Art is where and how we speak to each other in tongues audible when “official” language fails. It is not where we escape the world’s ills, but rather one place where we go to make sense of them.

—Elizabeth Alexander, The Black Interior

Upon meeting Kara Walker for the first time, I found her soft-spoken; sensitive; tall like her father, artist Larry Walker; and incredibly articulate. Her work is inventive, aggressive, ironic, humorous, loud, repeatedly surprising, painful, satirical, accusatory, sexual without being sensual, and matter-of-factly violent. Like Romare Bearden, she has stamped a medium and technique with her individual voice so powerfully that creative ventures into the realm of silhouettes by others now
seem derivative. It seems that white critics, dealers, and collectors of Walker’s work approach it dispassionately from their side of the slavery legacy, and they can be terribly enervated and excited about the brilliance of the art. Having more at stake from this side of that legacy, I find it useful to return to the work several times to sift through the rubble left by her explosion onto the art scene.

When artists speak in cultural tongues through their work, they speak to the choir, per se, invigorating them, lifting the spiritual excitement of the experience. However, the unconverted also are targeted: those visitors in the audience who have not committed to the visual, cultural, or theoretical orthodoxy preached by the artist. Artists like Walker can work like evangelists among new congregations in new venues, carrying their message into a wilderness...of believers. Walker is an African American artist, but is she performing African American art? When I viewed one of her tableaux—a horse on its back, its head in a howl reminiscent of the one in Picasso’s Guernica and being ridden sexually by a young black girl—at Harvard during a 1998 conference built around her work, I was convinced that it was not African American art. However, I now believe that Walker’s work expands this category into a provocative genre extending beyond the social criticism of Charles White, Dana Chandler, and Robert Colescott.

Walker’s chaotic tableaux might be seen as talking in tongues: an emotional eruption within the staid orthodoxy of the art world. The metaphor at work here, glossolalia, is commonly associated with Pentecostal denominations of Christianity. Rather than compare Walker’s chaotic, sexually excessive tableaux to the underworld fantasies of Hieronymus Bosch, it is interesting to locate her expression in a spiritual practice often associated with African American emotive religiosity.

Walker’s work is both personal and socially conscious, juxtaposing her own experiences with larger issues in a society that has begun deluding itself in earnest about a postracial (postblack?) status supposedly confirmed by the presidential election of Barack Obama in 2008. The irony, for me, is that this actually should be a postracial moment but is not, and the presumption of it being so impedes progress toward postracial possibilities by curtailing continuance of the work still required for such a moment to occur. Walker’s artworks, using simple forms with details found only on the edges, convey or allude to layers of significance, multiple histories, and personal experiences, and the imagery and contextual frame of art give voice to things that cannot be said in public. Yet at this historical moment, with its creeping popular cultural excesses, loudly speaking the unspeakable may be the only way to be heard above the cacophony.

### Contextual Madness

Racial definitions became a necessity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the colonial United States because of the enormous profitability of the chattel slavery of Africans in the Americas. Interracial interaction threatened the integrity of the slave system and led to formal legal boundaries and definitions. Laws became essential to effectively quarantine black populations from poor whites, to legally define American slavery, and in the process they began to draw the outlines of racial definition. There were not necessarily enmities between white peasants and African slaves; Mechal Sobel argues that they had more in common with each other than either had in common with the elite white plantation owners. Therefore legal and conceptual barriers were erected. John Hope Franklin suggests that sexual liaisons and interracial marriages were a central concern: “Although Virginians greatly appreciated the importance of slave labor in the development of the colony, they soon became apprehensive about such large numbers of blacks living among whites. Already whites and blacks were mixing, and a mulatto population was emerging.” Additionally, a black slave population offered some insulation against Christian judgments for cruel treatment and mistreatment of slaves, an ethical shield not available if the slaves or indentured servants were white: “Virginians began to see what neighboring islands in the Caribbean had already recognized, namely, that blacks could not easily

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The Treasure Hunters, 2007. Mixed media, newsprint, cut paper on gessoed panel, 84 x 60 x 2 in. (213.4 x 152.4 x 5.1 cm). Courtesy Sikkema Jenkins and Co., New York.
escape without being identified; that they could be disciplined, even punished, with impunity, since they were not Christians; and that their supply was apparently inexhaustible.2

Given that one of the public obfuscations and justifications of slavery was the Christian conversion of so-called savages, it is an irony that the biblical admonition “The love of money is the root of all evil” (1 Timothy 6:10) was exceptionally appropriate for the Atlantic slave trade. The system generated great profit for its benefactors, and the maintenance of that system generated cruelty, terrorism, rape, and a nearly genocidal outcome, with the deaths of between 15 and 30 million Africans in the capture, holding, and shipping through the Middle Passage that brought about 15 million live beings to the New World. South Carolina planter and U.S. representative James Henry Hammond, a leading spokesman for slave owners during the 1830s and 1840s, addressed abolitionists with this argument: “Nay, supposing that we were all convinced, and thought of slavery precisely as you do, at what era of moral suasion do you imagine you could prevail on us to give up a thousand millions of dollars in the sale of our slaves, and a thousand millions of dollars more in depreciation of our lands, in consequence of the want of laborers to cultivate them?”3

Northern merchants benefited no less from the trade and iterated the same argument in resistance to abolitionist activism:

There are millions upon millions of dollars due from the Southerners to the merchants and mechanics of this city alone, the payment of which would be jeopardized by a rupture between the North and the South. We cannot afford, sir, to let you and your associates succeed in your endeavor to overthrow slavery. It is not a matter of principle with us. It is a matter of business necessity. We cannot afford to let you succeed.4

The point is that slavery led to the definition of race in the terms we understand today. Additionally, structures create behaviors so that racist violence and terrorism are suppressed in circumstances in which institutional structures and social conventions do not support or tolerate these behaviors. People tend to be xenophobic, but so much more was at stake due to the slave system and its enormous profitability. Coupled with primitivist notions about non-European people (which often were grafted on preexisting mythologies and definitions about forest creatures such as the satyr and the Minotaur, as well as on denigrating ideas about people from lower classes), a system of confining and demeaning definitions and meanings formed to explain and contain plantation life.5 Yet white men sexually exploited black women with impunity. While E. Franklin Frazier argues that “mulattoes or mixed-bloods constituted 37 percent of the slave population” of the United States in 1850, census figures from the time indicate that only about 10 percent of the slave population was classified as mulatto.6 What is most striking is that in 1850 over four hundred thousand people were classified as mulattoes, not including those who might have been of mixed descent or those who “passed” for white and disappeared into that population.

This is the context that Walker somehow exaggerates, and she uses the plantation as the frame for a nexus of sex and race and violence. From this trance of rape, exploitation, violence, greed, and spiritual bankruptcy, Walker imposes upon her glossolalia of almost unintelligible speech. Because she is creating images, this work in tone has the character of automatic writing and resembles surrealistic ideas expressing the subconscious through drawing, and her use of cut imagery hints at decoupage. At the same time, Walker intentionally uses overstatement to signify about black complicity in racial discourse.

In short, race (and racism) functioned effectively in the construction and maintenance of the hugely profitable slave system. It had real-world benefits for those at the top, much as the drug trade does today. However, as the system began to be outlawed in the mid-nineteenth century, racism no longer had a functional raison d’être. It had its uses in the conceptual illusions of white supremacy, but the motivations of its construction no longer existed. In fact, racists today are, in my mind, mental primitives clinging to eighteenth-century ideas in the twenty-first century. Much of Walker’s work is located in an antebellum context, which brilliantly suggests that discussions of race are most appropriate for the period before 1850—another indirect critique of contemporary racial absurdity. She uses an art technique common to the era—the silhouette—to emphasize that the concept of race, though anarchistic, is an orthodoxy reiterated and reinvented daily by both sides.

Walker has suggested that race does not belong in twenty-first-century discourse; that its presence is bizarre, its history perverse and violent; and that in many ways sexual tension, jealousies, rivalries, excesses, and absurdities were central players in actual racial histories in the United States. Her Authenticating the Artifact (2007), creatively builds on her earlier silhouettes with the addition of color and with the quiltlike patterns that reinforce the primacy of the sexual victimization of black women in the racial tensions of the antebellum period. Additionally, she has inverted her practice of using the black silhouette on white space, applying white figures on a dark background to express the action. This is at once an artful play with negative and positive space and a hint of invisibility for the racialized figure. We are shocked to find the lovely young woman in the image gently fingering a decapitated head, while behind her what appear to be his hanging entrails drip down into the scene from outside the frame like artifacts of his disemboweling after his lynching from a tree also outside the frame. In interesting ways this work reflects the silhouettes of Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas and his painting An Idyll of the Deep South (1934), with the feet of the lynching victim at the top left invading the patterned, colorful painting.
The colorful image in Bureau, enhanced by the use of complementary colors playing off one another, has the random liquid quality of a Rorschach stain. Walker is implying that one must descend into the subconscious realms, and Walker's glossolalia, her painful speaking in tongues, evokes a trance state located in that consciousness. It is the plain- tive prayer of a mother speaking to God, asking for answers, grieving over the murdered son, the mutilated black body, the violated daughter. Perhaps Walker is implying that one must descend into the inferno to locate and justify the violent and persistent history of race in America. She has cast the plantation as an asylum where one can assess and analyze the insanity of racism and white supremacy. As New York Times critic Holland Cotter wrote of her in 2007:

And then there is the theme: race. It dominates everything, yet within it, Ms. Walker finds a chaos of con-tradictory ideas and emotions. She is single-minded in seeing racism as a reality, but of many minds about exactly how that reality plays out in the present and the past. For her the reliable old dualities—white versus black, strong versus weak, victim versus predator—are volatile and shifting. And she uses her art—mocking, shaming, startlingly poignant, exquisitely personal—to keep them this way.11

In many ways Walker's work implicates her own disfigurement by the products and residue of this environment in a reflection of Morrison's idea. The title of Walker’s 2007 exhibition at the Walker Art Center, My Oppressor, My Love, painfully (for blacks) explores the complicated antagonism and identification that many blacks feel with whites (and mirrors the hatred and fascination many whites then and now have felt for blacks). Walker’s work is artistic genius, as many admirers and scholars have attested, but it is rude, blurring out the unspeakable and the unspoken.12 It is challenging, confrontational, creative, and disturbing. But, to employ the well-used idea of W. E. B. Du Bois, it has a double consciousness.

The Other Side of the Coin

And we can’t all “just be individuals” because no one is just that, nor has anyone ever lived as such, any- where. Walker’s Rorschach stain, the face of the Earth. Indeed, there is no such thing as an individual human being abstracted from their social context. Human beings have never lived in isolation. Humans have always been social, and have experienced life as members of certain groups, be they tribes, communities, families and in more modern times nationalities, races, eco- nomic classes and religions.

—Tim Wise, Color Blind Walker is an African American woman who, from that perspective, makes vivid, disturbing commentary about the history of race within which she found herself. I would like to raise two related points about her work and her position in public discourse. First, it is essentially a racist assumption to define artwork done by a black person as African American art. Walker’s work, however, roots itself in the idiom culturally by reference, perspective, and practice despite challenging conventional African American sensibilities. Second, by presenting persistent images of black victimization, the work inadvertently risks reinforging white supremacy by reiterating its hierarchies and definitions of blackness. This is a delicate shift, and it is not easy to discern the step from attacking racism to a place that reinforces the diminished status of blacks. For some critics, Walker’s rapturous acceptance by the art world and by mainstream media and institutions, despite her rude criticism of racial histories and hierarchies and her sexually charged imagery, confirms this sinister shadow cast by her work. Walker’s task is a difficult one, but she successfully completes it by challenging and critiquing both victim and victimizer as having something like an enabling relationship. It seems that solutions and accusations are not her objective, but daring self-examination might be a part of it.

Returning to the first point, it is time to complicate the definition of African American art to include a cultural idiom.13 Jazz, blues, gospel, hip-hop, and other recognizable musical idioms have stylistic and cultural foundations. They emanate from lived cultural experiences, by and large, and therefore they are rooted deeply enough to embrace nonblack practitioners. Walker expresses both the rage of the black experience and the psychic injuries seldom visualized but commonly present among sensitive people. Her audience is not primarily a black one, but, like so many before her, she seems to speak truth to power from a public space. However, some aspects of her speech are uncomfortably private.

Sanctuary and Sanctuaries

A secret place filled with mirrors. . . .

—Jon Lockard, visual artist

Many African American artists since the 1920s have sought to express their individuality rather than their racial or ethnic selves in their work, and others have aimed their work at white audiences through the social commentary and subject matter in their work. Artists who have addressed their own community with a love of African American culture often have not fared as well critically or financially for a number of complex reasons, but the character of the work, like the best black music, can be incredibly rich in cultural nuance and resonance. A sanctuary is a place of refuge or safety. It also is a holy place, the innermost recess of a temple or church. Immersed in a racist, oppressive society that routinely defeated, denigrated, and violated them, African Americans often sought refuge from these conditions and from the people who created and maintained them. Blacks retreated to their own communities, cultural patterns and practices, and
mimicked the Creation story with a sense of the Afri-
can’s “initial fall away from wholeness into pain.” From this disjunction between the social body, and the accompanying psychological fissure, articu-
lated as double consciousness, we find in religious and musical practices a sort of collective conjure and re-creation. There is a “mythic epithany made palpable, given voice, full of scent and sound.”20 The black experience, configured by slavery, is congru-
tant with shamanic models of death and dismember-
ment, travel to the underworld, an ecstatic journey, transfiguration and transcendence, and return. The shaman or, in the social sense, the shamanic experi-
ence learns or teaches the ecstatic technique for the dramatic epiphany, rebirth, and transcendental re-
figured identity. Perhaps this process in some way explains the powerful presence of figures such as Eshu and other mediators between realms in African/ black folklore.

With Du Boisian double consciousness, Per-
kinson argues that Du Bois’s thought is consistent with an implicit Hegelian theme of recognition by
another as the curse, and the spiritual insight — “sec-
ond sight” — as its transformational gift. The white master’s agency as a physical body under the
master’s own control. The blackness of that body
was a sign of internal depravity to be rehabilitated
to their communal audience. Walker has collaged ele-
ments of ecstatic black religious experience with
the shamanistic dismemberment and potential re-
membering of the black body as a critique, exagger-
ation, regeneration, and exposure of the slave expe-
rience and the persistence of racism. She is using sex
and violence as a ritual plea for her own healing. I do not always agree with what she has done, but as I
understand it most, I recognize how she is talking
that talk — that talking in tongues while signifying
while confessing to her own pain. Walker offers
us, on one side, a vicarious transfiguration and, on
another, a withering reminder that “postrace” and
“postblack” are still aspirations rather than reali-
ties. What she has done is, to quote Moyo Okediji,
“slippery and beyond historicized imagination.”21

I am left wondering if, like a Rorschach image and
the Morrison thought, my musings on her are
more about the viewer than about the viewed.

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Notes

1. “[Glosisual) consists of strings of syllables, made up of sounds taken from all those that the speaker knows, put together more or less haphazardly but emerging nevertheless as word-like and sentence-like units because of realistic, language-like rhythm and melody” (William J. Samarin, “Sociolinguistic vs. Neurophysi-
2. John Hope Franklin wrote that “the actual statutory recogni-
tion of slavery in Virginia came in 1661 . . . In 1682, Virginia took
another step toward slavery by indicating in its laws that children
born in the colony would be held bond or free according to the
4. Franklin, From Slavery to Freedom, 57.
5. Ibid., 56.
7. Ibid.
8. Edward Long responded to early antislavery arguments with his virulently racist publication History of Jamaica (London, 1774), in which he tried to prove that blacks were a species dis-
9. E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), 13–14. Census figures show that in 1810 the South had a free black population of 235,569, of whom 101,308 were con-
sidered mulattoes. For the entire nation, there were 434,495 free blacks (12 percent of the total), 159,095 of whom were classified
as mulattoes. Of 3,204,313 slaves, only 246,656 were classified
10. Walker, in a corrective, says: “It should be clear from that
discipline of work that the title—mulatto hung by a grapevine near
roadside between Tuscaloosa & Greensboro (2007)—is a direct
(by yet disembodied) quote from records of murders and atrocities
culled from the ‘Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned
Lands” (pers. comm.).
11. Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Liter-
14. I am writing a book-length manuscript to address this argu-
ment in detail.
15. Elizabeth Alexander, The Black Interior (St. Paul, MN: Gray-
well, 2004).
16. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., Race Music: Black Culture’s from Bebop to Hip-Hop (Berkeley: University of California Press; Chicago:
Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College, 2003), 55.
17. “Ethnic identity operates much the same way that musical practice does . . . Musical gestures, genres, and styles are per-
formed; likewise, ethnicity and nearly every aspect of identi-
y should be considered performances. Blackness doesn’t really
exist until it is done, or ‘practiced,’ in the world. Musical styles and ethnics are loaded signifiers, doing each important cul-
tural work in the social world” (ibid., 39).
18. For a wonderful analysis of the conflict between the rhetoric
of a postblack, postracial society and the way that things actually
work on the ground, see Tim Wise, Color Blind: The Rise of Post-
racial Politics and the Retreat from Racial Equity (San Francisco:
City Lights Books, 2000).
20. Ibid., 20–33.
21. Italics mine. Perkinson (ibid., 37–39) is paraphrasing and
gilroy to make a complicated case for the role of music
as an agent in cultural and psychological transfor-
mation: “Blues, jazz, gospel, reggae, soul, funk, and
hip-hop are all interrogated in form and function
by [Gilroy] as complex re-creations of communal
identities under duress of modern structures of
oppression that transfigure violence into beauty.”21
A significant agency found through this trans-
figuration enabled survival in a toxic environment,
and the shamanic, transformative aspects of music
were not markedly different from those of religious
expression and belief. (And it is here that we find
Walker’s agency, primarily personal but vicariously
available to a black audience.) Consistent with
deeper figurations of the body. From this dismember-
ment of the black social body,
and violence as a ritual plea for her own healing. I do not always agree with what she has done, but as I understand it most, I recognize how she is talking that talk — that talking in tongues while signifying while confessing to her own pain. Walker offers us, on one side, a vicarious transfiguration and, on another, a withering reminder that “postrace” and “postblack” are still aspirations rather than realities. What she has done is, to quote Moyo Okediji, “slippery and beyond historicized imagination.”21 And I am left wondering if, like a Rorschach image and the Morrison thought, my musings on her are more about the viewer than about the viewed.