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DE PAUL UNIVERSITY

The Post-Black Aesthetic and Meanings of Blackness through the
Collage Narratives of Kara Walker and Fred Wilson

M.A. THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION
OF

SOCIAL CULTURAL FOUNDATIONS IN EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN
EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

APRIL 2012

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	4
CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW	19
CHAPTER 2.: KARA WALKER AND POSTMODERN METHODOLOGY	35
CHAPTER 3: FRED WILSON	54
CHAPTER 4: VISUAL PEDAGOGY	67
CONCLUSION	73
BIBLIOGRAPHY	76

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURES

1.	"Darkytown Rebellion" 2001	35
2.	"An Abbreviated Emancipation" (swan scene) 2002	43
3.	"Successes" 1998	44
4.	"Allegory" 1993	45
5.	"Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress" 2001	47
6.	"Consume" 1998	49
7.	"Presenting Negro Scenes Draw Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured by the Benefit of Enlightened Audience Wherever Such May be Found" 1997	51
8.	"Metalwork 1793-1880" 1992	56
9.	"Picasso: Whose Rules?" 1991	59
10.	"Colonial Collection" 1990	60
11.	"Jutus Englehardt" Kuhn. Henry Darrell III. Ca. 1710	62
12.	"Artemis/Bast" 1992	63
13.	"Collectibles" 1995	65

Introduction

In this study, I will discuss the Post-Black aesthetic through the work of two renowned artists, Kara Walker and Fred Wilson. I intend to show how these artists challenge hegemonic representations through the appropriations of racial stereotypes that exist within American culture. During the late 90's, a new generation of African-American artists explored techniques of representation through drawing, painting, photography and site-specific installations, which addressed social, cultural and psychological dimensions of blackness within post-modern society. Economic disruptions in the African American community sparked a social dialectic that reflected symptomatic forms of racism and racelessness within the dominant society. Due to rising unemployment, the loss of unskilled jobs has forced struggling black middle class workers to accept underclass citizenship; at the same time, the media has glorified a small number of black millionaires as exemplifying black achievement of the American dream. With the emergence of hip-hop culture, the music industry has masked a true

representation of black people through the circulation of racist images portraying the black man as criminal and hypersexual. Paradoxically, as modern society embraces multi-cultural and sexual orientation, many urban communities generated intolerance towards ethnicities and difference.

From this social context, African-American artists re-position their own identities in relationship to the demands of viewers, African-Americans and mainstream art critics. By dismantling racist stereotypes of the past, artists informed viewers about the dominant notions of blackness and the incompleteness of black subjectivity; at the same time, historical insights lead African-American artists to explore hegemonic influences within black culture.

I will examine the black aesthetic from a historical perspective, starting with the emergence of Jim Crow laws during the Reconstruction period to early 20th century views of black critic James A. Porter on the integration of black art into the American tradition; W.E.B. Dubois' idea on idealism and art, which gained significance during the Harlem Renaissance; and finally the black nationalist and separatist movements which spawned the civil rights revolution of the 1960's. With this perspective as a backdrop, I will debate key concerns, such as whether or not the sole purpose of black art is to support the political initiatives of the black community; do artists have the responsibility to take on the goals of the black majority; do African-American artists have the right to express themselves artistically, without reference to their blackness; does a collective black good

ignore black ethnicities within the United States and internationally? These concerns reexamine the role of African-Americans artists within the context of contrasting hegemonic conditions, in their desire to produce new expressions on identity and the racialized subject.

During the late 90's, Kara Walker and Fred Wilson gained recognition as artist in the post-black aesthetic movement. Their notoriety occurred during the ascension of a group of ethnically diverse black artists who offered a new perspective of identity, culture and aesthetics. In 2001, Curator Thelma Golden organized a Harlem exhibition called "Free Style," which included the work of a new generation of African American artists. Participating in the critique on traditional meanings of blackness, these artists embraced new perspectives on identity and difference, which produced unique forms of blackness. Golden used the term, "post-black" to describe these artists whose art forms provide a radical alternative to the black aesthetic.

Within this new genre, I plan to explore the work of Kara Walker and her visual strategies to appropriate popular novels and slave narratives of the Old South, expose myths and stereotypes of plantation life in America. During the 1990s, Walker created cut outs of black paper figures in silhouettes, which were arranged in tableau depicting the dark side of slavery; visual illustrations of a catastrophic world reveal unimaginable acts of sexual abuse, dismemberment and death. Walker transforms Mitchell's romantic notion of slavery in an effort

to analyze allegorical narrative based on tragic circumstances. In Walker's visual discourse on slavery, I will draw upon the methodological innovations of social and literary critic, Walter Benjamin. By applying Benjamin's concepts on allegory, history and redemption to Walker's visual narratives, I will provide further analysis on the methods post-black artists use to understand and deconstruct blackness within the context of postmodern culture.

Walker's images reveal trauma and loss through the display of brutal acts of sexual and physical oppression. Black slaves appear as docile victims stripped of bodily necessities and human desire; these traumatic depictions can be seen throughout Walker's visual narrative. I plan to introduce Fanon's concepts on the racial epidermal schema, which explores psychic repression and neurosis of the black subject, as well as Freud's theories on ego and body relation. These psychological dimensions shed light on the thought processes of Walker's slave characters, which existed under the oppressive conditions of slavery.

Conceptual artist Fred Wilson explores the issue of identity/race through site-specific installations. Curator and recipient of the MacArthur Foundation Genius Award, Wilson assembles and restages cultural artifacts on display in museums and historical institutions. Objects, photographs and historical references on slavery are juxtaposed with art forms of colonial America, exposing various forms of racial discourse. The rhetorical placement of objects disrupts the viewer's perceptions and the normative patterns of interpreting

works of art. In discussing Wilson's interrogation of cultural spaces, I will integrate Benjamin's views on historical materialism with Wilson's passion to reconstruct repressed narratives of the past.

The work of Kara Walker and Fred Wilson exemplify the innovative spirit of post-black aesthetics. Both artists decipher obscure artifacts and racialized images to expose voices of the unheard. Allegory, irony, appropriation and counter narrative transform established notions of gender race and identity into lucid and arbitrary art forms. Thinking in images awakens the viewer to new modes of interpretation and meaning making. Temporal effects intensify images. Having the capacity to appear as a forgotten moment, the image becomes arrested in time, only to spring forth as a ruin informing the present. In the Cambridge Companion on Walter Benjamin, Max Pensky comments,

The dialectical image [sic] is an image that emerges suddenly in a flash. What has been is to be held fast as an image flashing up in the now of recognizability... Benjamin was convinced behind the façade of the present, these otherwise forgotten moments could be recovered from oblivion and reintroduced, shoved in the face of the present, as it were, with devastating force. The materialist presentation of history leads the past to bring the present into a critical state (2004, p. 180).

Such notions on the temporality and the dialectical image can be recognized in the art of Surrealism. Allegorical studies through image juxtapositions, like those in Walker and Wilson's work was widely practiced by surrealist artists.

Visual culture provides new perspectives on the way images construct and generate meaning, through the paradoxical nature of art making. As humans we are inundated by visual culture. Learning how to see and interpret meaning within the framework of cultural artifacts and historical fragments allows educators and students to adopt the perspective that art making is a transformative experience. By understanding how collage, montage and allegorical narratives empower a critical consciousness, students explore ways to decipher socially constructed ideologies: commodity and fetishism, identity and subject formation and traditional notions of race. Through a visual curriculum program, educators and students become critical citizens, challenging visual codes and culturally dominant narratives. These artistic endeavors expand education beyond codified forms of learning by introducing a new vision on the cultural life of images.

I intend to shed new light on the contributions of Kara Walker and Fred Wilson whose work challenges hegemonic representations through the appropriation of racial stereotypes that exist within American culture. These ethnically diverse artists redefine complex notions of black subjectivity by exemplifying the innovative and assertive spirit of post-black aesthetics.

During the 1990s, a new generation of African American artist appeared on the American art scene. In 2001, *Free Style*, an exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, marked the presence of a group of black artists who produced works of art beyond the tradition of African American art. The curator, Thelma Golden coined these artists the new 'post-black.' The exhibition depicted works that centered on multicultural themes and ideological concerns. In Paul Taylor's article, "Post-Black, Old Black," he comments,

For Golden's post-black artists, as everyone else who has learned the lessons of the post-soul era, the traditional meanings of blackness, the meanings of black power, are too confining. New meanings have emerged: new forms of black identity that are multiple, fluid and profoundly contingent... as the shift from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness (2007, p. 626).

Golden's arrangement of themes for the exhibition raised questions about complexity of identity, and gender within the context of contemporary race theory.

Golden's post-black label generated a debate among African-American artists on the identifying features of a post-black aesthetics. Questions surfaced about the meanings and connotations of post-black. Is the post-black the new black and if so, how the new black identified through multiculturalism? Then

within this definition of post-black how black is black? These questions captivated artists to understand and deconstruct meanings of blackness within the context of postmodern culture. Many artists voiced criticism on being identified with the elusive notion of post-black. In Taylor's article, painter Kojo Griffin, a participant in the Free Style exhibition says, "as a person who is very proud of being black or of African heritage, I would be reluctant to ever describe myself as 'post-black' in any sense." Taylor goes on to say "Griffin's remark may reflect a misunderstanding of Golden's underlying idea, or some disagreement with her about the implications or likely consequences of its use (2007, p. 628). Here, Griffin's response was that Golden's term fails to disconnect traditional notions of blackness from socio-psychological and political economic factors in post-modern culture.

Although these arguments on Golden's post-black were confined to the art world, the social disruptions of the 90's gave rise to a group of African Americans who experience of culture and gender was distinct from past generations. Divergent groups that included Hip Hop, lesbian-gay, Afro-Caribbean, and trans-Africans established boundaries within the African American community. Locating blackness was complex and far reaching. Identity and difference exceeded the boundaries of traditional notions of race. In describing the complexity of difference, Paul Taylor considers social and literary critic George Nelson's views by stating,

George's post-soul culture emerges when certain narrow descriptions about respectable black identity give way to diverse forms of acceptable black identity. The baps, b-boys, bohos, and buppies in whose honor he named one of his books all listen to different kind of music, wear different clothes, and so on; and though all are black, this means principally their diverse identities have common roots in a generation of more uniformly black people, and the soul-era struggles, both cultural and political, to which they owe their freedom... thanks to the indeterminate present. The constitutive dynamics urban deindustrialization, hypercommodification of blackness and so on seem still to be unfolding, with no obvious endpoint clearly in sight (2007, p. 631).

This emergence of a culturally diverse group of African American expanded the post-black debate.

To understand the serious reactions to Golden's idea of a post-black aesthetics, it's important to define relevant forms of blackness within the context of visual culture. The western art world restricted the work of African American artists to slavery and idealism of the civil rights movement. These narrow representations became social indicators to objectify blackness. Artists who offered a different view of black subjectivity were overlooked and excluded from galleries and art institutions. A new genre of African Americans challenged the

limits of artistic expression through the production of innovative and subversive art forms. In Jennifer Gonzalez's book, *Subject To Display*, she writes,

These artists share a critical approach to material and visual culture that examines, and ultimately attempts to undermine, racist, colonialist, and sexist discourses in a long tradition of abolitionism [sic] a form of critical inquiry that will allow the complexity of their enunciation to emerge (2008, p. 20).

Contemporary black artist reflect upon the socio-cultural and psychological dimensions of difference, they create new art forms, which shape the future of the post-black aesthetic.

The question is what makes black art black? Is it integrated into the aesthetics of post-black? Artists face the dilemma of defining their work based on the limitations of cultural institutions and audience spectatorship. In order to secure artistic license, post-black artists explore alternative themes expanding the boundaries of artistic representation. In English's book, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, he suggests,

The work of many contemporary black artists reveal that, for them, black is but one mode among the many in which they elect to work. But in the great number of foolproof apparatuses to locate and underscore the cultural identity of the artist as the site and seat of

the work's significance, we come face to face with and especially pertinent problem that history poses for the present (2007, p. 30).

Obstructing hegemonic patterns of identification allows post-black artists to explore art as a function of change.

In order for contemporary black artist to confront these limitations, an examination of Franz Fanon's racial epidermal schema is critical in resolving these normative practices. Reading Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, the author black subject. This process of objectification functions through racial information: skin color and anatomical features. Dominant social regimes establish codes by which to repress black individuals. However, Fanon's racialized subject is split – he or she has the ability to camouflage and reduce forms of racial identification; Thereby, becoming elusive and unpredictable. Here the black individual achieves agency and freedom from objectified representations. English quotes,

If rather than reading *Black Skin White Mask* as paradigmatic, we recognize how greatly forms of longing, will vary, we can appreciate the book as model of how creative, aesthetic action upon signs of black difference can oppose black representational space's annexation of private space by rules of social governance (2007, p. 45).

From this perspective, the black artist and his work is an ongoing self-making process. Embracing new subjectivity based on personal experiences. Aesthetic experimentation goes beyond normative views of blackness.

Historical shifts influenced the work and social agency of African American artists. The reconstruction period in the late, 19th century mobilized Negro artists to support the leadership of black spokesmen as a means of survival. During the 20th century, black political movements initiated discussion on Negro art and culture. A driving force in these debates was historian W.E.B. Du Bois. From Du Bois perspective, racial progress was best achieved through the formation of a black middle class, embracing the values of American culture. The role of the Negro artist was to illustrate those ideas through art. This perspective on black life coincides with aesthetic realism of the 19th century, when beauty and truth were revered as essential properties of human beings. Such characteristics are visible through art and literature. Leonard Harris comments,

If, for Du Bois, the Negro artist does turn away from the objective of racial uplift – because racial uplift is the precondition of liberty – he will find that he has killed the soul of beauty in his Art (2004, p. 19).

Here Du Bois' ideas on racial uplift propagandize art through political persuasion.

As Du Bois' political idealism reached a burgeoning, Negro middle class critics reacted by proposing new alternatives. In the 1940s, black art historian James A. Porter published "Modern Negro Art," a collection of essays on the history of black art and culture. The objective of the publication was to present an integrationist perspective on black culture in America. Porter advanced programs that enabled Negro artists to integrate race and culture within a cross-cultural context. Porter's book attempted to challenge black consensus strategies, which undermined the expansion of African American art. English comments,

Porter's "Modern Negro Art" reminds us that a ready audience awaited these essays, and that they appeared just in time for the awakening of younger artist...at last America was becoming conscious of the collective strength of Negro art, was a Negro middle class which increasingly require the services of the artist (2007, p. 58).

Porter's integrative approach encouraged artist to explore cultural practices, beyond themes of racial uplift.

Social and political upheavals of the civil rights era mobilized artists to produce images based on powerful black rhetoric. Racial injustice and discriminatory voting practices forced artists to reexamine Du Bois' views on the black middle class and his definition of beauty. During the 1960s black artist Romare Bearden established a new artist collective known as Spiral. This

collective was the center of intense debates on integration verses black nationalism, producing art beyond traditional themes of blackness and reexamining the role of the black artist within African American communities and art institutions. English states,

The members of Spiral critically take on the Negro image, the symbology of material blackness, and the cultural politics of Negro art. In doing so, the only group compulsion they exhibit is toward a conception of art as a domain where fixed values and closed politics can be decentered and open. Perhaps most importantly, they position the artist as a manipulator, not a bearer of cultural meaning (2007, p. 62).

Spiral 's members generated a cultural shift in black aesthetics in which black artists and their work became sites of contest where boundaries redefined black identity and culture. The Spiral collective was a precursor to the post-black aesthetic.

Black artists during the civil rights era adopted formal strategies to illustrate unequal power relations between blacks and whites in America. Artists like Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence and Gordon Parks depicted racial struggle through narrations of tragedy and romance. These visual strategies reinforced traditional notions of race. Cultural shifts during the 1970s initiated a new wave of graffiti and hip-hop artists who found these practices obsolete in addressing

the surging black unemployment, failed economic policies, and the growing African immigrants population in urban America. These social dialectics challenged artists to explore radical strategies to exposing the cultural and psychological implications of racism. These strategies were overlooked by black artists of the civil rights era.

Post civil right artists utilized irony as a strategy to address the social inconsistencies within African-American culture. A traditional practice that gives form to the complexities of everyday life, irony displaces beliefs in political realities. Ironic moments occur when artists conceal views by which the audience is left to decipher and grasp possible meanings. Art critic Lucy Lippard writes,

Irony, humor, and subversion are the most common guises and disguises of those artists leaping out of the melting pot into the fire. They hold mirrors up to the dominant culture, slyly infiltrating mainstream art with alternative experiences - inverse, reverse, perverse [sic] irony and subversion are used strategically to connect past, present and future without limiting art or audience to one time or place (1990, p. 199).

As a historical form of narration, irony turns around stereotypes and cultural myths positioned within racial discourse.

If irony subverts meanings, then 'signifying' a term used...mocks temporal experiences and social realities. For centuries, signifying has influenced African-American culture. From minstrel performances to black literature, signifying is invaluable to innovative forms of narration. Henry Louis Gates adds,

Free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms. Repetition and revision are fundamental to black artistic forms from painting and sculpture to music and language use (1988, p. 24).

Utilizing signifying strategies as well as ironic expressions provided post-civil right artists innovative ways to address the shifting ambiguities of African-American culture.

During the 1980s, graffiti art was recognized as a cultural art form in America. The rise of black graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquait radically altered our understanding of the black aesthetics. Basquait's method of using irony to critique unconscious and racialized images in American culture blurred distinctions between his political views and his place within the art world, as well as his involvement with African American culture. Exploring strategies beyond post civil rights artists like Piper, Ringgold, Saar, and Colescott. Basquait deployed irony to challenge and subvert print, media and capitalism. His primitive style of reconstructing images, text, symbols and trademarks opened

new questions about copyright and artistic ownership. Basquait used black authority figures to depict acts of police brutality within African-American communities. These disturbing encounters reveal the dark side of black-on-black oppression. Richard Shur writes,

Unlike the civil rights or Black influence artists, Basquait does not attempt to create a dignified portrait of black humanity or an explicit demand for equality or social recognition. Rather, the image appears to reinforce white supremacist stereotypes of black inferiority because the image itself depicts African American in crude terms, thus supporting the racist thesis that there is not an African American worthy of consideration (2007, p. 644).

Basquait's approach to irony transforms the black aesthetics to new concerns that investigate the cultural and psychological implications of racism in American culture. His signifying sensibilities offer brought new relevance to the role of the black artist, as well as his politics on the complexities of African-American culture through black aesthetics.

Chapter 1

Literature Review

In this section, I will discuss the theoretical framework central to my dissertation on how contemporary African-American artists work to redefine meanings of blackness in postmodern culture, by outlining existing knowledge and ideas critical to the topic. Starting with Benjamin's concepts on the dialectical image and historical memory, I will examine silenced histories, which inform our present and future realities. Additionally, I will include a discourse of Mitchell's view on meta-pictures as it applies to visual material, which engages the reader to contemplate the connection between image and desire. Lastly, I will introduce the psychological dimension of blackness and fetishism central to the work of Frantz Fanon. The culmination of this research provides an analysis of visual representation, and its impact on race and identity formation.

In the article, "Lapsus Imaginis: The Image in Ruin," the author discusses the visual image as it relates to loss and ruin – the idea that "what dies, is lost, and mourned within the image and it is only through ruin that the image struggles to exist" (Cavada, 2001, p. 35). Cavada selects a photographic print of the 1940 air raid bombing of the Holland House Library in London. This image shows subjects oblivious to the devastation and shock of war, avidly reading the

remains of damaged books. This print illustrates how images of loss reveal traces of disaster and ruin.

Cadava suggests that the images of ruin about persons and events become imprints of existence embodied within an image. It is the ability of the image to withdraw from experience surviving traces, which provide insight and logic into historical conditions. Within the space of the photograph, time is interrupted, shattering our understanding of what can be known about the image. How can we begin to interpret these fragments of meaning? Cadava examines Walter Benjamin's notion of the dialectical image and how images are readable as historical markers. According to Benjamin, historical moments become visible when emerging images synchronize with the present. This present is known as the "Now" of a specific recognizable moment. Benjamin comments,

It is not that the past casts its light on the present or the present cast its light on the past; rather the image is that in which the then and the Now comes together into a constellation like a flash of lightning (as cited by Cadava, 2001, p. 38).

From Benjamin's perspective, past and present operate outside the dimensions of continuous time: such configurations are imagistic and dialectical. An image that emerges into the Now of recognizability bears the trace of historical moments readable by a critical observer.

Cadava's insights into the nature of the image as ruin coincides with those of African-American artists Kara Walker and Fred Wilson, who position themselves in the present to draw upon the unspoken traces of the past in order to subvert racial narratives. Kara Walker's symbolic use of the silhouette as a form of absence and loss also suggest the fissure and distortion of figures that dialectically transfer between the then and the Now of recognizability. Such emergence brings to the image its own dissolution. Like a lighting flash, the synchronization of images that allow them to transcend time, interrupting the historical conditions of the past as well as those of the present. It is the role of the historian, critic and artist to interpret these dialectical images.

Cadava draws attention to how the photograph captures a moment of crisis within a particular context, evoking a visceral response from the viewer. Decoding multiple expressions of meanings implied within a photograph suspend an imposed narrative. From Benjamin's concepts on the dialectical image, Kara Walker's figurative representations blast forth, propelled into myriad of contextual fields. These silhouettes loosen themselves to perform symbolic violence upon the slave narratives of the Old South.

Cadava informs us that images have the capacity to interrupt, suspend and transform time. By incorporating Benjamin's theoretical reflections on the power of the image as ruin, Cavada provides insight into how traces of past

events generate moments of clarification. It is this emergence and the survival of the image that bears witness to our historical moments.

In the book *What Do Pictures Want? The Love and Lives of Image*, Mitchell (2005) offers a scholarly discourse on the affective nature of images and how they fascinate and captivate our emotions and desires. Moving beyond the dominant question put forth by art historians – What do pictures mean? – Mitchell questions traditional modes of interpretation by which we extract overt well as subliminal messages from visual text. He urges us to consider, ‘What does the picture want from us?’ From this perspective, images can be understood within the context of human desire.

In the chapter, “Drawing Desire,” Mitchell explores the depiction of desire through image making. This captivating force harbors its existence within images. Desire flows through figures, landscapes and lifeless forms. The gravitational pull of a pencil can evoke traces of desires. From images of Caravaggio’s paintings of Christ to Walker’s silhouettes, each depiction oscillates between moments of passion and strife. These dialectical formations of depictions refer to the alternations of Freud’s pleasure principle and the death drive, as well Blake’s allegorical drawings on lust, passion and ungratified love.

Mitchell closely observes Blake’s drawings to provide insight on the affective nature of images. Rational desire is personified through the actions of a mythological god, Uizen, who can be seen inscribed within a circle, leaping

forward to create yet another as an allegory for unbridled materialism. This illustration signifies the fusion of desire and drive within a single image. This act of breaking out of the circle to inscribe another symbolizes the “infinite desire for rational boundedness reproducing itself” (2005, p. 63). The confinement of self in relation to the possession and control of desire leads to consuming passions. Such infatuations allude to Walker’s depiction of the social oppression and rational order of plantation life in the Old South. Here, established boundaries are redrawn to regulate and control black subjects.

Mitchell introduces another drawing by Blake titled “There is No Natural Religion: The Desire of Man being Infinite and the possession is infinite and himself Infinite.” This reflection depicts a man on a ladder trying to reach the moon, crying, ‘I want, I want,’ signifying ungratified desire. Here, the man’s fixation on his object of desire is all consuming. He is unable to comprehend and appreciate other stars and planets beyond his fixation. This obsession reinforces Freud’s theories on desire and longing for an object. Using this representation as a touchstone, the fixation and ungratified desire in Walker’s tableaux come into sharper focus. Slaves and slave owners engage in exploitative encounter where attachments lead to unfulfilled desires and fetishism. Mitchell’s close reading on how images are inextricably linked to desire, provide new perspectives into Walker’s silhouette constructions.

Mitchell contrasts Freud's interpretation of desire with a Deleuzian picture of desire and plentitude, based on an assemblage of fantasies. These dialectical formations merge into what Mitchell calls "metapictures," where still and moving images coexist within the same context. Desire is fixed as a still image, the 'concept drive replicates, moves and is given a voice within the moving image. Walker alludes to this concept with a display of desire and drive, creating metapictures within her tableaux.

Walker's decontextualization of 19th century novels on romance and racial stereotypes draws upon the affective nature of images in relation to the dark passions of race and sexual exploitation. Mitchell's interpretation of images of desire, teach us how to interpret those representation ourselves, by informing us on what to look for and how to see.

The book *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* sheds new light on blackness as an aesthetic practice (English, 2007). English explores the work of three contemporary African-American artists – Kara Walker, Fred Wilson and William L. Pope – providing compelling details on how these artists challenge the progress of ideological theme of blackness by transforming artwork into racial objects. English exposes the various limitations identity politics place on artistic production. He offers descriptive accounts of the way black artists confront idealized forms of blackness and identity.

English expands the scope of his argument with the discussion of Walker's tableaux, *The End of Uncle Tom*. Instead of describing Walker's artwork as iconographic terms, English searches for intrinsic meanings. Walker's tableaux illustrate a close reading of a contemporary approach to slavery, which reinterprets the concept of slavery. This reading is not based on facts but rather on experience.

As a historical subject, Walker positions herself in slavery, intersecting dimensions of time, revealing psychic translations and silent histories. This form of mediation allows Walker to collapse and reorder tropes on the plantation system of the Old South. English includes the view of historian Robert M. Stein, who considers the post-holocaust inheritance of contemporary intellectuals. Stein comments,

This is a generation formed by an overwhelming experience, desperately and poignantly their own, that they were not present to witness, hence the strong force of the desire for history that would refuse to be annihilated ... a past reality that enters experience as only already annihilated, an object retrievable only as lost (as cited by English, 2007, p. 82).

From this perspective, Walker's tableaux signify the depth and magnitude of Stein's summation on the desire for history. Through mediation, loss is retrieved as mere traces and shadow.

Walker seeks inspiration through 19th century silhouettes, historical romance novels and slave narratives, positioning herself within these sources, not by embellishing the past but rather illuminating the present. These points of identification allow Walker to intersect paths of social roles and scripted identities. However, these experiences generate ironic encounters on her path to self-actualization. According to English,

The endless reproduction of rhetoric and images about slavery minimize or eliminate the inscription of mediation, will strengthen masochism, one version which depends on the attachment to scripted roles and a submission to the restrictions they imply (2007, p. 84).

Such representations revel in moments of conflict and danger. English sees Walker's silhouette figures as scripts; through performances and gestures, these figurations depict the subtle and horrific ways racism and sexism influence our everyday lives.

English introduces Fanon's racial-historical schema as a way of decoding historical scripts that surface in post-modern society. Fanon defines scripts as established limitations of possibilities within the black consciousness. Fanon adds, "Below the corporeal schema I had sketched a historico-racial schema. The elements that I used had been provided for me ... the other, the white man, who has woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories (as cited in

English, year, 2007, p. 42). Here the black subject is constantly undergoing exposition by being explained, watched and framed based on appearance. English describes Fanon's process of decoding stereotypes through Walker's mediation; engaging in the expression of translating and reconstructing identities dissolves the racial formation of stereotypes. Walker's silhouettes appear and disappear within various levels of social identity, mimicking the scripted roles of racial and gender classification, ultimately illustrating the futility and danger of stereotypes.

How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness gives a brilliant perspective on a new genre of art and the daring attempts of African- American artists to reassess identity and black subjectivity on their own terms. These post-black artists shed light on the historical.

The article "Transgression, Excess, and the Violence of Looking" represents the work of African-American artist Kara Walker through the lens of the racial and sexual codes embedded within American culture (Wall, 2010). Walker derives her inspiration from 19th century romance novels and slave narratives that depict racial stereotypes and sexual stereotypes and exploitation. Walker's installation displays black silhouette figures performing heinous acts of violence and transgression. Consumed with desire and fear, Walker's figures disrupt the social framework of the Old South.

In Walker's tableau titled 'The End of Uncle Tom,' Wall describes a landscape where grotesque figures destabilize cultural scripts, which define race, gender and identity. Hall suggests that Walker's plantation scenes unleash entities, signifying forms of depravity, and abjection that seek to violate social and sexual boundaries.

Wall introduces the violence of looking as a theme that recurs in Walker's images. Since the earliest depiction of colonization, the African body was problematic to white sensibilities. Technological developments – optics, cameras, visual instruments–transformed the black body into the object of anthropological and scientific research. Hall describes an image that depicts a white youth inserting a cylindrical, optical device into the vagina of a black woman who looks away in humiliation. Wall introduces the idea that the “woman is forced to provide illumination of her own assault” (2010, p. 286). This image alludes to the objectification and classification of the black body as a subject of fascination and knowledge.

Wall pronounces our curious engagement in Walker's metaphorical constructions as a further an act of violence. Her disruption of visual codes engages a voyeuristic audience, longing to participate in racialized image making. Wall comments,

I would argue that Walker's work brings us to a similar space between... black and white, slave and master, voyeur and object...

we are made conscious of the surplus of meaning routinely hidden, the excess of desire, fear, trauma, and self hatred that is the cornerstone of racial representation (2010, p. 292).

Like in cinema, we travel across visual texts to experience representations of desire and disgust: thereby, reinforcing the politics of looking.

Wall observes Walker's use of images that dismantle scriptive power positions. She displays slaves as black cotton kings and power wielding masochists. Such violations disrupt social and racial classifications of the Old South. These inverted identities subvert the cultural machinery that visually encodes race and gender. Wall's analysis of Walker's tableau describes the artist's remarkable ability to parody and reconstruct novels and slave narratives, in order to visualize those silenced by history.

The article "Fanon and the Trauma of the Cultural Message" investigates how vision is used as a powerful agent is used to limit and categorize and the black body (Christian, 2005). Christian discusses Fanon's psychological interpretation of race and how this perspective provides new insights into complex issues regarding desire and blackness. The author analyzes the work of film-maker Issac Julien as it relates to Fanon's concepts on vision and trauma, illustrating the cultural impositions of race and identity

Christian introduces with Fanon's view on trauma and its cultural implications on the black subject. Fanon challenges Freud's views on neurosis: a psychic disturbance brought on by the residual effects of traumatic events. Freud postulates that neurosis has its origins in the European concept of family. The Oedipal myth frames psychoanalysis within this context. An African presence ignored by early modern psychology. Fanon's perspective is based on numerous accounts of black men with neurotic manifestations, who have never endured traumatic encounters with whites. In refuting Freud's psychological views on scenes of trauma, Fanon suggests that what is perceived to be the residue of real events may merely be cultural impositions.

Christian expands upon Fanon's notion of cultural imposition and how these discursive formations classify and traumatize black subjects. Here, Fanon comments,

In the magazines the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians, there is always identification with the victor the little Negro...becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary who faces the danger of being eaten by the wicked Negroes (2005, p. 222).

The black child's identification with the white hero corresponds to Lacan's view that this form of cultural identification is predicated on misrecognition. The child finds with the mirror of representations the white hero, which is a false

representation of self. The author expresses how black stereotypes through mass media generate images that trauma the black subject.

Christian exposes the psychosocial dynamics of race and trauma and how cultural imposition define blackness. Fanon's psychological concepts offer strategies-parody, satire and allegory for African American artists to counter the culturally prescribed messages of identity and blackness. Christian's views on trauma and Fanon's new racial schema redefine psychoanalysis through blackness and as it relates to popular culture.

The article *On Racial Fetishism* critically examines Fanon's views on fetishism and the psychosocial complexities of race. Recognized as loss and repudiation, fetishism reveals a polemical dimension where fantasy intersects reality (Marriott, 2010). Marriott's discussion of Fanon's concepts on 'Negrophobia' transcends established Freudian and Marxist notions on fetishism. Within Freud's second theory of anxiety, Fetishism is a defense mechanism that protects the ego against intolerable forms of anxiety. These fetishistic responses are triggered by phobic objects or projections, which displace unrecognized fears and desires. Fanon integrates Freud's anxiety theory with his investigations on racial phobia, in order to better understand how stereotypes form phobic projections and neurotic disturbances within the black psyche.

Marriott considers Fanon's comments on the splitting of the black subject, which describes the ways in which Negrophobia dislocates and infuses fear and desire into a fetishistic attachment to the Other's pleasure. Fanon adds,

The Black Man's sword is a sword. When he has thrust it into your wife, she really felt something and lets oneself go, that is when one abandons oneself into the movement of images, one no longer perceives the Negro, but a member: the Negro is eclipsed. He is made a member. He is a penis (as cited by Marriott, 2010, p.169-70).

Here, Fanon's describes the psychological transformation of the black subject into a penis, a sexual object of desire. It is this stereotype, which is a representation of anxiety and phobia, which replaces the black subject.

Fanon's description on how these projections assault the ego provide insight into the nature of the stereotype and its role in racial objectification. Contemporary African-American artists explore strategies allowing these cultural stereotypes to collide and explode within counter narratives. The erasure of racially charged images through montage, installation art, and allegorical representations disrupt the destructive elements of the stereotype. Despite their capacity to commit symbolic acts of violence, rhetorical devices – parody and signifyin' expose visual and cultural impositions within postmodern society.

Marriott closely examines Fanon's views on the unconscious and the nature of civil society. According to Fanon, fetishism affects economy and sexuality. Perverse forms of commodity are dependent upon idealized personifications. These cultural stereotypes project an all-encompassing myth, which fix and classify racial identities within oppressive regimes. Here, Fanon suggests that civil societies are subject to a racial logic, which embrace the illusion of a society that is rational, pure and noble. The legitimacy of a nation is based on the identification and classification of those who are considered the Other. It is this cultural stereotype that can spawn hatred and fear.

The racial logic of the Old South reflected the white social order. The slave trade, as a perverse form of commodity, emasculated the lives of Africans through the denial of culture, agency and political expression. Many post-black artists seek to expose these perverse social systems as phantasmagorical sites of ruin and despair, reflecting Fanon's reading on the unconscious and the cultural stereotype. Marriott's article "On Racial Fetishism" offers new insights into Fanon's view on fetishism, Negrophobia and the psychosocial complexities of race. This psychoanalytical reading on the black subject provides African-American artists with innovative strategies to explore the formations of identities in particular blackness.

African American scholar James Haywood Rolling Jr. explores the liberatory cultural work of visual culture archaeology that reveals political and

critical identity authorizing social change and agency. Rolling's research study investigates Western culture's effort to define people of color and their social histories. The author makes the case for a postmodern and poetic aesthetic in qualitative research. Rolling addresses criticality a way of interrogating power that allow artists, art educators and students to assert subject desire, the desire to name oneself. The author proposes a new dialectic where those who are marginalized become visible within polemic spaces. These new social cultural environments are prone to complexity and contradictions. To challenge normative strategies that define modern art; providing spectators and students with tools to reclaim body and self as a political site, Rolling discusses the agency of constructing oppositional images as sites of identity development and social positioning. In the article, art educator Dipti Desai, comments,

Art Education underscores the power of dominant forms of representation that make marginalized groups see each other. Here, I would like to point out that just as crucial and perhaps more remarkable is the power of recalcitrant forms of representations to be insinuated back into dominant forms to gestate there until new ideations of 'other' identities are popularly embraced by a dominant culture that once shunned overt familiarity with the other (Rolling-2007, p.8).

Rolling considers the practice of visual culture archaeology to counter post-positivist methods of research. This form of analysis seeks to expose emerging social processes, rather than cause and effects developments. Identities become manipulative materials that are discursive, giving names to bodies that are shunned and ostracized by dominant cultures. By examining the naming process, visual archaeology becomes a valuable methodology for investigating the formations of social practices and conditions based on modernist binary assumptions.

The Storytelling Project Model: A Theoretical Framework for a Critical Examination of Racism through the Arts by Bell and Roberts depicts a theoretical model for a curriculum program used to teach racism in classrooms and community based organizations. The evolution of this model is based on racial storytelling. The research project includes a variety of artists, scholars and public school teachers. A series of meetings were conducted to examine the power of stories revolved around poetry, novels, films, plays and artistic themes.

Educators and artists discovered how racism functioned as a system of oppression as well as extending beyond individual stories. Topics included transnational features of racism and how voices and identities are concealed through racism. The article describes four stories that operate within racism, the conditions that function within it and the way it is transmitted into the present

stock stories. This theoretical model allows the participant to explore a societal genealogy of racism.

One of the four stories I found to related to my research on African-American artists and their visual investigation of blackness is concealed stories. According to Bell,

Concealed stories operate as analytical tools that reveal the underside of racism and identify the hidden advantages for whites and the penalties for people of color. What are the stories of race and racism we don't hear? Why don't we hear them? How are such stories lost and left out? How do we recover these stories? What do these stories teach us about racism that stock stories do not? (2010, p. 2310).

These questions are important to consider in regard to conducting research on African-American artists. For educators to effectively address issues of race and gender within the context of the black aesthetic, such questions arises to what is being concealed and what stories need to be heard. To embrace the concealed stories of our past provides social agency and access to local knowledge.

Chapter 2

Kara Walker and Postmodern Methodology



Fig. 1. "Darkytown Rebellion" 2001
Cut Paper and Projection on Wall

In this section, I will examine Walker's art from the theoretical perspectives of Benjamin, Fanon and Freud and discuss how her visual narratives based on slave references challenge traditional notions of blackness, which inform identity and difference. Viewers approach the installation by walking from a brightly lit gallery through a dark narrow passage, which leads into a panoramic hall where the life size silhouettes are projected across a

figurative barren landscape. The effect of viewing Walker's landscape within this hall is much like being inside a nineteenth century camera obscura. These towering figures are not images, but more specifically image-fragments: mere traces of a shameful past like muddied imprints in the snow. These projections allude to the stereotypes of the Old South: the mammy, the Uncle Tom, the pickaninny, the mandingo, the southern belle and the white slave master.

Walker's' recontextualization of the silhouette amplifies its two dimensionality bringing to mind the psychological flatness that arises when selves are constituted, and identities composed in a constant play of surfaces (Joselit, 2007, p. 88).

However, one should exercise caution in reducing Walker's tableau to identities. Her cut paper silhouettes allude to the circulation of racial markers, which exist as images for others, just as images are inverted through the pin hole of a camera obscura, Walker re-imagines plantation life where inverted identities roam across a haunting landscape where phantom-like expressions are no less real than the hegemonic views of slavery.

Walker engages history through the process of mediation, establishing points of identification with nineteenth century sources: silhouette art, forms of slave narratives, folklore and romance novels. The artist provides a disturbing view of interracial sex and pleasure within slave culture. Walker's images depict illicit sexual acts between slaves and masters who struggled to come to terms

with forbidden desires. Walker adopts romance novel strategies based on tabooed relationships and tragic obsessions, which counter racist acts of sexual repression. By participating in her fictive history, Walker disrupts these traditional narratives, which denies the existence of interracial sexual relations in the Old South. English comments,

Much of Walker's tableau derived from this literature is a litany of transgressions – particularly sexual relations across the 'color line' – to tear from their safe stowage in a quaint genre and restore to a context largely purified of them by official histories (2007, p. 86).

It is from this perspective of mediation between the present and re-imagined worlds that Walker opens a new visual discourse on hybrid desire and blackness.

Walker's reworking historical themes expose the pathology of stereotypes, corresponding to Walter Benjamin's view that redemption can come through the excavation of the ruins of our past. The rhetorical use of allegory and ruin reveals a history silenced by traditional narratives. Allegorical expression revives silent histories that may have relevance to present social and economic conditions.

For Benjamin, historical knowledge was the most forceful way to combat bourgeois ideology, which depends heavily on reification and ahistorically 'mythic' cast of thought. This ideology fosters a sense of inevitability about the present social formation, which

historians contribute as well when they present history in a conventionally linear pattern (Winders, 1993, p. 29).

Benjamin opposed this conventional approach to history: instead, he observed history as an open-ended process based on multiple temporalities and narratives. According to art theorist Craig Owen, allegorical expression is characteristically postmodern.

In Walker's work, allegory is used as a way to transgress sexual and racial codes within the social structure of slavery. Her highly-charged images disrupt norms and cultural sensibilities through the depiction of illicit desire.

Transgression as a rhetorical device is omnipresent component of Walker's art. Interracial encounters end with sexual abuse and violence. These images appear as visual fragments that collide and explode throughout Walker's haunting tableau. Wall comments,

Because we are so profoundly reliant upon the world of images that surrounds and support us for the sense of who we are, the visual landscape of racial subject/object is a particularly potent arena for the articulation, subversion, and transgression of broader discursive categories" (2010, p. 281). Walker's use of allegory exposes the sexual transgressions and illicit acts hidden within the slave culture.

Serving as a device for social and political commentary, allegorical expression and postmodern strategies utilized by African-American artists confront racial stereotypes. Walker's revival of artifacts provides artists with a vast repository of references from which to subvert and challenge forms of racial essentialism. Tang comments,

Indeed, it is often specifically in the hands of women and people of color that postmodern citations of the past are argued to be their most critical, resistant, and politically efficacious. Understood as a way to contest received forms and histories and to critique hegemonic institutions, postmodern parody seems to hold special purchase as a mode of self-determination for the disenfranchised (2010, p. 143).

The reworking of hegemonic narratives and racialized cultural artifacts disclose the repressed and unheard voices of our past. The strategic use of postmodern repetition in allegory allows African-American artists to present the conventional approach to history through a critical lens, providing new insights to a postmodern understanding of identity and blackness.

During the 1990s, African-Americans faced specific social and economic disadvantages, reinforced by neoliberal policies and regulations. These policies gave rise to repressed forms of racism, denying black citizens equal opportunity. African-American artists began to question the social policy failures of the civil

rights era and challenged the aesthetic strategies of black power movements of the 1960's. Artists like Kara Walker and Fred Wilson explored postmodern art as a means to reexamine black narratives on social mobility and progress, as well as forms of disenfranchisement within American culture.

Walker was born in Stockton, California. She earned her MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. In 1997, Walker was the youngest recipient ever to receive the MacArthur Genius Award at the age of 27. Walker is most celebrated for her life size silhouettes, which portray racial stereotypes performing horrific acts of sexual abuse and violence from the days of slavery. These rhetorical figures become visible within a tableau of phantasmagoric landscapes that depict plantation life in the Old South. Walker's tableaux suggest allegorical themes on racial and gender formation, memory and social trauma as well as the legacy of racism that remains from the institution of slavery.

Walker won acclaim and public recognition for her visual commentary on slavery through the exploitation of racial stereotypes. Disturbed by these negative depictions of blacks, African American artists and critics initially rallied against the display of Walker's installations. Racially charged tension reached a crescendo when African-American artist Bettye Saar launched a campaign to protest the exhibition of Walker's art. English comments,

In 1997 after visiting *Upon My Many Masters - An Outline*, an exhibition of Walker's work at San Francisco Museum of Modern

Art, Saar mailed letters to some two hundred writers, artists, and politicians. The letter itself began: I am writing you seeking your help, to spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African-American artist, Kara Walker concluding that these images may be in your next city (2007, p. 78).

This campaign to disclaim Walker's work as danger to the integrity and moral character of African Americans continued the effort to hold black artists to specific criteria what images are acceptable to black consensus as well as "procedures for determining membership and its proscription for what counts as politics" (Ferguson, 2009, p. 187).

Prominent figures like Du Bois to Saar's have given life to a social movement that polices the representation of blackness. Walker denies narratives based on racial essentialism and progress through her interpretation on the evils of slavery and unspeakable forms of racial and sexual exploitation. It is through parody that Walker reconstructs express her inner visions. In the article "Postmodern Repetition: Parody, Trauma and the Case of Kara Walker," the author states,

Henry Louis Gates Jr. who describes Walker's art as 'post modern, signifying racial parody. Gates argues that Walker's employ stereotypes in popular and high art forms and to liberate our people from residual, debilitating effects that the proliferation of

those images undoubtedly have had upon the unconscious of African American people (Tang, 2010, p. 187).

From Gates' perspective, Walker's successful exploitation of racial stereotypes through parody performs an exorcism that confronts past evils and releases new forms of social agency.

Like a character from a present day romance novel, Walker's fictionalized character travels within imagined landscape where passages lead to detours and blocked entrances. Using scissors as a critical tool, she films, edits and rewrites cultural scripts with satiric and ironic forms of mimicry. Seen from a video screen, her fictive self engages with reckless entities: stereotypes whose transgress sexual and racial codes through intolerable acts of perversion and violence, reflecting the pathologies of a southern regime obsessed with oppression. "Walker... locates her self at this blurring: She states, 'In order to have a real connection with history, I had to be somebody's slave. But I was in control: that's the difference'" (English, 2007, p. 87). By engaging history through representation, Walker challenges the viewer to think differently about racialized scripts that continue to thrive in postmodern culture.

These cultural impositions deeply penetrate the collective unconscious. Based on Benjamin's concepts on language, thoughts are derived from dialectical images that thrive within a temporal dimension that is discontinuous and

irregular. At critical moments, images-fragments emerge like a flash of lighting, revealing conditions, which are relevant to the present. These critical moments are known as the Now of Recognizability. It is the role of the allegorist to observe these image-fragments as a mode of transformative thought, providing ways to interpret present and future conditions. Davidson comments,

This way of thinking about images is similar to the theory of the unconscious as described by Freud. His use of the story of Oedipus, for example, was a dialectical image that brought about a new way to consider subconscious forces at play. Freud's work with dream analysis is comparable to the way Benjamin deployed dialectical imagery in his work. The utilization of dream elements in waking is the textbook example of dialectical thinking (2006, p. 136).

Davidson's viewpoint sheds light on Walker's ability to dialectically rework image-fragments of slavery through allegorical expression.



Fig. 2 “An Abbreviated Emancipation” (from The Emancipation Approximation) (detail) 2002, Cut Paper and Adhesive on Wall

In Walker’s tableau, dialectical images allude to archetypes, where humans transmute into animals forms, transforming ideological compilations into tragic myths. The artist incorporates swan in her narratives, which are symbolic of desire and hybrid identities. “An Abbreviated Emancipation” (Fig. 2) a panel from a series, titled The Emancipation Approximation depicts a swan impregnating a black woman consumed with passion, evoking theme of miscegenation and symbolic of the forbidden entanglement between self and other. Negress consumed with passion becomes entangled with the swan. The impact of sexual assault is so powerful that it excites an onlooker in the tableau. Walker is retelling of the Greek of Myth Leda and the Swan – a story about

desire and sexual violence, utilizing dialectical imagery that invert Western myths to articulate colonial domination. Walker comments, "I was trying to make up mythology and deconstruct it at the same time" (as cite in Dixon, 2002, p. 14.). Walker's work, the reoccurring motif of the mating of a black girl and a swan develops into a potent symbol of blackness and their fusion through sexuality" (Dixon, 2002, p. 14). Through the allegorical expression of mythological themes, Walker's narratives parallel Benjamin's approach dialectical imagery, harnesses the dynamic power of these archetypes to promote change in the way identity is formed within our social collective consciousness.



Fig. 3 "Successes" 1998 Cut Paper and Adhesive on Wall

Walker's work reinterprets race relations, a topic ignored by abolitionists and nineteenth century novelists. Her metaphorical scenes of interracial sex give

rise to hybrid life forms, alluding to ethnic formations. Disowned by plantation owners, mixed offspring were shunned and looked upon as social outcasts. Walker revives these encounters by exploring the variety of relationships available to the racialized subject. Walker's enigmatic characters offer the viewer a disturbing perspective on interracial desire. "The suggestion of dual animal and human nature call up representations of whiteness and blackness and the desire to put on aspects of the other. Here decapitation becomes a way for the slave to become white or the swan to become black or the creatures to become hybrid – half black, half white, half human, half animal" (Dixon, 2002, p. 17). These metaphorical representations of race mixing parallel the post-black artist's investigation of diversity within African-American culture. Walker's slave narratives redraw visual maps are redrawn on race and difference.



Fig. 4 "Allegory" 1996
Gouache on Paper

"Allegory" (1996, Fig. 4) depicts a white youth inserting a telescopic device into a black woman's vagina, as she looks away with indifference. This violation takes place on a platform inside a water-filled dungeon. Walker presents this crude examination as a means to objectify and denigrate the black subject. Throughout the nineteenth century, Western medicine utilized scopic procedures to interpret the black body as a site of disease, deformity and perverse fascination, utilizing procedures, which originated in the age of reason and enlightenment. Walker exposes scientific examinations of the female body as an act of sexual aggression and visual fascination. Pathological illustrations

Fig. 5 "Endless Conundrum, An African Anonymous Adventuress"
2001 Cut Paper on Wall

Walker composed a mural with black and brown silhouettes whose gestures evoked personifications of African fantasies within the white imaginary, depicting the violent rape of Africa by imperial regimes during the age of colonialism. Figures appear as disembodied ghosts – sculptures, mutilated bodies, and tribal fetishes – are arranged in various combinations throughout the mural. These arrangement give the visually resembles a Rorschach test. These iconic signifiers collide, crash and explode throughout the mural. As an example, an animated nail figure representing a nkondi sculpture is holding up dismembered body parts as the silhouette of white colonizer run off with a black child, while the mother gestures in frantic alarm, Another depiction is a silhouette of a black woman dressed in a banana skirt outfit evoking the iconic image of Josephine Baker. In yet another portion of the mural a figure is shackled to the boat with a ball and chain. Viewing these visual disruptions reflect the psychosomatic realities of racism and its dehumanizing effects on the African body. On the psychological trauma of racism, Fanon comments,

Disoriented, incapable of confronting the other, the white who imprisoned me, I transported myself...and gave myself up as an object. What did this mean to me but an amputation, an excision that splattered my whole body with blood (1967, p. 80).

Fanon's citation clearly describes Walker's display of tormented and mutilated figures.

Freud's theory on ego and the body relation parallels Walker's display of the brutalizing effects of racism on the black body. According to Freud, psychic dimensions of the ego are manifested in the physical realm. These manifestations are disharmonious and incomplete. Decoding is crucial to the transference of symbolic meaning from psyche to embodiment. Psychic disturbances occur when racialized impositions erupt and giving rise to symptomatic effects that destabilize the black body. Western notions of race exist dualistically within the mind and body. The ego refers to the intellect and symbolic expression, while the body signifies corporeality and death. Knowles states that,

The negative values associated with blackness (blackness as dirt, impurity, smell) become vehicles in race supremacist cultures for the racist attempts to adapt to his estrangement from the reality of the human body. The projection of these undesirable attributes of the human body to the victim of racism as a convenient scapegoat, is part and parcel of the process of denial and self deception which characterizes the cultural heroics of Western culture and civilization (as cited by Hooks, 2008, p. 144).

Freud's perspective of the destabilizing nature of ego and body manifestations reaffirms Walker's psychosomatic insights, as well as Fanon's psycho-existential views on racial epidermization.



Fig. 6 "Consume" 1998
Cut Paper and Adhesive on Wall

Walker's work transposes the dehumanizing conditions of the past onto present forms of racial oppression. Consume (1998, Fig. 6) is a silhouette construction that illustrates of a black woman in a banana skirt and high heels, auto erotically suckling her breast. Below her, a white child is sucking on a

banana from her skirt. This visual commentary suggests the emergence of identity politics in African-American culture. This image reinforces black identity based on racial formations from the past. By using this iconic persona of the black entertainer Josephine Baker, Walker is representing not only the primitive and erotic desires of modernism, but also those that exist in post-black female performers today. By perpetuation stereotypes, the Baker persona unconsciously fuels demeaning expressions. "The racialized subject moves circuitously back and forth between past and present, truncating the historical trajectory of past, present and future and suspending it in a state of incompleteness" (Tang, 2010, p. 166). Walker's allegorical narrative exposes the complexities of identity and social agency, drawing attention to the slippage of stereotypes within identity politics.

Also in Walker's mural, Primitive art is reexamined through parodic invocations and visual tropes. Art historical references are re-appropriated as silhouettes to continue the debate on the exploitation of African artifacts by Western culture. Walker silhouettes of the modern European sculptor Brancusi, exemplifying the artist style by depicting a huge black zigzagged phallic looking pillar. The construction is mocking European artists who manipulated African art to promote a debased eroticism, as opposed to revealing aspects of African sculpture. Clifford comments,

The notion of the primitive in Western culture is ‘an incoherent clusters of qualities that at different times have been used to construct a source, origin, or alter ego confirming some new discovery within the territory of the Western self, assuming a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption and representation” (as cited by Lippard, 1987, p. 24).

Walker’s aesthetic exploration exposes primitive discourse as well as the psychosomatic expressions of racism, thus providing new insights on blackness and creativity.



Fig. 7 “Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such Mat Be Found”
1997 Cut Paper and Adhesive on Wall

In Walker's "Presenting Negro Scenes Draw Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured by the Benefit of Enlightened Audience Wherever Such May Be Found" (1977, Fig. 7). A black man feverishly plays a banjo with a pair of scissors protruding out of his back; a woman nearby attempts to use the scissors to turn the musician into wind up toy. In flight above the performer is a figure with a trumpet extending from her genitalia. Walker's tableau is a minstrel show, illustrating black entertainers as a marketable commodity for white interest. These token performance perpetuate false notions of artistic freedom. The cultural needs of slave culture overrode individual creative expression. Holt adds, "Minstrelsy soothe white anxieties, however at the cost of reinforcing black stereotypes and institutionalizing racist ideas and images for generations to come" (1995, p. 16). Here, the trumpet symbolizes the jazz age and the emergence of modern musicians, from Louie Armstrong to Dizzy Gillespie, caught in a vicious cycle of musical fascination and white enslavement.

Walker's visual tableaux on slave culture generate a fresh sensibility for understanding blackness through what has been silenced and oppressed in American culture. She subverts ideological themes based on racial essentialism such as romance novels and slave narratives, which exploit and threaten the expression and freedom of identities. Her allegorical, dialectical images demonstrate how fragments from our past have the capacity to redeem the present and the future. Walker's parodies the themes to expose the

psychosomatic forms of racism, initiated by an oppressive social regime.

Exploring desire and disenfranchisement as critical tools to decode racial and sexual discourse, Walker destabilizes stereotypes and symbolic logic based on colonial desires. By doing so, her visual disruptions convey various forms of psychosis. Walker comments,

I'm sort of intentionally vague right now. I think that's actually a strategy in way in my work as to why I'm interested in the shadows. I am horrified of by the thoughts that come to mind and am occasionally blinded by them" (Dixon, 2002, p. 44).

Walker's remarkable tableau of image fragments shed new light on the complex nature of fictive realities and its power to inform and destabilize blackness and identity formations.

Chapter 3

Fred Wilson

After the Civil Rights Era, art institutions continued to support a racial discourse that categorized black culture as primitive and inferior. Many post-black artists launched projects that questioned the politics of visual display and representation of racialized artifacts. Installation artist Fred Wilson investigates meta-discursive practices to expose relations of power within art institutions. Wilson's site-specific installations describe how these traditional forms of representation reveal stereotypes embedded in museum culture. The viewer is allowed to question racial hierarchies that undervalued artifacts and images

produced by African-Americans. Traditionally, art institutions have manipulated archives and documentation, forming incomplete narratives that produce and circulate a racialized system of signs.

Wilson, a gay African-American, was born in the Bronx in 1954 and received his BFA from Suny/Purchase in New York. His Caribbean ancestry influenced many of his ideas on blackness and colonialism. Wilson's experimentation with everyday objects led to his unusual way of exhibiting art and artifacts. After receiving the Catherine MacArthur Award in 1999, Wilson focused his artistic efforts on issues of slavery and representation. Traditional slave narratives have been reconstructed to engage his audience and to expose silent histories of black subjects repressed by the institution of slavery. His site-specific installations target museums as sites of resistance and a means to redeem the past.

During the 19th century, art institutions obstructed the cultural tools and ornaments of indigenous people through forms of appropriation and depredation. The archival process of categorizing and displaying the artifacts of subjugated cultures enforced the perception of western supremacy throughout the modern world. Cultural institutions documented colonized artifacts as glorified trophies. Conquered populations had no recourse but to subjugate their local traditions and values to the dominant culture. Forms of indoctrination separated races of people from their personal objects and local environments.

When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources of pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, and sexual practices affirm their power-over intimate relations with the other” (Berger, 2001, p. 26).

Cultural exploitation defined the role of the oppressed as well as the oppressor.

Wilson’s strategy to transform artifacts from the past corresponds to Benjamin’s concept on historical materialism, in which long buried ruins of the past are excavated and redeemed as social objects. Gonzalez comments,

A materialist historian, according to Benjamin, must act as one who digs to pull signs from the past into new confrontations with the present. To write history, Benjamin asserts, therefore means to quote history. But the concept of quotation implies that any given historical object must be ripped out of its context.” (2008, p. 19).

Benjamin’s perspective best illustrates Wilson’s ability to revive racial artifacts, thus providing insight and clarity on blackness and the African-American experience.



Fig. 8 "Metalwork 1793-1880" in the Mining Museum 1992

Wilson's 1993 exhibition, "Mining the Museum," (Fig. 8) illustrates the atrocities of slavery as a social institution. Inside Baltimore Maryland Historical Society, Wilson rearranged historical artifacts, forcing the viewer to experience multiple meanings from familiar objects. Wilson drew attention to the exhibition space, by juxtaposing a series of 19th century repousse silver goblets and urns with a pair of rusty shackles, emphasizing the incongruity between the production of artistic refinements and crude instruments of inhumanity. "Turning away from the creation of new objects to focus on the reinterpretation of sign systems all ready in place. Wilson offers a critical perspective on the history of museums, artifacts, and evidence as they represent cultural difference, colonialism and race" (Gonzalez, 2001, p. 24). These jarring presentation expose the fluid connection between objects of desire and slave exploitation.

In a different installation, Wilson transformed the interior of room into a collage narrative by placing a phallic-shape gun pointing at a wooden effigy of a black man on the wall. Here, the artist alluded to the sport of duck hunting as

well as the tracking of runaway slaves. Placed on a nearby wall were reward posters of runaway slaves.

The conditional nature of representation – that the meaning of any utterance or object or image is ultimately dependent on the words and objects and images around it and the reader who interprets it - brings various languages and codes of culture into relationship with each other in an effort to reveal the contradictions and complexities of human existence (Berger, 2001, p. 12).

This racial profiling for identification purposes prompted the viewer to reflect upon the chilling circumstances of the institution of slavery.

Wilson unravels the issue of how museums either consciously or unconsciously have reinforced racist's ideologies and behaviors. These ideologies are encoded in the ways museums preserve and display art objects. It is important to consider how African-American youth are limited by the visual hegemonic system of cultural institutions. Many prominent curators formulate museum narratives to reflect the dominant culture. There is no orientation to ethnic significance of artifacts within the context of oppressive social structures. Contemporary museums continue to exclude ethnic communities from fully embracing cultural traditions and ancestry. African-American artists are re-examining these reproductions of inequality, which counter ethnically-diverse narratives.

Cultural histories shape identities. By understanding how individuals are formed and informed narratives is a key to political agency. The integration of visual symbolism into the daily life of people of color reinvents citizenship and society. Wilson's critical perspective of traditional narratives confronts hegemonic 'cultural positioning' – which has become the established order. The ability to critically examining culturally constructed ideologies, we can renegotiate social identities within the context of cultural events.

The recognition of museum strategies of appropriation and reconfiguration of objects heightens the viewer's awareness of a particular project. By facilitating a dialogue, the artist's intentions and concerns are revealed, forcing the viewer to challenge visual hegemonic practices.

Museums had long considered African sculptures and masks as undeveloped creations. As a result, African sculpture was not legitimized as an authentic art form. The rise of cubism in modern art introduced African art to western society. As a method of study, cubist painters reinterpreted African sculpture using it as inspiration. This new style is evident in the early paintings of Picasso. "Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)" was introduced as the depiction of enigmatic and exotic forms of African sculpture. In challenging western values, Picasso's painting was met with controversy and ridicule. In the painting, five prostitutes – presumably, Algerian immigrants – are displayed in highly evocative positions. The women appear as anthropomorphic figures with faces

resembling tribal masks. Despite sexual references to a brothel scene, Picasso's portrayal of their facial appearance was disturbing and controversial.



Fig. 9 "Picasso: Whose Rules?" in *Primitivism High and Low*, 1991

Fred Wilson's 1991 installation "Picasso: Whose Rules?" (Fig. 9) reintroduced Picasso's "Les Femmes d' Avignon". The artist displayed a life-size reproduction of the painting in a white, cube-like space, reexamining the painting through French colonial practices. A mask was hung from the ceiling covering one of the prostitute faces: a blue light glowing from behind the eyes of the mask. As the viewer peered into the mask, the video screen showed Wilson with two other friends speaking phrases, "Who rules decides what is great." and "I, your modern art is our traditional art. Does that make our contemporary art your cliché?" (2008, p. 78). This site-specific installation reconsiders the role of art in museums and the standards by which it is judged.

Wilson's technique of juxtaposing video with appropriated images is effective in exposing power structures within museum. Wilson's strategies of resistance coincide with Foucault's theories on power. According to Foucault, power is pervasive in all societal encounters and relationships. From bureaucratic systems to interpersonal negotiations, power regulates our behavior and the way we communicate with others. Institutions enforce norms that reflect the interest of the dominant culture. Wilson enacts strategies to confront cultural impositions in museum culture. Wilson's critical assessment of museums continued with his 1990 "Colonial Collection" (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 "Colonial Collection" 1990

The artist considered the historical plight of colonialism and its devastating effects. He installed on the gallery walls six wooden masks. Each mask was blindfolded and gagged with colonial flags, a woman's face projected over one the mask. As she gesticulated with her eyes and mouth, the recording of a woman's voice is heard. She plead, "Don't just look at me; listen to me. Don't just own me; understand me. Don't just talk about me; talk to me. I am still alive" (Gonzalez, 2008, p. 69). In this installation, Wilson illustrates harsh realities of

colonial domination through the emasculation and silencing of cultural artifacts. By reinventing narratives Hall notes, "New meanings are grafted onto old ones. Words and images carry connotations over which no one has complete control, and these marginal and subsumed meanings come to the surface, allowing different meanings to be constructed, different things to be shown and said" (1997, p. 270). These forms of meta-discourse deconstruct and challenge the politics of display.

Wilson provided a new discourse from archives of black and white photographs. On the exhibition wall, the artist presented photographs depicting a group nineteenth century eugenicists measuring the physical differences among Africans and Native Americans were placed along side images of well-dressed and prominent minorities. Labels below signified eugenicist as "Early Ethnographers and Other photographers of European descent." An inscription, "Photographed by Others and Photographed by Ourselves" referred to images taken by early 20th century African American photographers. In this installation, Wilson exploited the power of photography. The act of labeling a photograph redefined the image to speak for the colonized. Wilson's juxtaposition of image and text revealed the problematic nature of the photograph. "The classification conceit of type allowed images of individual human being portrayed in each photograph, but rather as self contained exemplars of idealized racial categories with no single referent in the world' (Poole, 2005, p. 163). Here, Photography as

visual language becomes an important tool to shape and redefine us outside the framework of white values of institutional of art.

Wilson's project on placing the archives of eugenicists within the context of racial identity and self reveals the visual and ideological perspectives of nineteenth century. The white power structure in America regulated African Americans through forms of punishment. Public lynching and executions were common events in white southern society. Social stratification prevented slaves' geographic mobility. Eugenicists and anthropologists formulated scientific theories to categorize blacks as less than human. Museum culture stored and recorded documents to supporting the premise a primitive black cultural. In the book *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Mitchell notes, "European racism increasingly relied on the invention of culture as a unidirectional membrane where people of color remained forever located on the "primitive side" while their Caucasian counterpart could partake in the best of both worlds" (2006, p. 108). Museums as institutions continue to enforce this view through misrepresentations of African-American art forms.

Another exhibition of Wilson includes a number of oil paintings found in the basement of the Baltimore Maryland historical society. These portraitures (Fig. 11) depicted white children finely attired. In each portrait, a child slave is marginalized, appearing at the edge of the canvas.



Fig. 11 "Jutus Englehardt Kuhn" Henry Darnall III. 1710 Oil on Canvas

In slave culture, young black children were provide debased forms of entertainment for the master's children. On each painting, Wilson installed motion detectors to illuminate the presence of the black children, prompting recorders that could be heard as the viewer approached the portrait. A voice asked, "Am I your brother? Am I your friend? Am I your pet?" (Gonzalez, 2008, p. 87). Beneath this portrait, a dog collar is attached to the wall. By doing this, Wilson exposed the hierarchical relationships within the slavery culture. Indeed, Many black families ties were broken and redefined due to the codes and regulations of the institution of slavery. "The force of history resides within the social dynamics and economic relationships that constitute chattel slavery based on race, and that slavery was instrumental in creating interdependent racial identities based on two notions of property - 'Blacks as property' and 'the property of whiteness.' The racialized meanings that constructed through the

white ownership of black slaves were reified and rendered 'natural' by the laws of the land" (Harris, 1993, p. 2). From this perspective, museum culture continues to endorse white privilege through visual archive, ignoring resources essential to new cultural narratives.



Fig. 12 "Artemis/Bast" in Patanta Rei: A Gallery of Ancient Classical Art, 1992

Wilson's site installation revisits art historical references. In his 1992 "Artemis/Bast" (Fig. 12) Wilson's exposed the aesthetic link between Greece and Egypt and their Africa origins. The artist creates and transforms replicas of Greek and Egyptian gods and goddesses into mythological, hybrid creatures. The new creations were designed to reexamine Western aesthetics and expose concepts that Greek and Egyptian culture was separate and distinct from African

traditions. One sculpture has the body of a Greek Goddess with the black head of Bast, the cat goddess.

Wilson provides the viewer with a new perspective that contest race form of domination that operates in cultural institutions. The artist placed a large bust on the wall of the pharaoh Ankenaten, with a voice motion detector hidden in the walls. As the viewer approached the pharaoh, a voice spoke "What race am I?" after a brief pause and a voice responds "Wrong." The voice continued, "What race are you?" After another pause the voice replied, "Hmmm." Finally, the voice asked, "What is race?" Wilson's implied that cultural institutions collect, document and display artifacts of different cultures and while redefining race according to value of cultural treasures. The artist suggested museums' presentation of artifacts is racially coded by visual hegemony. "To contest the marginalization of self within hegemony, to contest the displacement of personal agency over the dominant agents in society, the subject position must speak for itself, of itself" (Rolling, 2007, p. 8). Wilson's narrative strategies expose ideologies that oppress ethnically diverse identities and cultures.



Fig. 13 "Mine/Yours" 1995 Painted Ceramic

Wilson's 1995 exhibition, "Collectibles," (Fig. 13) examined the circulation and distribution of black commodities in present day culture. The Mammy, Uncle Tom and Aunt Jemima collectibles are beautifully hung and sold in gallery and museum gift shops throughout America. Many of these popular stereotypes border on the kitsch as well as derogatory representations of the past. The artist discussed the role these collectibles play as commodities. Wilson observed that African Americans have a peculiar relationship with these kitsch items. Wilson noted that we collect these representations of stereotypes as a way of remembering our ignominious past: However many African Americans collect Mammy and Uncle Toms to symbolically reanimate and to kill them. Some collectors believe that by owning these items that they can reclaim their power over them, yet the very act of collecting can spur on a economy around these

collectibles which perpetuates the very stereotypes that that they hope to abolish. Cultural critic, Stuart Hall's theories on the nature of stereotypes allow artists to reconsider of value of these debased commodities. Hall comments, "Stereotypes get hold of the few 'simple, vivid memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized' characteristics of a person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity" (1997, p. 258). These qualities symbolize the misrepresentation of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Tom and Mammy".

Wilson has reexamined identity and blackness within museum culture. And provided a new discourse on relations of power. By exposing the ideologies of museum culture, African-American art is rediscovered and valued in modern society. African American artists continue to question and transform the politics of visual display. In the book, *Subject to Display*, art critic Kobena Mercer notes, "Fred Wilson shares a critical approach to material and visual culture that examines, and ultimately attempts to undermine, racist and colonialist discourses in a long tradition of abolitionism" (Gonzalez, 2008, p. 20). Wilson's critique hegemonic narratives on blackness provide new insights into how art institutions silence and undermine cultural expression with African-American Communities.

In conclusion, my journey as an artist has awakened me to the inequalities of visual representation in present day cultural institutions, museum discourse

misrepresents artists of color and their viewers through the construction of visual display. Artifacts and objects are arranged and presented by museum administrators who seek to conceal and yet make visible ideologies of the dominant culture. It is my quest as an artist to contest various forms of racism that exist within museum culture.

Chapter 4

Visual Pedagogy

Like other artists in the post-black aesthetic, Walker and Wilson challenge existing notions of race and gender through collage narratives. Walker uses silhouette portraiture of the nineteenth century to depict the identities of those silenced by social institutions. Recognized as elegant art forms, these portraits were valued and revered by the bourgeois culture. At the same time, silhouettes were used to profile slaves as property. Here, Walker subverts a highly-stylized form of collage to expose the dark realities of racism in the Old South. The artist's exquisite recontextualization of language and historical fragments of slave culture bears pedagogical significance for educators and students who seek creative expression and political agency. Garoian writes,

Exposing, examining, and critiquing significant issues in contemporary cultural life represent the practice of critical citizenship. What we might expect from artists is work that will

impact society, to challenge existing forms... to bring ideas into society that might not yet be visible, and to do so in a way that can be accessed and to some degree understood" (2008, p.98).

Post-black artists, through polemical and contingent representations explore diverse meanings that are imminent and possible.

Early modern artists of the 20th century employed collage narratives to counter images prevalent in popular culture. Armed with scissors, Italian Futurists of the 1920's critically manipulated images and texts from modern culture exposing social codes that politicized and silenced the public role of artists and intellectuals. Everyday words, sounds, and images were assembled in a power way to transgress the hegemony of corporate production, advertising and consumption. These aesthetic strategies these transformed artists into a creative force that opposed popular culture based on mass production and consumer identities.

The collage narratives of Dadaist and Surrealists inspired African-American artist Romare Bearden to create imagined worlds where a kaleidoscope of identities help define blackness and difference. By exploring race through surrealism, reveals new social realities are revealed. Bearden comments,

I did the new work out of a response and need to redefine the image of man [and woman] in terms of the Negro experience I

know best...other intellectuals were defining the Negro sociologically, but not artistically. What I have attempted to do is to establish a world through art in which the validity of my Negro experience could live and make its own logic" (as cited by Glaser, 1994, p. 414).

This reexamination of artists such as Dali and Picasso, inspired Bearden to reinterpret popular images of black life, thereby to shedding new light cultural identities.

Through collage theory, artists contest the displacement of critical pedagogy and public citizenship a prescribed by mass-mediated culture. The Reagan Administration initiated educational polices, that restricted the creative and intellectual role of art in K-12 classrooms. In 2001, legislators enacted No Child Left Behind (NCLB), which standardized media and cultural studies based on governmental understandings of culture. Cultural impositions and consumerism has infiltrated the school curriculum, giving rise to the dismantling of narrative structures that promote creative and political agency. Garoian adds, "Mailer identifies the interruptions of commercial advertising on television as the culprit which has usurped and altered children's attention and the desire for literacy, thereby opening the door for the government to standardize schooling" (2008, p. 95). A critical pedagogical approach is crucial to countering inequities in

media representations, which define and fix cultural standards, as well as public opinion.

Today, Contemporary African-American artists continue to question meaning of blackness as it relates to the postmodern condition. Many critics consider visual pedagogy as a new theoretical framework in which to examine reexamine the complexity of social formations through images and textual representations. African-American artists practice postmodern strategies to interrogate fixed perceptions of race, guided by forms of dualism and modern methodologies. Visual pedagogy expands the notions of race and difference to uncharted regions and borders. Here, new spaces mutate and transform subjective experiences into social realities that are problematic and inevitably translatable.

Within this subversive zone, artists interpret subjective experiences through a textual process, which is open-ended and incomplete. Scheurich adds, “Philosophically speaking, the essence of the postmodern argument is that the dualisms which continue to dominate Western thought are inadequate for understanding a world of multiple causes and effects interacting in complex and non-linear ways, all of which are rooted in a limitless array of historical and cultural specificities” (as cited by Davidison, 2006, p. 134). Postmodern strategies expose the fluid and volatile nature of race within bounded containers of meaning.

Visual pedagogy provides new perspectives for educators, students and public citizens on image making and how to re-interpret hegemonic social codes embedded within media, school and home environments. The creation and subsequent critical interrogation of negative self images distort and misrepresent those who are racially and culturally different. Through visual pedagogy, students discover productive ways to recontextualize and transform stereotypes generated by media culture. Rolling adds, "Representative image-making may also involve the agency of constructing oppositional images and gestures - the construction of an other-image as opposed to self image... excavating an identity and surveying a site conducive for identity development and social positioning" (2007, p. 5). Question these reversed identities allows students to dismantle hegemonic norms through performance and critique.

Since the early twentieth century, African-American literature has been considered the epitome of black aesthetics. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Power Era, social recognition was less visible for young emerging visual artists. WPA programs of the 1930's and 1940's allowed black artists to create wall paintings and murals, depicting forms of political propaganda in the name of social progress. It wasn't until the early nineties that artistic freedom generated national and global recognition. Ashe comments, "The chief difference between the Civil Rights Movement and earlier and this post-civil rights era is the black artists' relationship to freedom... As a result, today's black artists, who

have grown up in the squishy, hazy, post-civil rights movement era of sometimes-real, sometimes-imagined freedom, are exploring blackness from within the contexts markedly different from their forebears” (2007, p. 619). A new wave of post-black artists redefined black aesthetics through visual art forms, culturally shifting the focus of away from literature.

From this perspective, contemporary African-American artists engage within interstices, where freedoms are negotiated and challenged within culturally coded environments. Artistic participation in the reexamination of categories that determine race, gender and identity expands the postmodern debate on cultural impositions and racial essentialism. Post-black artists’ artistic inquiry into identity and race generates a new paradigm shift to new emerging social realities. Darby comments, “In their ways...Walker and Wilson refer to the traffic between subject and ideas; where use does not burnish cultural forms but alters them; where the interactions of practices and institutions generate problematic situations; where artist subjects contracted by compulsory representativeness transform their constitution by power workable, more like a work of art” (2007, p. 26). It is within these borders that the future of the post-black aesthetics will flourish.

By opposing these cultural impositions, Walker embraces Benjamin’s approach to storytelling as a pedagogical tool for critical citizenship. According to Benjamin, consumer culture has devalued the art of storytelling where cultural

histories are relegated to classified references or reports. Educating students to explore narratives reveals the complexity of human experiences retold by teachers and sages.

Writing about the complexity of storytelling describes a piling up of the other of thin transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings (Benjamin as cited in Garoian, 2008, p. 101).

Walker's collage narratives encourage students to challenge traditions and to be more responsive in constructing and expanding roles of critical citizenship. Reid-Parr adds,

Walker is deeply criticized for her belief that both black and the American must fashion and refashion themselves constantly, must piece together traditions as thin as cut paper...she opens up those of us who are not afraid of a new world of possibility (2002, p. 41).

Walker's storytelling enables students to contest cultural forms through critical pedagogy.

Conclusion

Faced with the economic policies from the Bush Administration and hypercommodification of the early 1990's, contemporary African-American artists sought emancipation from forces that restricted the production of art. This agenda exposed internal tensions between artistic freedom and the myth of social progress by challenging artists to reexamine blackness within the context of post-black culture. African-American artists created complex narratives to counter Du Bois' bourgeois notion of black life, as well as prescribed narratives on black power politics. These historical eruptions revealed black art's inadequacies. This collapse gave rise to artists who chose alternative realities over a single-class vision of African-American culture. The strategies of Walker and Wilson work to dislodge tradition perspectives of blackness hegemonic forms of visual representation.

Walker's reworking of romance novels as well as slave narratives of the Old South sheds light on the psychological conditions of racism and sexual exploitation within a repressive society, where the collapse of norms and cultural sensibilities fall apart. By uncovering racialized fragments from the past,

dialectical images emerge, casting a different view on the existing forms of racism in postmodern culture. Walker's visual strategies coincide with Fanon's criticism of cultural industries and media and their promotion of stereotypes and monochromatic modes of blackness. These configurations are reexamined through a fictive tableau of plantation life. Viewers experience a world where symbolic forms of human subjects manifest psychosexual symptoms, linking this concept to Freud's theory on ego and body relation. Walker's visual work on slave culture provides new interpretations on the sociological complexities of blackness and difference.

Wilson's installations awaken viewers to the inequalities of visual representation in present day cultural institutions. He presents the argument that museum discourse misrepresents artists and viewers through visual practices that concealing inequitable practices and subliminally promoting the ideologies of the dominant culture. Utilizing Benjamin's concepts on historical materialism to challenge various forms of racism that exist in visual culture, Gonzalez comments,

It is within museums that the basic distinctions between nature and culture are demonstrated as science that laid bare and objectified; and there that theories of race and gender relying upon a fundamental nature/culture dichotomy are cloaked with material proofs and scientific authenticity" (as cited by Marcus, 1991, p. 24).

Wilson's process of destabilizing encoded devices of museum display and education reveal the neglect and distortion of blackness, culture and artistic expression.

These innovative strategies to deconstruct and understand meanings of blackness within postmodern culture offer pedagogical significance to historical fragments and their ability to shape and contest identity and difference. The critical practice of collage narrative allows individuals to discover personal and cultural histories that have been silenced and ignored by Neoliberal policy makers. Giroux adds,

This is a pedagogy that refuses detachment, one that understands how multiple forms of power and experience structure and position different groups in sets of relations that must always be questioned by a larger project of extending and improving human capacities (as cited by Garoian, 2008, p. 111).

From this perspective, the artistic efforts of Walker and Wilson provide pedagogical insights on how different aspects of blackness are produced through experiences and identities, illuminating a greater social and global significance.

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