she be the arbiter of our social life and our morals?’ She’s trouble, but she doesn’t really do anything. She just sits there, though she is described all over the place. You know, the shifty eyes, the cunning mind, power-hungry, dark.”

In these and other works, the Negress is referred to as a type of heroine, a “Negress burdened by good intentions.” Ultimately, she is also an “Emancipated Negress,” a contradiction, a free soul with an enslaved soul, an allegory for the split identity posited by African-American philosopher and writer W. E. Burghardt DuBois as “double-consciousness.” In his essay “Strivings of the Negro People” (1897), he explains the term as, “this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.”

CENSORSHIP?

Walker’s charged imagery has generated intense debate. In July 1997, an older generation of African-American artists embarked on a letter-writing campaign in which they publicly asked colleagues to “spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African-American artist, Kara Walker” and not to exhibit her work. Questioning the maturity and artistic merit of Walker’s art, the campaign inspired accusations of censorship but also support. The debate over the appropriateness of displaying her work continued through letters and articles that appeared in various art journals and culminated with the public symposium “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke: A Harvard University Conference on Racist Imagery” in 1998.

THE CLANSMAN
AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE
OF THE KU KLUX KLAN

BY
THOMAS DIXON, JR.

NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1905

Fig. 3—Title page of a 1995 edition of Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s book

Walker’s bitter humor references the minstrel shows of the 1850s and ’40s—the first American form of theater, in which white actors painted their faces black to sing, dance, and deliver comic skits in a “Negro” manner that propagated derogatory language and demeaning representations of black Americans. The artist has said that minstrel shows interested her because, like the silhouette, the performances involved “middle-class white people rendering themselves black, making themselves somewhat invisible, or taking on an alternate identity because of the anonymity . . . and because the shadow also speaks about so much of our psyche. You can play out different roles when you’re rendered black, or halfway invisible.”

The artist’s appropriation of racist and sexist stereotypes extends to her use of language, which is evident in the precise and sometimes flamboyant titles of her pieces and exhibitions. These often intertwine the testimonial style of the slave narrative with the melodrama of the historical romance novel. The words “gone” and “historical romance” in the title of this mural reference two best-sellers of American literature: Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind (1936) and Thomas Dixon, Jr.’s The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan (1905) (fig. 3).

The artist also introduces the term “Negress,” both to identify the narrator of the story and to locate the scenario in a time before the Civil War. This loaded word appears in many titles throughout Walker’s oeuvre and over time has evolved into a complex adoption of a racist fantasy projected on black women and an element of self-loathing on the part of the artist.
The series of 66 watercolor drawings in this gallery, Do You Like Cream in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk? (1997) (fig. 4), started as Walker’s response to the controversy. In one, she writes “What you Want,” followed by “Negative Images of White People Positive Image of Blacks.” Another reads “The Final Solution: How to unfairly stereotype White People.” And at the bottom of the page she adds “for balance.” These comments speak to a tension that plays a large part in Walker’s work, the give and take between white society’s discrimination against blacks and black prejudice against whites in response.

Kara Walker follows in the footsteps of a long line of artists who took it on themselves to speak truth to power. Nineteenth-century caricaturist Honoré Daumier (1808–1979) and postwar German Expressionist George Grosz (1883–1959), for example, also used forbidden images to satirize bourgeois society (fig. 5).

**Fig. 4**—Kara Walker, Selection from Do You Like Cream in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk? (1997). Watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite on paper. 16 sheets, 64 sheets; 11 1/8 x 8 1/16 in. (27.5 x 20.8 cm) each. Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. Photograph by Glenn Balcom.

**Fig. 5**—Honoré Daumier and Suiplice Guillaume Chevalier-Gavarni, Les Artistes, nineteenth century. Lithograph, 17 3/4 x 17 3/8 in. (45.4 x 44.8 cm). Collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Gift of Mrs. Charles C. Bovey.

Like many of Walker’s works, The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven (1995) is inspired by a literary source, referencing in its title the two main protagonists in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1852 novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life Among the Lowly (fig. 6). The panoramic composition of this large mural includes a number of allegorical figures that appear repeatedly in the artist’s hyperbolic tales. Walker accepts that the subjects of racial representation and the legacy of slavery are difficult and unsettling. Though her unabashed appropriation of stereotypes may not make it obvious, her work in fact resists positive or negative representations of African-American history. Walker’s choice of Uncle Tom as the protagonist in this mural exemplifies its ambiguity. Stowe wrote the character of this long-suffering slave as a model of Christian virtue, but she also portrays him as childlike and submissive, which gives evidence of her own internalized racism.

Walker’s rendering of Stowe’s protagonists avoids the pitfalls of victimization and the illusions of racial reconciliation. In this mural, for example, Uncle Tom is seen on the far right giving birth to a child as he raises his arms to the heavens in prayer. In this allegory of fatherhood, Walker manipulates her literary source to retell a story we thought we knew, thereby revealing the traps of representation.
imagery explicitly quotes scenes from Johnson’s pastoral painting, an ambiguous depiction of idleness and interracial interactions in which a white mistress enters the yard of the slave quarters and finds a man playing the banjo while a child dances with his mother. In Walker’s version, this picturesque scene of afternoon leisure is rendered as a carnivalesque nightscape in which the subtext is unleashed and unsettling events take place by the light of a crescent moon.

AFRICAN-AMERICA NARRATIVE

"I don’t know how much I believe in redemptive stories, even though people want them and strive for them. They’re satisfied with stories of triumph over evil, but then triumph is a dead end. Triumph never sits still. Life goes on. People forget and make mistakes. Heroes are not completely pure, and villains aren’t purely evil. I’m interested in the continuity of conflict, the creation of racist narratives, or nationalist narratives, or whatever narratives people use to construct a group identity and to keep themselves whole—such activity has a darker side to it, since it allows people to lash out at whoever’s not in the group. That’s a contact thread that frummozes me.”

Shot in black-and-white film and video, 8 Possible Beginnings, or, The Creation of African-America, a Moving Picture by Kara E. Walker (2005) consists of eight grim fantasies that hypothesize the genesis of the black experience in America. Walker’s first tale is set at sea as bodies are thrown off a slave ship in the mid-1800s. Labeled with loaded aphorisms for blackness, such as “AFRICAN,” “AUTHENTIC,” “BLACK,” “ONE FAKER,” and “A WANNABLE,” these bodies are swallowed by the proverbial “Motherland,” only to be digested and reborn as King Cotton in the New World. Before the Civil War, Southern politicians used the phrase “King Cotton” to refer to the dominance of the Southern cotton-based economy. The robust male figure may therefore symbolize the cotton industry, its foundation on slaves as free labor, its importance in establishing America as a world economic power, and its responsibility in planting the seeds of violence and racism in this country.

King Cotton’s rebirth from excrement may also be an allusion to the Egyptian god Khepri, who, like a scarab beetle rolling a ball of dung, pushed the newborn sun through the sky each day and through the underworld at night. Egyptian myths played an important role in the twentieth-century Pan-African movement and especially in Cheikh Anta Diop’s controversial book The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality (1974). In it the Senegalese anthropologist and archaeologist claimed that the ancient Egyptians were “Negroid” and that Egyptian myths in turn formed the basis of Western European civilization through their influence on ancient Greece. Diop hoped that his theories and
archaeological tests would not only disprove the prevalent belief that Europeans brought civilization to Africa, but prove the opposite.

Walker's use of myths to question potentially racist assumptions is similar to Du Bois's strategy. Her video references instances when storytelling has been used to reinforce and redefine the ranking of people according to race. An example quoted by Walker in the last section of her video is Walt Disney's patronizing film Song of the South (1946), which is based on Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings (1881) (fig. 8). Although Harris's collection of stories is evidence of the African influence on American folklore, the character of Uncle Remus is another example of subtle racism, and neither the book nor the film acknowledge any history of racial oppression. Instead, they feature Uncle Remus telling cheerful stories about avoiding trouble and the trickster Br'er Rabbit's "laughing place."

Walker's body of work is a visual riddle that poses many questions as it unearths the malignant roots of the black experience in the United States. She is not in favor of a generalized anguish. She grants no accusatory voice to any of the characters; nor does she disguise the victim from the victimizer. Instead, she proposes hypotheses from which we might glean an explanation of the origin, extent, and depth of racism.

Yasmin Raymond, assistant curator; Rachel Hooper, curatorial fellow, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

NOTES

1. Interview by Linda Yablonsky, "In the Studio," Art & Auction, February 2007, 52.
3. Ibid.
4. Interview by Elizabeth Armstrong, in Richard Flood, et al., no place (like home), exh. cat. (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997), 160.
5. Ibid.
10. Interview, no place (like home), 160.

Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love is organized by Philippe Vergne, deputy director and chief curator, and Yasmin Raymond, assistant curator, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

The Hammer presentation is coordinated by Gary Garrels, Chief Curator.