

# *An Uncanny Insurrection: Debating Negativity in the Work of Kara Walker*

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In the late 1990s, Kara Walker was gaining international recognition. At the age of twenty-seven she was the youngest recipient of the MacArthur “genius” grant. It was a recognition that would launch her works to greater levels of appreciation, while at the same time spur harsh criticisms of her work. Debates around the highly sexualized, racialized, violent images at play in her shadowing narratives were prominent in the art community. The *International Review of African American Art* captured a portion of this debate through a somewhat heated exchange between Walker and the journal’s editor, which I describe below.

After an initial anonymous publication that sided with critics of Walker’s works (*International Review of African American Art*, 1997), Walker wrote a response to the journal. She argued that the reported critique of her work was also a personal attack, that many of her works and comments were presented out of context; and that the strong reactions to her work spoke to its necessity. The very fact that her work evoked such a response reiterated the importance of a much needed discussion around the meaning that these images still hold today (*International Review of African American Art*, 1998, p. 49).

In the same issue as Walker's response, the previously anonymous author now named as the editor of the journal, Juliette Bowles, responded to Walker's claims, in part, by saying:

Kara, considering all of the various types and complex strains of racist imaging in black and white Americans, is the most effective way of exorcising its shadow by *depicting* it, as you do in your work—which could have some power but which also has a fatuous character and which, imbued with all your flourishes...[and] bizarre [bodily] functions, sex and violence, could make you the Jerry Springer of the fine arts world—or by *dissecting* it?  
(p. 50, emphasis in original)

Bowles' question to Walker inferred that she must make a choice to either depict or dissect racist imaging in contemporary culture. According to Bowles, Walker could depict stereotypes and receive recognition through the flashy, superficial likeness of a tabloid-style talk show host or, she could reign in the shock and bizarre to make room for a less abrasive dissection of contemporary conceptions of race. But, Walker could not do both. She could not depict and dissect issues of racial tension, at least not in the alleged careless approach Bowles claims she was taking to her work. This formulation of depiction versus dissection operated, and continues to operate, as the foundation for the debates around Walker's work.

In this paper, I look consider the concept of negativity at stake in the debates over the meaning and use of Walker's historical imagery in contemporary art contexts. I begin with an elaborated discussion of how critics of her works warn that her images risk a recapitulation of stereotypes and racist conceptions. For her critics, negativity is something to be censored, warned of, and closed down because it reifies the very racism that she claims to challenge through her work. I then look at how others take up the negativity in her work. While they

acknowledge the highly racialized, sexualized, violent nature, they also argue that there is a flipside to this negativity that may open a space for new thinking to take place. As is explored throughout the paper, the concept of negativity is used by her critics with the connotation that implies that what is negative is damaging or destructive, where supporters of her work argue that the concept of negativity is more dynamic. While they agree that negativity can be conceived as perpetuating unwanted images and thoughts, her supporters argue that negativity can also act as an indicator of difficult histories, images, and thoughts that remain in our socio-political frameworks but go unaddressed.

To frame this latter dynamic of the debate, I turn to Mark Reinhardt's (2007) discussion of the uncanny in relation to Walker's work. He suggests that the concept of the uncanny may help us to think about the anxieties around censoring these images and the difficulties inherent in thinking about how these images may open the possibility for thinking history anew. I further suggest that when a mirroring of Reinhardt's concerns is brought to Deborah Britzman's (2009) discussions of education, we may read that education faces a similar struggle in dealing with difficult histories. And, in turn, this means that Walker's works may be read as presenting an offer to education where new engagements with history may take place. I end with a reading of Walker's installation, *Insurrection!* (2000), to illustrate how this piece may be read as a site for reflection of learning from difficult history in education.

### The Debates

In Bowles' critique of Walker and her work, she drew heavily on the opinion of Betye Saar, who many contend is one of the most notable critics of Walker's work (Dubois Shaw, 2004; Wall, 2010). Saar, an

African American artist who is one generation senior to Walker, spearheaded a letter-writing campaign against Walker's work in 1997. Saar called for others in the arts and political communities to speak and act against the positive receptions of Walker's work. One of her concerns was that Walker's work would feed into a racist discourse rather than act against it. Her concerns were inflamed, and partially justified by, the overwhelmingly positive reception of Walker's works by white viewers, critics, and artists. Saar's call insinuated not only a need for a different orientation towards Walker's work, but also a need for censorship of her images:

I am writing you, seeking your help, to spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African American artist, Kara Walker...Are African Americans being betrayed under the guise of art? Is this white backlash, art elitist style?...These images may be in your city next. (as cited in *International Review of African American Art*, 1997, p. 3)

In her discussion of the reception of Walker's work, Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw (2004) contends that around this same time, the Detroit Institute of Arts pulled one of Walker's images from an exhibit highlighting the work of female African American artists because Walker's images were considered too controversial (p. 103). The interim director, Maurice Parrish, reasoned the Institute's decision by saying: "We believe that it is our responsibility to present controversial art in a way that helps our visitors to understand the work and the artist's intent...In this instance, we determined that we could not present the work with the appropriate didactic material" (as cited in Dubois Shaw, p. 105).

More recently, Howardena Pindell (2009) worked to bring together a collection of, what she describes as, "non-pro commentary" (p. vi) on Walker's work from a range of writers, artists, and curators. The contributors articulate a shared concern that Walker's works do nothing

more than reiterate racist conceptions and that her works act against the struggle of previous generations of African American artists (McCannon, 2009; Snowden, 2009; Spriggs, 2009). As with earlier critics of Walker's work, the negativity at play in her pieces is one that needs to be closed down, warned of, and censored. The negativity at play is dangerous and therefore cannot be let loose at the risk of misinterpretation and racist appropriation.

Sitting on the other side of the debate, Sander Gilman (2007) argues that the construction of negativity in Walker's work unveils something else, or, what he sees as the "double-edged sword" of representational art. That is, Gilman argues that representational art is "damned" because of the idea that it "reflects the 'real' world" even as it is subject to the unrealistic expectation that it should be "nonrepresentational" – not repeat – the horrors it purportedly depicts (p. 32). Any art that evokes negative reactions is presumed to support the very struggle that it speaks against: "That is, if you show it, you must be an advocate of it; there is no room for ironic distance, critical explanation, or thought" (32). The struggle with disturbing representations, he argues, can in part be attributed to the power of art to speak to and reveal our fantasies and imagination. The difficulty lies with grappling with these images as both products of Walker's imagination and our own, as well as social images that represent unthinkable historical violence (p. 33).

Similar sentiments on the operation of the negative in Walker's pieces are offered by Lisa Saltzman and Philippe Vergne. For Saltzman (2006), there is a double meaning of the negative that operates in Walker's work and that allows for more than just a reification and idealization of stereotypes to take place. She argues that while Walker's works can be read as acting as a type of reinforcement of cultural stereotypes—acting "negatively"—they simultaneously operate through the negative as a shadow of a repressed history that perpetually remains and resurfaces through current social frameworks (p. 59). The re-citation of these images

in a present context—and the controversy they generate—opens new questions about their meaning, and so, the problem of interpretation. Saltzman suggests that the negativity of Walker’s work plunges viewers into the stark conditions of thinking itself, inviting questions about the possibilities and limits of representation. In this negative space, where meaning is made and not determined in advance by the image, is where the possibility for new engagements with history may emerge and reside.

Vergne (2007), too, argues that the negativity at work in Walker’s pieces is not one that should be read as a simple reiteration of cultural stereotypes, but one where Walker creates a visual language that reveals the lingering presence of the racist past. The artist invokes, what he calls, a “negative space of representation” which may absorb the dismissive way that the black subject and history have been approached in art (p. 14). Her presentation of sexually deviant acts and alleged excess are parceled with a reading of society’s on-going perception and treatment of history (p. 23). For Vergne, Walker’s process draws from negative conceptions, not the perpetuation of racism on repeat, but a possibility for thinking of its lingering force, what he calls a “historical hangover in the present” (p. 25).

The point that Gilman, Saltzman, and Vergne are making is that there is a difference between perpetuating negative stereotypes and utilizing negativity as an opening for thinking about a shadow of history that remains, to ask where these echoes continue to reverberate not only in Walker’s but our imaginations, and to question how the re-citation of difficult history might help shoulder some of its affective weight. But, what makes this distinction so difficult to maintain? From where do these anxieties about managing and censoring the negative come?

### Walker’s Fantasies and Ours

Reinhardt (2007) suggests that the anxiety brought about by Walker's works speaks to the uncanniness of her pieces. Drawing from Freud, he explains that the uncanny nature of an experience is brought about by anxiety towards what is being experienced not because it is unfamiliar, but because it is a recurrence of something held in our mind which has been repressed (pp. 116-117). The uncanny is not unknown and foreign, but an encounter with the return of what is repressed within the self in another form, such as in Walker's images. This experience of holding but in a repressed state brings about anxiety when we are confronted with this material. In Walker's work, Reinhardt argues, it is this anxiety "that seeps off the surfaces...as we who view [her work] are urged to confront the bearing of the slave past on the white supremacist present" (p. 116). In Walker's work, we are faced with what we would like to forget about ourselves in relation to the history it represents. Her visual formulation of a repressed past puts her, and the viewer, in the challenging position of representing the ways difficult history lingers in its fragments and that return with uncanny force. This is a kind of history that "remembers the pieces without putting them back together" (p. 118). And, it is through the presentation of these pieces that faces the viewer with the un-thought fragments of the self—shards of aggression and sexuality—that one would prefer to forget. The debates over Walker's work may thus be read as evidence of the disturbing uncanny effects that her images dredge up, and that are yet to be integrated and acknowledged into thought.

Walker's use of silhouettes, Reinhardt suggests, intensifies the uncanny feelings brought about in her works (p. 118). The silhouettes act as shadows, both familiar and unknown, which call for recognition but simultaneously refuse any absolute comprehension of what is being represented. They enact a doubling, what he calls, an "eerie echo of the self" (p. 118). This doubling is furthered through Walker's shadows

which are not simply presented in isolated forms, but which are in action, play, and violent performance with one another. He explains:

To look at Walker's silhouettes is to confront the deeds and misdeeds of shadows, shadows acting...of their own volition. The effect is heightened further still by the fact that these are portraits not of living bodies but of figures of collective fantasy and phobias: they are thus, in a sense, the spectators' own shadows. (p. 119)

To think of Walker's work as presenting viewers with their own shadows insinuates a possibility for engagement with thoughts and preconceptions which are not only related to the individual, but also to the societal preconceptions that the viewer brings to this work. A shadow drama of uncanny thoughts and figures, Walker's work calls the viewer into their pre-existing dramas and desires to ask the question: how does representational art call me into implication, and into account for the meaning I make from this history?

An uncanny understanding of Walker's works suggests these images have already been censored. Instead of being worried about these images coming to our cities next, we are faced with the suggestion that these images already reside in our cities and our minds. Through Reinhardt's uncanny proposition, the debate around Walker's work depicts the struggle between our strangely familiar selves and the return of figures, objects, and fantasies that have been asked to leave.

### Difficult Education

This struggle between censorship and possibility, between repression and invitation of difficult images and histories, is echoed in education. As Britzman (2009) suggests, when difficult histories are brought to education they are often met with a flood of affect; such affect may disavow the reality of these histories and the presence these histories

hold in the present (p. 121). For Britzman, this difficulty lies not only in the social and cultural forms of representation (such as in curriculum or in Walker's images), but also in how our internal worlds shape attempts to understand and express our implication in, and with difficult history. From this vantage, difficult history is never finally past insofar that repression is vulnerable to cracks, opened, for instance, by uncanny images. If images are dangerous, it not solely because they risk reifying the racist past but because they alert us to the ways social histories of violence un-tap an unconscious archive that implicates us in the destruction we witness.

But there is more, for difficult history destabilizes the firm footing we might like to claim in relation to it, such as in occupying one or the other side of a debate over Walker's images. Drawing from the early nineteenth century poet John Keats, Britzman states that artists hold the ability to tolerate what is difficult to know for certain about the world. This, she argues is the accomplishment of negativity: the artist's capacity to tolerate and express the unknown. A "negative capability," opens possibilities for understanding the world beyond determined or literal meanings (p. 118). An artist's ability to grapple with, hold, and express a struggle with the unknown brings emphasis to difficulties of representation itself, and not certain meaning: "With the idea of negative capability we are permitting the depth of emotional reality as capable of both registering the world that cannot be known and signifying how it is that we come to be affected" (p. 118). Through their capacity to toggle and create within a space that is between phantasy and reality, the artist presents, what Britzman names as, an "uncanny index of doubts" to the viewer, and in this uncertain space, bring into symbolization that which has previously been defended against (p. 113).

Through the process of coming to understand our negotiation between these two worlds of phantasy and reality, Britzman suggests that we can begin to reflect on our responsibility, education's

responsibility, to learn about what we do not, and may neither be able to or even want to know (p. 125). Drawing from the work of Hans Loewald, she argues that education should not take responsibility for the past in a way that is organized by a circuitous cycle of blame, guilt and defense, but rather should *accept* responsibility for our ongoing relationship to, and with, events which preceded us and which resist easy or direct representation. In Britzman's terms, and from the vantage of the artist, "the past leaves to us its excess, what could not or would not be grasped at the time of the event but now must be symbolized" (pp. 123-124). In other words, in accepting responsibility that exceeds our capacity to grasp it directly.

### An Uncanny Insurrection

I now turn to my reading of Walker's installation, *Insurrection!* (2000) to show how this piece, through its uncanny frame, may confront us with this excess of our history and ask us to accept responsibility, in Britzman's sense of that term, for our implication as witnesses to it. In *Insurrection!*, viewers walk into a room that is covered floor to ceiling in her signature silhouettes and old school projectors are placed strategically on the floor throughout the room. The projectors serve a dual function. Unlike some of her earlier works using only a black and white colour scheme, gelled overlays of red and blue are placed on the projectors, which then add aspects of dimension and colour to the background of the characters that play along the wall. As viewers walk throughout the installation, the projectors also cast the shadow of the viewer unto the wall alongside the silhouette cut outs.

In the casting of the viewers' shadows unto the installation, Walker enacts a recasting of characters into the drama. Not so much a new invitation, the projectors work through an insinuation that the viewer is already implicated in the work. The viewer is implicated in both the

sociocultural conditions the work represents and the conditions through which the work is read and conceptualized. The implication at stake here is not, then, a fantastical drama that belongs to Walker alone, but one that speaks to, and draws upon, a series of conceptions that are active in the social conditions of viewers, embodied, arguably, in the debates of reviewers.

Walker explains that *Insurrection!* was inspired by the work of Thomas Eakins and his surgical theatre paintings. The piece was created through a meditation on the performance of dismembering in relation to slave revolts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Art21). The full title: *Insurrection! Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On* speaks to the use of rudimentary objects, such as kitchen utensils, which she envisions were used in the revolts (Art21). This title may also be read as a metaphor for Walker's tools in her installation. Her tools—projectors and cut paper—are also rudimentary. Yet, her use of these tools creates an interactive shadow drama that acts as a revolt against the narratives of both the past and the present. Her use of rudimentary objects also works to “press on,” or challenge, the frames for knowing and thinking about history and its presence today.

When thought through the treatment of difficult histories in education, Walker's work may be a site where we are presented, or re-presented, with thoughts and narratives that our education has disavowed. Through this re-presentation, we are called to reinterpret the past, this excess of education, as that which could not be symbolized at the time but for which we must now accept responsibility. Through her uncanny play, Walker's shadowing historical narratives offer a site where a flood of affect may give shape to the past in relation to the present. Similar to the anxiety at play in the debates over Walker's work, education, too, is made anxious when presented with histories and images which we both unconsciously hold and have left behind through the mechanism of repression. An uncanny reading of Walker's works

may allow us to step outside the need to choose between the depiction and dissection of difficult images to a space where we may read this anxiety as evidence of the lingering presence of an unattended past. Walker's works are radical, and not simply repetition, if we can bear to accept their uncanny insurrection towards our established thinking. Her depiction of familiar images may act to simultaneously dissect difficult history and the conflicts of learning from it. As for education, what remains is a question about how to encounter the excesses of history as witnesses to an uncanny insurrection and so to finally accept its echoes as having everything to do with the present, and us all.

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