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The Art of Inclusion, Black Art and (Mis)representation: Repainting Black Expression

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Senior Project

The Division of Art History and Visual Culture

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The Art of Inclusion, Black Art and (Mis)representation:

Repainting Black Expression

Foreword

This body of work, submitted to Bard College's Division of Art History and Visual Culture, serves to add to the zeitgeist of authors and artist who oppose the previously circulated narrative of African Americans: Their histories, their cultural heritage, their place in American society, and the effects of the presupposed White narrative that has been imposed on the Black body. I will be focusing on African American artists of the twentieth-century, who have shown their dedication and activism through their work, to dismantle the fascist structure of the American museum, and in turn, American society as we know it. These artist, whose work supports the individual histories and narratives of Black people, work to rewrite history, and insert the narratives of the disenfranchised. Each artist, executes a different approach to facing the problem of exclusion and misrepresentation in the American museum; and though some of these artist, may have radically different methods, they all work towards the same goal: to create a atmosphere within the present world of American art and society, that will never exclude, nor ever question the inclusion of the Black narrative. The artists that I will be examining are Kerry James Marshall, Jacob Lawrence, and Kara Walker. I will also be examining the influences of these artist.

Introduction

The history of the world is continuously being written, illustrated and revised. But, historically, there has been an immense amount of exclusionary practices set in place to glorify European, Western, expansionists culture. The narratives that have been left unattended, and unrecognized, belong to those who've had their history and identity stolen, and rewritten. Artists give history life: A face, an expression, meaning. Artist also reflect the realities of the world. The merging of art and history gave way to museums in the early 19th century. As museums became more popular, and people became more interested in historical documentation, museums became the subsidized housing of the art world. A great majority of museums represented the same ideals, the same values, the same artists, the same capitalistic drive, the same exclusion, offered the same experience. There is no denying the beauty and magic of the museum. With levels of halls of art and its evolution. It is a true time capsule. But whilst absentmindedly traversing through this structured time-scape, does one not realize that the portraits, the landscape, the expressionist and abstract works, are missing something? Where on earth are all the other people, I mean, the ones that aren't European? Do they not have bodies, and forms to be rendered? Do they not exist in the ever flowing landscapes? Do they not have reactions to social and political climates, as do the surrealist and abstract artists do? The answer is yes, they do, but to fit that into a centuries-old, pre constructed narrative, proves to be a difficult feat.

The visual historical narrative of native and African American art and artists has throughout history been discarded, used as a prop, used as a scientific artifact, or used outside of its original intent. The construction of the museum gave credibility to these workings; the museums established a hierarchy of knowledge, and represented the upper echelons of talent and creativity, so how can what is being seen on such a grand, formal, exclusive scale, be denied as the truth? As we answer these questions, it is no longer acceptable to exclude, or omit the past, present, or future presence of all races. Within recent decades, African Americans have taken their own platform as craftsmen and teachers of the arts. But this is again, within recent decades; meaning that the most influential periods of art have long passed. The renaissance, dadaism, and the early surrealist years being a few of the major art periods. Throughout these ages of the arts, Africans, and African Americans were of course creating art, but not art that would be regarded as sophisticated and beautiful as renaissance work, or a complex commentary of the social and political state of the world such as many great surrealist works. African American art was regarded as a form of survival, ruled by accessibility to materials, and instinct. African American art involved musical rituals, hair braiding (used as maps for escaping plantations), textiles and quilts, wood carvings, and forms of expression that offered relief from the everyday degradations and cruelties of slavery, segregation and disenfranchisement. African American art did not fit into the values and aesthetics of art from the Renaissance and onward. Moreover the last thing that African Americans suffering through slavery, poverty and daily injustices were worried about, was acceptance in the art world. They were fighting for the legitimacy of their own existence. As a result of the lack of African American presences in art, a visual narrative was established by white people, who controlled and circulated this false narrative as a cultural,

scholarly fact. This narrative of expansion, concurring, extinction, and servitude. African Americans in modern realist paintings, like Manet "Olympia" in which the black woman though part of the focal point, blatantly represents a servant, even she was lesser than the proud prostitute. Or history landscape paintings that were representative of Native American land, but feature no Native American peoples; if any Native American figures appeared, they were only depicted in small groups in a curious and non-threatening manner indicative of their extinction, and openness to western expansion. such as artist Thomas Cole who rendered paintings inspired by novels like *The Last of the Mohicans* by James Fenimore Cooper. Painting like these were held in high regard and traveled from museum to gallery as fine art as a complete narrative. Only within recent decades, artists and art historians, have challenged these narratives and questioned the museum to be a proponent of false history. Artist like Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Horace Pippin and Charles White were artists who created work to go beyond the aesthetic of painting and symbolism. Their work challenged a system, while infiltrating it and exposing it. Their work goes beyond artists expression and moves towards activism.

Chapter 1: Kerry James Marshall

There have been many successful African American artists that have arisen throughout the 20th and 21st century, the best of which have expressed powerful meaning through their work. To begin this study, I'd like to start with African American Kerry James Marshall, a contemporary painter whose work is not only visually stunning, but layered with information regarding his personal history, the history of Black Americans, and the relationship between the two histories. Marshall's road towards artistic success has been enriched with the far too frequent tragedies of the the mid 1900's for Black folks. Marshall's work reads like a biography. From his early childhood experiences in Birmingham Alabama, to he and his family moving to California in the midst of the LA Race Riots; The autobiographical works of Kerry James Marshall, though not directly about, or featuring him, are a transcription of his memories. There are elements in his work that is reminiscent of a child's perspective. With bold colors, irrational space, and scenery that is bold, and vivid, Marshall creates a world that is beautiful, eerie, unstable, transcendental, divine; reminiscent of the Black American experience. Marshall's work shamelessly called into question the ethics of art history, the museum, and who art caters to; not surprisingly, for years Marshall's work was rejected by museums and major art outlets. His work, though, continued to stand in opposition to the structure of the museums, and more importantly, the men and few women who fund and uphold the ethics and values of the museum. It is important to remember that the museum is not an autonomous being, there are corrupted people

at the helm. In the case of Marshall, there have been art commissioners that have admitted to the pure talent in his work, but that the museum was not “ready” to have such installations.

Thankfully, rejection did not deter Marshall from creating. His work is not only appreciated, its needed.

Marshall’s name still carries relevancy, as he is a teacher and successful artist to this day. But, Marshall’s road to success was riddled with hardships both mental and physical. Kerry James Marshall was born 1955 in Birmingham Alabama. The south as well known, was (and still is) a cesspool of racism and segregation. During his early childhood, the Montgomery Bus Boycott had sparked a chain reaction of violence against Black bodies. He was He was in Birmingham in 1963, when white supremacists dynamited a Baptist church and killed four young girls. He was nine years old when he and his family moved out to the ghettos of LA, in the Watts district. This was the year of 1965, just before the LA Race Riots broke out. Despite these traumatic events surrounding his young life, and the lives of other black children who grew up with the same frightening race based narrative; Marshall grew up having a seemingly normal life with a father, mother brother and sister. At an early age, Marshall knew that he wanted to be a visual artists. 10. He knew in kindergarten, after his teacher, Mary Hill showed he and his classmates a scrapbook full of greeting cards, pictures, and other imagery. He taught himself how to draw, mimicking flowers, murals he saw on the street, television and comic book characters and so forth. A pivotal moment in young Marshall’s life, was his first visit to an art museum in 1965, he was 10 years old. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, housed the first original painting that he was to lay his eyes on. LACMA’s two huge paintings of saints by the Italian Renaissance

artist Paolo Veronese wowed him. But even at a young age he noticed that there were no works of art created by African American artist, and the african art that was housed in the museum, was placed in the downstairs gallery. He realised the disparities between the two worlds of The Renaissance art and African art. His mission became to merge the two forms, as he stated to an audience at the University of Chicago's Renaissance Society: "For a long time, what I've been trying to do is marry this kind of history painting that is done by Veronese (fig.1) and the kind of power and mystery that resides in the Senufo figure."(fig.2)



(Fig.1 Veronese, *Portrait of a Man* 1576)



(Fig.2 Senufo figure)

In many ways, Marshall has accomplished this. Marshall graduated from Los Angeles Otis Art Institute, where he studied under a renowned african american artists and a great influencer of Marshall's work, Charles White, who I will discuss further along in this paper. Shortly after

graduating, Marshall made his first piece of work that would canonize his style and voice within the art world.

It began with “*Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*” created in 1980. A work that was small in scale, (Only 8 by 6 ½ inches) but large in impact. The painting was inspired by *Invisible Man*, The controversial Ralph Ellison book that highlighted issues of racism, and segregation against the black community. Marshalls painting, was charged with symbolic meaning. Looking at the surface, the viewer is confronted with a starkly black figure, merging into a black background. The only thing



(Fig.3 Blackface character)



Fig.4 Marshall, *Portrait of the Artist as his Former Self*, 1980

that distinguishes a human face are the white eyes, and a wide smile revealing a missing front tooth. The unsettling nature of the image, is that it is reminiscent of black face, a mocking creation of White people painted and dressed as “Black people” that display African Americans

as cartoonish clowns. This first reaction to the work, is a commentary on social conditioning and projected theories of Black people. This black character is automatically charged with the negative connotations associated with black face, and faces. But ultimately, Marshall's portrait speaks to the issue of projection onto the Black body. The projection of us being sideshow characters, disembodied figures, black, scary foreign masses or completely invisible. Marshall walked a thin line when creating his first notable work of art. He feared that the layered meaning of his work, would collapse on itself with the weight of its pre supposed stereotype. Of the delicate balance of the work Marshall says "I sought a way to reclaim that image of Blackness so that it wasn't negatively valued, but achieved an undeniable majesty. The problem," he writes, "was how to bring that figure close to being a stereotypical representation without collapsing completely into stereotype. I was playing at the boundary between a completely flattened Out stereotype, a cartoon, and a fully resonant, complicated, authentic representation, a Black archetype... which allows for degrees of complexity."¹ *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, was the first of a series of portrait paintings that Marshall completed to create a social discourse on the socially ingrained issues facing Black Americans regarding their identities, sexualities, projected stereotypes, and the brave demeanor we must wear in order to face these things. Marshall continued this paradigm of Black expression, his methods going far beyond the creation of work that was aesthetically pleasing and palatable to a predominately White audience.

¹ Marshall, Kerry James. "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of his Former Self." *Western American Literature*, vol. 36 no. 4, 2002, pp. i-i. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/wal.2002.0014

Marshall intended to create purposeful work, that called to question the social order of art, society, and the museum. His intent was rather simple; to impose within the museum, depictions of blackness that were undeniable and to expose the omission of Black stories throughout the ages. Marshall's aim was not only to create self expressive work, though at the beginning of his career, he had a short stint with abstraction in which he described as just "pushing paint around". Marshall insisted upon making work for the people, all people. Work that not only imposed the loss of a narrative, but that dignified that loss with triumph. Marshall's work exonerate the Black experience, while simultaneously imposing the Black experience onto the historical framework of art. Marshall draws inspiration for the background of his work, from the old masters. He has studied their work, as an african american artists, The old Masters Courbet, Corot, Daumier, millet, were the only historically great artists he had to look to. They also represented a figurative connotation to master vs slave, the position of master being exclusive, and White and unyielding to the wants and needs of Black people. Of the disparaging lack of Black artists Marshall says in a tapped interview "If you look at the historical narrative of art, we do have to contend with the narrative of the 'old master'. I had to recognize [that] in the pantheon of 'old masters', there are no Black masters. So he worked with a single-mindedness to learn from these painters, "to close the gap between what they done and what I was doing."² Marshall's pursuit to close this gap, was evident in the composition of his work. His first work *A Portrait of the Artist as His Former Self*, was Marshall's quest to collage blackness onto historical White idealism. It went beyond the content of the piece, that being a historical idea of Black folks, and went as deep as the medium itself, a figural ideal, paint on canvas. The material

² Marshall, Kerry James. May 2, 2016. Personal interview (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago)

Marshall used was egg tempera, a medium that precedes oil paintings and was used during the Renaissance for fresco paintings, and also by Italian surrealist artist de Chirico, who Marshall makes reference to often. Marshall's use of egg tempera, a material that was declared dead long ago, calls into question the rules and regulations of art and its death and revival. Who gets to say what is a dying style, who gets to delegate what is presently acceptable? Marshall continued to challenge these claims of authority by calling into question what makes one artist greater than the next. In his series of Black portraits, he gathers influence, like a collage, from different centuries and cultures, to create the works which create a lost narrative. He sources inspiration from Byzantine icons, to Frida Kahlo and Mexican retablos. In "When Frustration Threatens Desire" which he created in 1990, Marshall references a cat seen in Edouard Manet's "Olympia" (1863). Haitian Vodou, Santeria, and neighborhood spiritualists, traditions so close and yet so distant to black life and our deeply embedded spirituality, was also heavily influential in Marshall's work. Of the vast influences that he draws upon Marshall says "What also started to crystallize in that painting was a way to bring together not only Western traditions of pictorial representation, but folk traditions of painting that have an equally valid authority. I don't see much difference between using Giotto or Bill Traylor (an African American artist born a slave) as a point of reference. To me they're the same. Their work has a certain power."³ Marshall blatantly denies the hierarchy of artistic status, there are no great painters, equally, we are all great painters, it is the intention to be great, that makes a work great. His comparison of the two artist Giotto, and Traylor, is so striking, in my experience, it can be seen in their work. Traylor, drawing no more than stick like figures, has such power and conviction in his work that you can

³ Shelle, Mimi. "Resituating Kerry James Marshall in a Black Radical Tradition" (Jan 24, 2017) <https://hyperallergic.com/353553/resituating-kerry-james-marshall-in-a-black-radical-tradition/>

look into the eyes of his characters and see souls. Giotto, with his alter paintings so spiritual, you can truly believe in the story of the divine conception. Both painters captured an essence that is beyond an aesthetic. Marshall continues his work and becomes the Black equalizer, creating works such as *Many Mansions* (1994), *Watts* (1995), *Study For Past Times* (1997), *School of Beauty*, *School of Culture* (2012), and so many more that continued to create a narrative of Black life that had been omitted for decades. The Black characters that Marshall included in his works, emulated what Black life truly is, an acceptance of social struggles, in actuality a very lax experience, at least the expression on the faces of the Black character would suggest such. The expressionless faces prevalent on the figures of his paintings, is not particularly cohesive with the vibrancy of the settings in which they are painted. Ranging from scenes of barber shops *De Style* (1993), to scenes of a picnic on a lawn reminiscent of Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, there is always a setting that fosters expression, laughter, despair, happiness, community ties, but the expression lies only in the scenes that surround the subjects. Marshall explains the lack of expression in his characters as this

“there are things that I don’t do; you don’t see images of black people who are abject in my work...If you look at those figures,” he says, referring to his paintings of hair salons, families, lovers, “they seem to be self-possessed. That matters a lot to me... In the history of painting, white people seem to like themselves. They like what they look like, they like what they do and they like seeing themselves with each other. There is no equivalent genre for black people, because of the history of conquer and slavery. So beauty and pleasure come to be seen as an exclusively white entitlement. We don’t think of Black people and joy.”⁴

⁴ Brown, Griselda Murray. “Kerry James Marshall: ‘You don’t see black people in trauma in my work’” (Financial Times) 2018 <https://www.ft.com/content/7f16afe4-c6ed-11e8-ba8f-ee390057b8c9>

This viewpoint of Marshalls works to dismantle the myth that Black folks live in a perpetual state of anger, and violence. Turmoil is not a part of the narrative of his characters, they simply live in the moment that is depicted, never sad, not necessarily joyous, just existing exclusively.

Marshall's work is ultimately a reflection of his reality. His adolescent years shaped the artistic style. As earlier stated, Marshall grew up during the tumultuous time of the civil rights era. He witness pivotal, and violent moments, such as the LA race riots, cause by police brutality exercised against Rodney King. Along with trying to translate the traumas of his own life, Marshall works to create depictions of trauma passed down through the generations of African Americans descendant of the African Diaspora. His work, *Great America* (1994) demonstrates his attempt to depict the trauma of Africans middle passage into america by way of slave ships. In discussing how he finds a way in which to translate this historic trauma, Marshall says:

“We’re not dealing with a genuine historic memory but with information we’ve come to know through indirect sources. As African Americans we’re trying to come to terms with a zero point in an evolving history. We can only locate our point of origin at a “no place” in the middle of a vast sea; it represents nothingness. We’re trying to figure out a way to construct a point of origin from that “no place.” And the reason why we are compelled to do it is because a story has been told. It’s a story to which we feel related. The philosopher Cornel West has said, “There are things that one cannot not know.”¹ For a lot of African Americans, not knowing something about their origins is one of those things. You have to fill in a lot of the gaps. Where other artists may have tried to focus on the trauma, I felt like you had to displace it and attach it to some things in a more indirect way that don’t appear to be traumatic. Which is how I arrived at the use of the amusement Cover: *Great America*, 1994 park haunted tunnel ride in Great America. It was the only way I could comprehend what the idea of the Middle Passage was and the closest I could get to something that suggests that kind of fright and anticipation.”⁵

⁵ Meyer, James. Marshall, Kerry James “In the Tower: Kerry James Marshall” (National Gallery of Art) June 28th-December 7, 2013 <https://www.nga.gov/content/dam/ngaweb/exhibitions/pdfs/2013/nga-kjmarshall-brochure.pdf>

Marshall's tactical use of dissociation in order to identify an exact feeling of emotion, translates through the figures in his work, whose attitudes can certainly be described as dissociative in nature.

Kerry James Marshall has had great success over the recent years. This of course, was no easy feat for Marshall, who had to defend his work in the most extreme, and subtle ways. The color of his skin, determined everything about his life, and as an artist, it greatly affected the reception of his work. Marshall had experienced many instances in which revered art critics and reviewers, had publicly misinterpreted and misrepresented the work of Marshall. One such instance being the 1995 Whitney Biennial, curated by esteemed art critic Klaus Kertess. Marshall was being considered as a represented artist for the bi-yearly art exhibit; the paintings up for consideration, where created my Marshall in response to a real event happening in the Cabrini Green housing projects in the ghettos of Chicago. These low income housing communities in Chicago, where facing demolition in efforts to quicken the gentrification of low income and minority counties in Chicago. Families where being displaced from their homes, and Marshall wanted to express this t



(Fig.5 Marshall,

Better Homes Better Gardens, 1994



(Fig. 6 Marshall, *Many*

Mansion, 1994)

According to the New York Times Magazine's account of Kertess' visit to Marshall's studio to review the work being considered for the Biennial, it did not seem that he would be approving of Marshall's work entering the exhibit. "It was sweet" Kertess said of *Many Mansions*, "but I would wish for more of an edge, a little more tension. He is nice and bright and fighting the good fight; it isn't easy to be a black artist in the center doing very classically composed works. But i'm not ready to take a flyer with it yet."⁶ Dismissal is one of many words I would use to describe Kertess' examination of Marshall's work. Perhaps he was not aware of the social gravity of Marshall's paintings, nonetheless his lack of awareness, was simply due to not investing an

⁶ Paul Goldberg, "The Art of His Choosing," *New York Times*, Feb 26, 1995, nytimes.com/1995/02/26/magazine/the-art-of-his-choosing.html

adequate amount of time and care in researching a master artist. It is hard to imagine that a white artist being considered for the same platform, would receive the same dismissive, infantile treatment. Another instance of the misrepresentation of Marshall's work being made public happened, when in 1997, Marshall's work was still being heralded as surrealism, and not history paintings as Marshall himself describes his work. "New York Times art critic, Holland Cotter explained: Kerry James Marshall, an artist based in Chicago, has described his work as history painting, and he has taken Black life in America as his primary subject. In the large-scale pieces he contributed to last years Whitney Biennial, Black children played in housing projects that resembled those he lived in during the 1960's in Los Angeles. The settings were carefully detailed, but surreal."⁷ Here again we see an esteemed white art critic, dismissing and contradicting the true meaning behind Marshalls own description of his work. The traditional methods of history painting, the grandiose natural settings, the saturated colors of the earth, the heroic portraits of great White men, typically present in traditional history paintings, may not be fully seen in Marshall *Garden Project*, but the historical narrative of Black American life, was the premise of the work, Cotter was oblivious to this fact. Helen Molesworth, art critic and former Chief Curator at The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Held very strong opinions against Kertess statements, and very publicly addressed Kertess lack of care and understanding pertaining to Marshall's work. As Molesworth so distinctly put it, "Kertess clearly did not see the dialectic at work within the individual paintings, nor it seems, had he considered the work Marshall had made leading up to the Garden Project: works dedicated to exploring religious imagery, drawing dually from the history of the Italian Renaissance and Haitian voodoo

⁷ Holland Cotter, "In Civil Rights Ferment, a Conflicted Nostalgia," New York Times, Oct. 2, 1990, [nytimes.com/1998](https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/02/arts/art-review-in-civil-rights-ferment-a-conflicted-nostalgia.html), [nytimes.com/1998/10/02/arts/art-review-in-civil-rights-ferment-a-conflicted-nostalgia.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1998/10/02/arts/art-review-in-civil-rights-ferment-a-conflicted-nostalgia.html).

traditions...In other words, Kertess didn't comprehend that the paintings in Marshall's *Garden Project*, were part of an oeuvre that was well on its way to offering a forensic analysis of Western painting, inasmuch as the artist was examining painterly genres on at a time-- self portraiture, religious painting, history painting, genre scene, landscapes, and abstraction."⁸ this was not the first instance of Molesworth speaking out against the ethics and methods of curation and the museum. These instances of Molesworth voicing her displeasure in the mistreatment of African American artists, and the mishandling of their work, ultimately resulted in her termination as the Chief Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. The news broke: "Philippe Vergne, the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, had fired the museum's chief curator, Helen Molesworth, whom Vergne himself had hired four years ago... one week after his initial report announcing the news, MOCA still hasn't issued more than a vague statement citing 'creative differences' to explain the dismissal—despite, as the headline put it, 'crucial questions and too few answers.'"⁹ This blatant display of punishing Molesworth for speaking out against the racist practices of the museum, did not go unnoticed. Nevertheless, Kerry James Marshall had not allowed the biased treatment of his work, deter him from creating the content that museums, galleries, and African Americans needed to see. His work continues to transcend the stereotypes bound to the Black narrative, and his intentions continue to speak to Black artists and thinkers like myself, who understand the depth of his work, and the solidarity

⁸ Alreveer, Ian. Molesworth, Helen. Roelstraete. Winogrand, Abigail. "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry published on the occasion of the exhibition organized by and held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (April 23-September 25, 2016); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (October 25, 2016-January 29, 2017); and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (March 12-July 2, 2017).

⁹Douglas, S. (2018). *Prior to Her Firing, Curator Helen Molesworth Made Public Statements Critical of Museum Practices, MOCA* -. [online] ARTnews. Available at: <http://www.artnews.com/2018/03/21/prior-firing-curator-helen-molesworth-made-public-statements-critical-museum-practices-moca/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

present in every stroke of his brush. The work of Kerry James Marshall, laid such a firm foundation for Black expression through painting, and broadened the range of emotional depth allowed for African American art.

Chapter 2: Jacob Lawrence

Jacob Lawrence, was an African American artist of the Harlem Renaissance influence. His work explored the intricate lives of African Americans that were part of the modern diasporic experience within America; Namely, Southern Blacks, and the migrative surge to the North for better working conditions, supposed better social experiences, and black affluence, a precursor to whiteflight. Jacob Lawrence's path towards artistic success is different than Kerry James Marshall's in that, Lawrence was discovered very early in his career, and gathered a large following due to his popularity; his work was highly sought after by the very museums that denied Marshall. Jacob Lawrence was a painter in his personal world, but a commodity in the world of the museum and its ethical practitioners. Lawrence produced work that White people could not, or would not dare. Lawrence's career was at its peak during the height of The Great Depression. His work was an example of the era of The Great Depression, as experienced by African Americans who, unsurprisingly, thrived, while White affluence disintegrated. The crumbling of communities, financial loss, suffering, and fear became a societal phenomenon for White communities, but an eternal experience for Blacks living in a White world.

Jacob Lawrence was born on september 7th, 1917. Originally from South Carolina and Virginia. he and his family migrated to the North, like millions of Southern African Americans, sharecroppers, and direct descendants of slaves, for better social conditions and working opportunities. They migrated to Atlantic City New Jersey. At the age of 7, after the divorce of his parents, Lawrence, his mother, and his siblings moved to Philadelphia, later settling in Harlem New York in 1924; he was 12 years old. During this time, Lawrence was surrounded by the

remnants of the Black brilliance that was the era of the Harlem Renaissance, and the cultural ethos of the African American diaspora. The Harlem Renaissance was prevalent in expressionist painters, writers, musicians, poets, and performance artists. During this time of Lawrence's adolescence, he was enrolled into an after school arts program, Utopia Children's Center. His talent was recognized early on, by Charles Alston; a painter, and prominent figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Alston was also the appointed director of the Utopia Children's Center. Lawrence was afforded the opportunity to be mentored by an African American artist, who had garnered success in the professional arts landscape. In 1950, Alston entered one of his new, abstract works in the competitive exhibition *American Painting Today* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It won the purchase prize, and the museum acquired it. Using theories from Arthur Wesley Dow's textbook *Composition*, Alston taught nonrepresentational drawing and encouraged Lawrence to invent his own pictorial language based on personal decisions about composition and space.¹⁰ In an interview Lawrence recalls his mentor, Charles Alston, as being very encouraging of his artistic style, never telling him that there was a certain way in which to describe and illustrate images properly. Lawrence recollects "The way I was seeing had validity, was very valid." this of course gave Lawrence the encouragement that he needed as a young artist to continue in his unique Expressionist Style. Upon graduating into highschool, Lawrence continued painting and developing his own skills. He found a niche in drawing simple geometric patterns and diorama style paintings. He found inspiration in his home and community in Harlem. His childhood homes, offered a world of color and geometric patterns. He recollects living in Harlem during the Great Depression, saying that he ultimately found a world within his home, which his single

¹⁰Whitney.org. (2002). *Jacob Lawrence: Exploring Stories*. [online] Available at: https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/meet/early_childhood.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

mother kept lavish with decorations. Despite financial hardship, Lawrence's mother made great efforts to have a beautiful home. Lawrence's eye became attuned to visual relationships and he developed his predilection for certain shapes. "Our homes were very decorative, full of pattern, like inexpensive throw rugs, all around the house. It must have had some influence, all this color and everything. Because we were so poor the people used this as a means of brightening their life. I used to do bright patterns after these throw rugs; I got ideas from them, the arabesques, the movement and so on."¹¹ Lawrence received a formal education in the arts at The American Artist School in New York City; Lawrence's early exposure to the museum, afforded him knowledge of the compositions and techniques of the old masters. He greatly appreciated both classic and modern masters such as Giotto, Goya, Matisse, and Van Gogh. His appreciation of the old masters however, did not preclude his appreciation and employment of African art, and the African American artists who he was surrounded by; equally as masterful in their work as the old master aforementioned. Employment of classical styles and motifs, merges with the modern mode of painting, and very clear Black expression. As earlier expressed, Lawrence was surrounded by the affluence of African American thought and creativity during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Close mentors and colleagues of Lawrence, included fellow painter, Romare Bearden. Bearden was an avid proponent of the work of old masters. His knowledge of them stemmed from his education at New York's Art Students League. There, Bearden studied very closely with German artist, George Grosz. Grosz philosophy was based in a rigorous and careful analysis of the old masters, which proved to be incredibly influential to Bearden. He implemented the techniques of the old masters, making work based on the compositional

¹¹Whitney.org. (2002). *Jacob Lawrence: Exploring Stories*. [online] Available at: https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/meet/early_childhood.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

structure of Renaissance works. Artists and influencers of the Harlem Renaissance, were very open and supportive of their fellow black artists works, working closely together and exchanging ideas frequently. Lawrence's use of the techniques of old masters, stemmed not only from his personal exposure to museums at a young age, but also his peers, who had different experiences in relation to interacting with old masters of painting. Lawrence's use of these techniques of old, could be clearly seen in the way that he illustrated the stories of modern African American life, equally the way in which he rendered the visual narratives of monumental Black historical figures, *The Harriet Tubman Series* 1938-1940, is proof of this. Francisco Goya, Mattis, Botticelli, and Giotto, were just a few of the staple figures of Renaissance and Contemporary art, that Lawrence took great care to study. Many, if not all of his works, reflect the techniques of the old masters, while simultaneously inserting the narratives of the Black nobles, Black families, Black groups of peoples, and Black individuals. Egg tempura, a Renaissance technique, used by the likes of Botticelli, etc. Was used to complete one of his most notable works of art, *The Migration Series*; Comprised of 60 individual paintings expressed on wood board, pigmented with egg tempura, no doubt influenced by the Renaissance masters. Painted at one go in early 1941, when Lawrence was barely 24, the panels in the series tell how throngs of black migrants made the trek from southern countryside to northern cities in the first decades of last century. Of migrant stock himself and coming of age in the rich middle of the culture of 1930s Harlem, Lawrence was perfectly qualified to be the Virgil of this uptown Rome: His images set out its founding as definitively as anyone could want. Each of the story's 60 pictures comes with a caption that tells us what it's all about.¹²

¹²Whitney.org. (2002). *Jacob Lawrence: Exploring Stories*. [online] Available at: https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/meet/early_childhood.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].



(Fig 7. Jacob Lawrence *The Migration*

Series panel No.1 "During World War 1 there was a great migration North by southern African Americans," 1917)



(Fig. 8 Jacob Lawrence *The*

Migration Series panel no.17 "Tenant Farmers received harsh treatment at the hands of planters." 1917)

Many critics and viewers of the work consider these particular works to be a History Painting series, but Lawrence rejects this view of his work, insisting that it is instead a portrait series, of himself, and his community; modeling the abstract patterns seen in the work, after the patterns and reflection, he saw and reimagined in his own community. The windows of churches, the

decor of Black homes, crowds of Black people, Black stories and story tellings. The captions reserved for each panel of The Migration Series, revealed the stories of the migrants, and children of migrants like himself, within the community of Black folks in Harlem. A rich ethos of history, and culture was hidden within the walls of the Black community of Harlem, all of which Lawrence was able to transcribe into a widely celebrated series. The merging of Black narratives, Renaissance techniques, and Expressionist sensibilities, continued in Lawrence's work. It is seen in the use of color in works like *Toussaint at Ennery* 1989. The pure blues, reds, yellows, blacks and whites, the flat space, the Expressionist abstraction of the near primitive like figures, is reminiscent of Matisse paintings: *The Dessert Harmony in Red*, 1908, and *Large Reclining Nude* 1935. The looming, errieness and violence of his *Harriet Tubman Series* 1939-40, is reminiscent of the terrible creatures created in the subconscious dream state, rendered by Goya's *Black Paintings* 1819-1823. Lawrence also proved his prevalence as an artist who was versatile in modernity. His *Migration Series* nods both to the traditions of the Renaissance, but also to the Abstraction Expressionist with the thick painting style, flattened perspective, and featureless characters that embodied movement, hope, fear, and triumph. He showed further wit and dexterity, with the influences of Avant-garde Cinema, creating his characters within a storyboard, using uniformity of color and composition to interweave the images into a cohesive moment.



(Fig.9 Jacob Lawrence, *Toussaint at Ennery* 1989.)



(Fig10. Henri Matisse *The Dessert Harmony in Red*, 1908)



(Fig11. Francisco Goya, Black

Paintings: Like Wraiths)



(Fig 12. Jacob Lawrence, *The Harriet Tubman Series*, panel #4, 1939-40)

After its debut in 1941 at The Downtown Gallery, owned by Edith Gregor Halpert, Lawrence's *Migration Series* advanced his career exponentially. Certain panels from the series were reproduced for *Fortune Magazine*, soon after, both MoMA and Duncan Phillips, owner of the Phillips Collection in Washington, each bought half of the panels from the series. Years later, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to paint *The War Series*. This series of Lawrence's was, like his other collections, inspired by he and his communities day to day experiences. When he got drafted into the United States Coast Guard in 1943, the barracks where he and his fellow Coast Guardsmen resided, became his new community. There he experienced a different type of culture. He was a Steward's Mate; a great artist, reduced to serving food to his White captains. It was the only rank available for men of color during the time of segregation within the military. In accordance to his experience as a Black man commodified by a country that did not respect him nor his ancestors, and being diminished to servitude, he was also stationed in the deep South, St. Augustine Florida. There Lawrence experienced first hand the grave realities of the dangers of being Black in the South. Keeping in contact with his artistic career back in New York, was

something that Lawrence had to prioritize, as his works from *The Migration Series* were still being sold. He writes to Edith Halpert, who had contacted him regarding the progress of his works in progress. He openly describes the experience of the Black Americans in the South. He writes

“...St. Augustine is a very dead city and really southern when it comes to negros. There is nothing beautiful here everything is ugly and the people are without feeling. As a negro I feel a tenseness on the streets and in the hotel where I am working-- in fact; every where. In the North one hears much talk of democracy and the Four Freedoms, down here, you realize that there are a very small percentage of people who try to practice democracy. Negroes need not be told what fascism is like, because in the South they know nothing else. All of this I am trying to get into my work. It is quite a job, as it cannot be done in a realistic manner. I have to symbols and symbols are very difficult to create, that is good strong ones. It takes me much longer to do a drawing than it took me to do a painting. And my drawings are very simple. So this is what I am doing, a series of drawings on ‘How a Negro sees the South’. If they are good I would like to have them to you, one and two at a time, but when you do see them there will be many, as I am working steadily...”

¹³

within a year, due to an experimental integration policy that was being pushed heavily by democrats, high officials, and the Secretary of War Robert F. Patterson. Also, with the backing of Edith Halpert, Lawrence was moved to one of the first integrated regimes. Halpert helped broker his transfer out of Florida and reassignment to the *U.S.S. Sea Cloud*

“Captain Carleton Skinner reclassified Lawrence as a specialist, third class in the Public Relations Branch so that he could work on his paintings full-time as an official combat artist. During World War II each of the military branches created, as an arm of its propaganda campaigns, war artist programs that could capture aspects of wartime service elusive to photography and print journalism, and Lawrence became of a member of this cohort. In October 1944 MoMA displayed eight paintings of his Coast Guard subjects

¹³ Jacob Lawrence letter to Edith Gregor Halpert, 1944 Jan.. Downtown Gallery records, 1824-1974, bulk 1926-1969. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Whitney.org. (2002). *Jacob Lawrence: Exploring Stories*. [online] Available at: https://whitney.org/www/jacoblawrence/meet/early_childhood.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

and his epic, sixty-piece *The Migration of the Negro Series* in its first solo exhibition for a Black painter.”¹⁴

It was by great misfortune, that many of the paintings that Lawrence produced while stationed overseas in places like Italy, England, India, and Egypt, were mysteriously lost. Nonetheless, Lawrence was able to recover from the loss of his works, when in 1946 he received a Guggenheim Fellowship to paint *The War Series*. The fourteen panels of the series present a narrative of the integration experience from the view of a Black man fighting for his country. The paintings paid homage to the lost paintings that Lawrence produced while in Egypt, with the flat dimensions, and silhouetted figures prominently displaying a side profile, and compositions in a way that is linear and spaced in a way that allows a frame for each figure; this style highlighted the influence of Egyptian wall paintings. The narrative was that of progression, and diversity in the American fabric. This can be seen in the obscurity of the Black and White figures in some of the works. Not only was it difficult to distinguish the figures by color, but also by assignment and rank. The military was a grand institution, so pushing integration on such a large scale was a taboo subject. Lawrence as a Black artist experiencing the beginnings of institutional integration, was able to capture the essence of the ideal, that in critical moments, Black and White Americans are ultimately the same. It is my perception, that it was during this point of his career, that Lawrence began to undergo a change. The various experiences that Lawrence went through during his time at war, exposed him to the more complicated, yet more restricted realities of his people. The Southern Black experience was one that Lawrence was so removed from by way of his parents

¹⁴Journals.uchicago.edu. (2015). *Battle Station MoMA: Jacob Lawrence and the Desegregation of the Armed Forces and the Art World | American Art: Vol 29, No 3*. [online] Available at: <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/684920?mobileUi=0> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

who migrated North, escaping the racial torments that they and their parents endured.

Experiencing the tensions of the South, breathing in the air that was thick with hatred for his skin color, feeling the fearsome eyes of White men scrutinizing him as he simply existed, being stripped for a year of his abilities as a painter while serving as a steward mate, these experiences, left a lasting impact on the life and perceptions of the painter. It was humiliating, undoubtedly an out of body experience for he, a Black man raised in the liberal Northern regions, had lived a life free enough to at least discuss the institutional misdeeds and social injustices of Black people.

But, even these basic freedoms, became, not enough for the Black artist. During his time in St. Augustine Florida, his correspondence with Edith Gregor Halpert, even read as someone on the inside looking in, an informant describing racism all the while unaware that he is engaging, in ways participating in it. Perhaps experiencing a loss of identity in his new environment strewn with the extremes of racism, he wrote as if the Southern Negro, and the Northern Negro were not synonyms, as if he was not within the lineage of the Southern Negroes that he described to Edith. As if she may see the difference. Even in trying to describe the concepts of his work to the white audiences that sponsored his efforts, the description of segregation becomes diluted so as to make the work more understandable; the truth of the matter being unfathomable, until lived.

Essentially Lawrence lived a double life; A Black man experiencing the multiplicities of racism, and an ally of one of the biggest White societal structures, the museum. Contributing to the lost narrative of African Americans, an undoubtedly necessary action, but one that only scratched the surface of a deeply rooted issue of inequality; Covering the issues but never quite uprooting it.

The question, can Black autonomy exist within a White structure? Why? Why not? These

questions are addressed by Lawrence and his fellow black artists in an open dialogue-- *The Black Artist in America: A Symposium*.

This meeting of the Black artistic minds, was held by African American artists, Romare Bearden, who acted as moderator, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Tom Lloyd, William Williams, Hale Woodruff, and of course Lawrence. The discussion was representative of the struggle of Black artists, lack of recognition, lack of acknowledgement within their own community, as due to a lack of education. Also the struggle of making a living as an artist, and the inevitable compromising of ones identity, as a Black artist that has reached the level of success that Lawrence had reached. The artists touched on the topics that had become so familiar to them, "The Black artists very existence being denied." Needless to say, the livelihoods of Black artists were compromised due to this erasure. Contributing to the erasure of Black artists, was the lack of knowledge within the Black communities. Blacks who were fortunate enough to receive an education, were not versed in the arts, and if taking a personal interest in the arts, such as the children of Jacob Lawrence's past at the Utopia Children's Center, Old Masters and contemporary white artist would be the primary point of study. The work of Black artists was therefore monopolized within the White community. The Black artists success was determined by White men, the advancement of Black artists became paradoxical, the slave and master paradigm being implemented in plain sight. Undoubtedly, this cycle was cruel and discouraging to many Black artist, who's expression did not please certain White audiences and was perhaps never introduced to Black audiences. Their art and their names began to fade from the narrative of American Art and History. This erasure, came close in contact with Lawrence, when he was

drafted into the segregated ranks of the Coast Guard, he too was unable to create. Had it not been for his correspondence with Edith Halpert, it is possible that he would not have been transferred to another fleet, where he was able to continue painting. On a more national scale, had it not been for the white allies of the civil rights movement, and other progressive movements, the advancement of Black people, and the intolerance of inequality, would have slowed exponentially. Can you imagine the frustration of this? Longing to liberate oneself from a racist society, but not being able to move freely within that society, ruled by the very ones you try to escape. The question of inclusion and recognition is posed by Romare Bearden: "...You said that the Black artist is unknown in the Black community. What could be done to have him better known? Within his own community and within the mainstream of American art?"¹⁵ Tom Lloyd gives his reply, "First I think he has to be accepted in the galleries; the museums have to recognize that he has something to contribute to his own culture, to the black communities, and I think they have failed miserably to do this. Sure, within the last couple of years I've heard about exhibitions dedicated to the accomplishments of the Black artist and I've been in some, but what has happened for the two hundred years before that? What has happened with some three hundred, four hundred art galleries in greater New York? What has happened with the museums?"¹⁶ Jacob Lawrence expounds further upon this sentiment, making powerful observations saying;

"Mr. Loyd asked what could be done, what can help. I think one thing we can do is just what we are doing now, and more of it. It's going to take education-- educating the white community to respect and recognize the intellectual capacity of Black artists. We've been

¹⁵ Bearden, Romare, et al. "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 27, no. 5, 1969, pp. 245–261. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3258415.

¹⁶ Bearden, Romare, et al. "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 27, no. 5, 1969, pp. 245–261. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3258415.

accepted in theater to a greater degree than we have in the fine arts. Why is this so? I think it's because in this area we are recognized to have to have great ability. But still, there's a psychological problem. You take a man like Bill Robinson, who never attains the same kind of recognition as Gene Kelly. They say we're supposed to be good cooks, but we've never been made chefs in the Waldorf-Astoria, we've never been asked to give cooking lessons on television. Why? Because this calls for a certain recognition on the part of the white community, that you have an intellectual capacity that either they don't want to recognize or are so brainwashed that they can't accept."¹⁷

Lawrence goes to express his experience on the demographic of the "Token Black" saying,

"On the other hand, none of us wants to be selected as 'the one and only' or 'one of the few' Mr. Woodruff and I have been participating in shows for a number of years, and the rest of you have come along-- I've seen your names. But none of us appreciates the idea of 'We'll accept *you* and this is it.'" It's going to take just what we're doing now to educate the white community. I think they must have a psychological block because they refuse to see and refuse to recognize what we can do. The mere fact that we're here, having this discussion, indicates this. We're always in *Negro* shows, not just shows. I don't know any other ethnic group that has been given so much attention but ultimately forgotten."¹⁸

It is evident in Lawrence's expression, that in his close affiliation with White people, artist, supporters, donors, and the museum, that Lawrence has experienced a level of ignorance and disingenuous understanding regarding the inequalities that are faced by Black artists, and people. He recognized himself and his work as a commodity of the White American story, his work was meant to complete the narrative in a way that was authentic, and epic, but not revered. The lack of respect, and reverence for African Americans experiencing the various levels of racism. It could be seen in subtle ways, even within the extent of inclusion. Through the words of White

¹⁷ Bearden, Romare, et al. "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 27, no. 5, 1969, pp. 245–261. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3258415.

¹⁸ Bearden, Romare, et al. "The Black Artist in America: A Symposium." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 27, no. 5, 1969, pp. 245–261. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3258415.

critics, who would minimise the wisdom and experiences of this artist. Lawrence experienced as much, when Leah Dickerman, who curated his Migration Series, said of the work “This 23-year old kid was looking at lynching, voter rights, riots in St. Louis of all places, the capricious incarceration of black men,” she said. “This gives us a sense of the long history of these concerns. ” She added: “We’re trying to show Lawrence’s deep, deep engagement with other contemporary work across mediums. His work is an incredibly innovative form of political speech.”¹⁹ Dickerman’s reference to him not being a learned man, enriched with personal experience, but as a kid, who was merely looking at and studying, racism and violence against those of his race, was minimizing in the most discreet way. In her wording of the statement, she separated Lawrence from the trauma of the violence, he was witnessing. In her description one could assume that this was not an egregious reality for a black man like Lawrence, his peers and family. More caution and reverence should have been extended towards the sensitive work of Lawrence, which transcended the structured space, fluorescent halls, and spacious rooms of galleries, and museums. These were the tumultuous lives that Lawrence’s kin existed in. It was not so far removed from Lawrence’s reality, as it was from his White critics and sponsors. Lawrence was well aware of this incompatible atmosphere of his work being viewed and critiqued by a White audience. Of this gap in true empathy he would say that he painted without worrying about who would see it. The paintings aren’t as concerned with a white gaze as they are with getting the story clear and right.²⁰ He was more dedicated to the idea of supplying the

¹⁹Lee, F. (2014). *Jacob Lawrence’s Great Migration Series Returns to MoMA*. [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/arts/design/jacob-lawrences-great-migration-series-returns-to-moma.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

²⁰Wolkoff, J. (2018). *A Closer Look at Jacob Lawrence’s “Migration Series,” the Masterpiece He Made at 23*. [online] Artsy.net. Available at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-closer-jacob-lawrences-migration-series-masterpiece-made-23> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

African American youth with a truly authentic narrative of Black history. He wanted to highlight “a great epic drama taking place in America. The Negro has been one of the great, I guess, focal points of this drama which we as Americans have experienced.”²¹ As Lawrence strove to correct history, he began to struggle. Living between two worlds, the world of a Black man surrounded by the Black intellectuals of Harlem, and a Black artist, who has reached a level of success that allowed him a glimpse into a world forbidden for most African Americans. This social duality, caused Lawrence to lose sight of himself, and contributed to the decline of his mental health.

Jacob Lawrence’s battle with depression was sparked by a conglomerate of his life's events from childhood to his admission into the Hillside Hospital in 1949. His paintings are truly telling of the issues surrounding the decline of his mental health. His *Migration Series*, and *The War Series* especially, which highlight the plight of his direct lineage. The child of migration, he had no sense of home and ownership. He adopted Harlem as his residence, and grew within the influences of that city; but his historic ties lay in the South. Upon his travels to the South, he discovered that there too, was no home, or roots that could be cultivated into a blooming success. He found little to no peace within his immediate surrounding with Black artists who could not, rather were barred from entry into the upper echelons of recognition within the community of fine art; and the White’s who would never recognize these egegrions as such. Caught in between these dichotomies, was Lawrence's unequivocal love for his art. Truly, Lawrence was a quiet soul who strove to paint and express in every condition. His depression was hereditary, Lawrence spoke of this. His mother, and poor blacks in general emerged in depression, and

²¹Mcfadden, S. (2015). *Jacob Lawrence’s Art as Journalism*. [online] TheNation.com. Available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/jacob-lawrences-art-journalism/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

masked with their skills of interior decoration. In conversation with an author Lawrence expressed:

“We lived in a deep depression. Not only my mother, but the poor people in general. In order to add something to their lives, they decorated their tenements and their homes in all of these colors. I’ve been asked, is anybody in my family artistically inclined? I’ve always felt ashamed of my response, and I always said no, not realizing that my artistic sensibility came from the ambience. I did not realize it was taking place. It’s only in retrospect that I realized that I was surrounded by art. You’d walk Seventh Avenue and look in the windows and you’d see all these colors in the depth of the depression.”²² Artistic expression and aesthetic literacy followed Lawrence throughout his life, and seemed to be his source of grounding in his vast movement through the world. In July 1949, Lawrence walked into Hillside Hospital in Queens, seeking treatment for depression. He stayed in the facility for four months, came home for the holidays, then checked himself back in on January 16, 1950, remaining for seven months. His treatment being funded, by Edith Halpert and the Downtown Gallery. While being treated, Lawrence continued to paint, working on a series of work, illustrating his experiences in the hospital. These works were exhibited within the Downtown Gallery in 1950, and included works such as *Sedation*, and *Depression*, works that differed greatly from his previous paintings. The paintings of the Hillside Hospital series “offered insight into the circumstances of mental illness and therapy, from the patients’ absorption in the occupational therapies of weaving and gardening to

²² Cary D. Wintz, Paul Finkelman 2004 Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance: K-Y. Published in 2004 by Routledge an imprint of the Taylor and Francis Group www.routledge.ny.com [Accessed 30. April 2019].



(Fig 13. Jacob Lawrence, *Sedation*, 1950)



(Fig 14. Jacob Lawrence, *Depression*,

1950)

the spiritless of the depressed. His paintings differed significantly from his other work because it was the only work that depicts exclusively white subjects. It also has subdued colors and people who appear resigned or in agony.”²³ Lawrence's self admission into Hillside Hospital, changed the trajectory of his painting style and career for the rest of his life. Instead of the dense, colorful, impassioned work of his early career, he began painting with less bold color and content, reminiscent of the work he created while inside the bleak walls of the institution that granted him solace.

His return to the world of the arts, was a graceful one, choosing the pathway of an educator. Being no longer satisfied with the representation he was receiving through Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery, he seized the opportunity to become a figure in the organizing of the arts; serving as president of the New York chapter of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1957. In 1958, he joined the faculty of Pratt Institute where he stayed until 1960. Though he was no longer producing work that was represented and circulated by a singular gallery such as Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery. Lawrence's repertuar continued to grow as he was commissioned to work on several murals, and honored through artists retrospectives at prominent galleries and museums. It is an undeniable fact, that Lawrence work, journaled an authentic narrative of the displacement of African Americans, the everlasting migratory experience, the subtleties, and bluntness of racism, and so forth. His work was the a part of the grand catalyst, for the visibility and equality of African Americans. Even so, there are some who believe, that Lawrence never took a direct stance of opposition towards white, and was not vocal

²³Brown, K. (2016). *Black History Art: Jacob Lawrence*. [online] KaliBrown.com/KaliJournals. Available at: <http://kalibrown.com/kalijournals/2016/2/12/black-history-art-jacob-lawrence> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

enough, in support of Black revolution, radicalism, or true liberation. Lawrence could have been seen as a representative of the change that Blacks wanted to see: true integration and equality. But Lawrence's approach was more covert, choosing the path of illustrator or as opposed to articulator. This age-old notion of separating art from the artist, applied to Lawrence in this particular way. Was he willing to risk his likability, and profitable career within the White community of fine art, to take a strong stance against the White people, whom had elevated his career to the point of global recognition within the artist community? Some would say no, and I would have to be included in that "say so". Lawrence maintained throughout his career, that his work was directly inspired by his life and experiences; nevertheless, his work could be seen as also objective in that the work was factual, but lacking that personal connection, and relation of the Black artist, not merely looking and studying, but experiencing the emotional turmoil that was caused by the daily trials he faced. The slightly passive nature of the words that he connected to the image, are reminiscent of one who is trying to be careful, due to the restrictions, of being a Black man editing the White man's vision. *The Migration Series*, gives an example of the cautious, passive nature of the words used to guide the viewer's through the series. Panel no. 14, whose caption reads "For African Americans there was no justice in southern courts." and panel no. 15, which reads "There were lynchings." also panel no. 16, which continues "After a lynching, the migration quickened." and lastly, panel no. 17, in which he writes, "Tenant farmers received harsh treatment at the hands of planters." These captions are displayed as cold, hard, facts. Devoid of a sense of emotion, it leaves me to wonder what type of connection Lawrence had to the paintings. Yes, as a Black artist, who experienced racism at the hands of Northern whites, Lawrence understood racism and prejudice; but in chronicling the ways in

which Southern African Americans experienced racism, the implication is that the life of Southern Blacks and Northern Blacks, were worlds apart, and that one was not directly linked to the next. Northern whites were indeed no less racist in their treatment of Black people, they were though, certainly more covert, and refined in the ways in which they kept African Americans subjected under white supremacy. Lawrence does make note of this in the later panels of The Migration Series. Panel no. 49 writes: "They found discrimination in the North. It was a different kind." And panel no. 50, which reads: "Race riots were numerous. White workers were hostile towards the migrant who had been hired to break strikes." And Furthermore panel no. 51 notes, "African Americans seeking to find better housing attempted to move into new areas. This resulted in the bombing of their new homes." Notice in Lawrences descriptions, he omits pointed descriptions, never naming the protagonists and the antagonists, leaving that to the eye, and the interpretation of the one viewing the painting. This omission is a show of the parameters that were unspoken by "The Museum" synonymously Whites, but known not to cross by Blacks. If Lawrence had made descriptions that were more pointed, and emotionally connected, he ran the risk of offending his primary audience. By presenting his series in the way that he did, Lawrence allowed time and space to penetrate the message. Whites could look at the series and also feel that disconnection; they could have space to believe "This is an issue of the past, an issue of the South. This could never be about me, or my peers." To take on the duty as a spokesperson for an entire race, to represent revolution, was not a foreseen future for Lawrence. As a man born Black, in a time of racial turmoil, he was an artists, simply bound to create. The weight of his fame, and dedication to the visibility and representation of his race, caused cracks in his foundation. His seeking treatment for his declining mental health, and his decision to not become

the face of Black radicalism during the height of pivotal Black activist movement such as the Black Panther Party during the 1960's, was a decision Lawrence made to preserve himself as a man, and artists whose work had proven itself to be monumental, and progressive for the advancement of contemporary African American art. How forthright and radical Lawrence was during his career and lifetime, is something that I have to handle with gloves on, afterall, I can never imagine the anxiety that went along with his livelihood teetering on the emotional ebb and flow of white idealism. During his time, Lawrences work was possibly as radical as it could be, without it being censored, and eventually erased.

From Lawrence's release from Hillside Hospital, till his death, on June 9th, 2000, Lawrence made work that carried remnants from the sedation of his stay at the hospital. Perhaps his being amongst the mentally unstable, gave him a true sense of equality, each person, Black and White, being enraptured in a world of their own creation. Mental health was expressed individually, within a uniformed structure, while within American society, such a clear divide had been created between races, and this divide, affected every aspect of African Americans social autonomy. Lawrence work expresses a sense of introspection, reminiscent of the solitude, and pressureless environment of the hospital. Even in death, Jacob Lawrence's legacy remains monumental. His murals and paintings populate museums, galleries, hospitals, and the nostalgia of a lost or forbidden homestead felt by many African Americans.

Chapter 4: Kara Walker

The strongest yet least heard voices are that of the Black woman. This rings true for Kara Walker, a female contemporary African American artist, whose work explores racial stereotypes, gender and violence. While the work of Kerry James Marshall, and Jacob Lawrence embody the ideal Black body; docile, and inward, a quiet strength residing inside of them. Kara Walker's work contradicts the later form, and embodies rage and direct action. Narrating the African American experience, takes the form of black silhouetted figures, with stark facial expressions, and theatrical movements. Born in California in 1969, at the age of thirteen, Kara moved with her father Larry Walker to Atlanta Ga when he had accepted a teaching position as an artist at Georgia State University. She grew up amongst the arts, her father Larry, painting in a style similar to his daughters in that it encompassed the darkness of the human figure and experience.



(fig 15. Larry Walker, *Intruder* 1996)



(Fig 16. Larry Walker, *Veiled Wall Spirits*)

As a result of migrating to the South, Kara Walker experienced the full brunt of racism in Stone Mountain Ga, where klu klux klan meetings and rallies were still being regularly held. She

recalls being called racial slurs often in integrated high school, and even amongst her white friends and acquaintances, dialogue surrounding african americans always held an air of distaste and prejudice. This experience was so different from the liberal mindset of her early childhood in California; “I just didn't get it” she states “I didn't know what the story was that made people behave in very particular ways that I thought were prescribed and unnatural. I started looking for my own point of origin: maybe the point of origin was being American, or being black, or being a woman. I thought, I'll start with the foundation of this idea of a place, of America, and then work my way forward.”²⁴ As she grew older, Kara’s realizations of racial boundaries, and tensions broadened and became more profound in her work as an artist and thinker. Her work became a linear illustration of African American history, in all its violence, internalized rage, and hatred. From highschool onward, Walker faced the racial divide that was so clearly drawn in the antiquated South; she recalls the reality of being “forced to determine your allegiance.” Racial stereotypes continued to be pushed upon Kara throughout her education, as well as through college, where she attended The Atlanta College of Arts. She felt the magnitude of racial tension and identity heavily during this time. Surrounded by professors and fellow academics, she found herself submerged in a world raced based expectation. It was while studying art as an undergraduate in Atlanta that Walker first felt this pull: an expectation, from her professors and fellow students alike, that as a Black artist she should be striving to represent the Black experience positively. "I was making big paintings, with mythological themes. When I started

²⁴Barnett, L. (2013). *Kara Walker's art: shadows of slavery*. [online] theGuardian.com. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/10/kara-walker-art-shadows-of-slavery> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

The Art Story. (2019). *Kara Walker Biography, Life & Quotes*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theartstory.org/artist-walker-kara-life-and-legacy.htm> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

painting black figures, the white professors were relieved, and the black students were like, 'She's on our side'. These are the kinds of issues that a white male artist just doesn't have to deal with.”

²⁵ Kara almost succumbed to the pressures and expectations of those living outside of her experience; but she remembered her influences, a major one being artist Adrian Piper, a performance artist who used self as canvas and executed performance pieces based on race and gender. Walker was influenced by Black movement, and how Black bodied had permeated the far reaches of America. She became obsessed with grasping at all things that imply Blackness. In a conversation with Moma in 1999, Walker revealed she had cultivated a habit in response to a pattern that she had noticed within herself. It stemmed from that Southern antebellum tradition of segregation that had been instilled in Blacks and upheld by Whites. It was a way of life, that invisible line that Lawrence too, experienced in the South; the line African Americans could not cross. This line for Kara existed as the set parameters that African American emotion, success and ambition inhabited. Dominated Southern Blacks lived in fear, and instilled within their children, these parameters, Whites encouraged the practice of domination within their children, and of course, remnants of this cycle are visible to this day. These projected stereotypes of African Americans in the South, and elsewhere was “Blackness that's exotic, animalistic, or savage; or noble and strong and forceful--worth putting on display, something grander than grand.”²⁶ These faux characteristics began to penetrate Kara’s mindset and perception of herself, and she began to perform the ideals that were prescribed to Blackness. To break free from the

²⁵Barnett, L. (2013). *Kara Walker's art: shadows of slavery*. [online] theGuardian.com. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/10/kara-walker-art-shadows-of-slavery> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

²⁶ Moma.org. (2019). *Kara Walker*. [online] Available at: https://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/1999/conversations/trans_kwalker.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

constructed restraints of the South, and of her skin, she dove into her art, becoming introspective and meticulous in the theories that she contrived about Blackness and African American history.

She revealed:

“I started a couple of years ago keeping a notebook of words and ideas and images, and just about anything that I could to process what Blackness was and is all about for me--very personal writings, along with just clippings, nothing that was art, just a way of getting at ideas. I was, at the time, interested in Adrian Piper’s political self-portraits, and maybe the way she could discuss an incident in her childhood and merge it with a larger political issue or agenda. Also [in] collecting little bits of ... Black Americana from flea markets around the area, but nothing of the sort that serious collectors might find ... sometimes reproductions of older works, things that are being pulled out of the attics and mass-produced for the benefit of this newly aware black collecting audience...”²⁷

furthermore Walker also drew influence directly from her father Larry Walker. Being the daughter of an artist, Kara was exposed early on to the creativity and complexity of art. At the age of three she knew that she wanted to become an artist, and her father encouraged her endeavors. When asked by the New York Times, in what ways her father's art was influential to her, she expressed “ It’s very rare to have an artist parent who also encourages the art of his children. I spent a lot of time with my dad growing up, hanging around the university art department and accidentally watching life-drawing classes for adults, which I was embarrassed about!...There’s this heaviness in the work that is really affecting. It’s affecting for me as an

²⁷ Moma.org. (2019). *Kara Walker*. [online] Available at: https://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/1999/conversations/trans_kwalker.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

artist because I know what I go through in the studio to realize the work. So seeing my dad as just not my dad but as an artist who is struggling with mortality is humanizing and scary.”²⁸

These influences and personal habits that Kara acquired furthered her artistic voice, and gave way to the style in which she became best known for. Grotesque, Contemporary History Painting; this is one way in which i would describe the content that Kara created. The black silhouettes that became Kara’s staple execution of illustrating the Black experience, is what truly peaked the interest of the art world. There are many reasons why Kara chose silhouetted figures to express her experience grappling with her history. The silhouettes, directly called attention to antiquity in its resemblance of Victorian middle class portraiture and illustrations. More importantly, for Walker, it simplified the frenzy of working through illustrating the loaded nature of being African American. The cut outs were straightforward, lacking facial expression, Walker relied solely on body movement to express meaning and emotion in her characters. Describing her process in deciding that silhouettes where the most adequate way to represent her narrative, Walker says

“While I was working on drawings, keeping a notebook, I was really searching for a format to sort of encapsulate, to simplify complicated things--it's very difficult to look at words and images over and over again. And some of it spoke to me as: ‘it's a medium--historically, it's a craft--and it's very middle-class.’ It spoke to me in the same way that the minstrel show does--it's middle class White people rendering themselves Black, making themselves somewhat invisible, or taking on an alternate identity because

²⁸Nytimes.com. (2019). *Kara Walker Talks to One of Her Biggest Influences: Her Father*. [online] Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/09/t-magazine/art/kara-walker-father-larry-art.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

of the anonymity ... and because the shadow also speaks about so much of our psyche.

You can play out different roles when you're rendered Black, or halfway invisible.”²⁹

In grappling with the psyche of African Americans, and Whites obsessed with imitating African Americans, Walker begins to take power away from the racial aggressors, White supremacy, and the whitewashing of art history. She goes on to explore all options and explanations regarding the African American experience and perception; going so far as to acknowledge the “creature comforts” of White supremacy, it is all America has known postcolonialism. She expresses “I knew that if I was going to make work that had to deal with race issues, they were going to be full of contradictions. Because I always felt that it's really a love affair that we've got going in this country, a love affair with the idea of it [race issues], with the notion of major conflict that needs to be overcome and maybe a fear of what happens when that thing is overcome-- And, of course, these issues also translate into [the] very personal: Who am I beyond this skin I'm in? beyond this place where I've been changed?”³⁰ These propositions bombarded her mind, and she worked with a fury that was reminiscent of the influence of European neo-impressionists who painted with such a hatred for the medium, that the work seemed rushed, and aggressive, dripping with sarcasm, and a hidden conversation between artist and medium. Kara was introduced to this language when in the 1980's German Expressionist and Neo-Expressionist art arrived in Atlanta in the mid- or late-1980s, Walker found her calling. It seemed to her that

²⁹ Moma.org. (2019). *Kara Walker*. [online] Available at: https://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/1999/conversations/trans_kwalker.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

³⁰ Moma.org. (2019). *Kara Walker*. [online] Available at: https://www.moma.org/interactives/projects/1999/conversations/trans_kwalker.html [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

"They hate themselves, they hate the world, and they hate painting."³¹ What also inspired her process was the physical labor that went into displaying her work. Using an exacto knife to cut out the large silhouetted figurines, and installing it in a way that furthered the story-book like romantic scenes that she depicted. Her most well known installation, which kickstarted her infamous career was titled *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994) This lifesize monument to the Southern Black narrative, was derived from interpreting close readings of texts such as Margaret Mitchell's famous Civil War era novel, *Gone with the Wind* (1963); also a passage in Thomas Dixon, Jr's *The Clansman* a staple klu klux klan text devoted to the manipulative power of the "tawny negress", that is, the negress that is invited into the hierarchal White patriarchy by willing her sexual prowess over weaker, susceptible White males. She infiltrates these systems only to destroy the foundation of it. This "Tawny Negress, is revealed in the title of Kara's work *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*. The installation mimics the constructed anecdote of the tawny negress, and the stereotypes surrounding Blacks living in the traditional southern social climate. The installation was fashioned inside of a cyclorama, a popular attraction of the late 19th century, popularized by an Irish painter who wanted to submerge viewers of his war paintings, into the battle field directly. The engulfing nature of the cyclorama, gave Kara's work that exact cinematic effect, and bombarded the viewers with the reality of their own subconscious. From a distance, the work inside of the cyclorama, gives a general feeling of romanticism, the silhouetted figures each engaged in a world of their own. But as one approaches the scene, the

³¹Fernandes, A. (2010). *Creating Melodramas in Silhouettes: Kara Walker*. [online] Mentalfloss.com. Available at: <http://mentalfloss.com/article/23776/creating-melodramas-silhouettes-kara-walker> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

truly shocking and gruesome nature of what is being displayed, comes to be realized. The details of the work include a male and female couple engaged in what is the beginning of a passionate kiss, but an extra pair of legs, are seen coming from under the dress of the woman, while her own legs seem to be animal like, having the structure of a goats. Moving along the installation, a child is seen strangling a duck, and offering it to an elongated, boat like figure of a Black woman, her back floating on water. The most shocking figures are pictured doing explicit sexual acts including a young Black girl, performing oral sex on a young White male. In a similar way, a young Black boy is pictured floating away into the air, propelled by grotesquely enlarged falice. the young White male recieving falacio, seemingly exalting his disappearance by raising his arms towards the sky. Another Black woman can be seen, pulling babies from between her legs, both being thrown into the river below. Lasty, a Black woman in slave like attire, is seen being elevated by the figure of a man whose head and torso is thrust into her skirt, only his legs can be seen hoisting the body of the Black woman; broom in hand, surprised, and spitting, something, out of her mouth. Surrounding the parameters, and framing the entire play like scene, are old moss trees, looming and intense and romantic, these details that Walker included truly set the tone for the old Southern dialect she aimed to convey.



(Fig 17. *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart* 1994, Kara Walker)

Every figure is charged with aggression and is offensive in nature, and complies with the stereotypes intended for Black bodies to uphold, the Tawny Negress of Dixon's *The Clansmen*, open to all sexual advances, willing even. The Black man only visible, if for his penis. The Black mother, who is neglectful and uncaring of her children. All of these actions that are being portrayed in Walkers work, is an acknowledgment of these stereotypes, and a form of disarming the creators of these stereotypes. The origins of these stereotypes go back much farther than Walkers generation, but of course these conceptions were taught through generations, and the remnants of these racist ideologies remains to this day. Walkers use of these racist tropes and antebellum jargon, enables her with the the power of "the master". She takes these words, and

these images of Black livelihood, and throws it into the faces of the descendants of racists, of discreet racist, ignorant Whites, and uneducated, unrealised Blacks. There are those White viewers who are aware of the underlying implications of race in American society, and those who are aware are shocked, but grateful for the reaffirmation that the world that they live in is unjust, and that there is work to be done still, in regards to racial equality, these are the obvious facts, exaggerated though they may be by Walker's work. This recognition may not go beyond the walls of the room in which her work is being displayed, but the acknowledgment, or recognition of what Walker is trying to convey through her work, is if anything, half a step in the right direction. Many though, viewed Kara's work as grotesque and crude and only that. These sentiments were shared by Whites who could never expect this type of internal confrontation, and Blacks who could not understand, or possibly envied Walker's display of power and freedom. In fact Walker received the most criticism from Black artist, including Betye Saar. when in 1997 Walker was the second-youngest person ever to receive a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Grant, fellow African American artist Betye Saar led a campaign against Walker's work, sending letters to officials in the art world, asking, "Are African-Americans being betrayed under the guise of art?" Saar along with other members of the Black community were unsettled by the ways in which Kara was allowing Black imagery to be consumed by a White audience. Saar released a statement saying "I felt the work of Kara Walker was sort of revolting and negative and a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children; that it was basically for the amusement and the investment of the White art establishment."³² In some ways, Saar's

³²Sargent, A. (2017). *Kara Walker Showed Me the Horror of American Life*. [online] Vice. Available at: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/59ywgz/kara-walker-showed-me-the-horror-of-american-life [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

assessment of the consumerism of Walkers art was true. White audiences who enjoyed Walkers work, saw the intended message, but took delight in the fact that their livelihoods were not compromised by this knowledge, or by Walkers subtle accusations. They could walk away unscathed beyond the walls of the galleries and museums where her work is displayed. Perhaps this also propelled Saar's disregard of Walkers work, it was a reminder of her reality, the quasi fixed reality of African Americans living under an unjust social, economic, and judicial system. A reminder that only we can suffer from racism in America, while Whites can relive and enjoy the labor of our ancestors. The divided experience of viewing Walkers work was made clear in an article written Nicholas Powers, a contributor to *The Independent*, a New York City-based progressive monthly newspaper that covers news, culture and grassroots social movement. He writes about his experience viewing another of Walkers infamous works *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) , an enormous sculpture housed inside of the Domino Sugar refinery plant. Created to pay homage to the labor of slaves working sugar cane fields, of course, the sculpture is loaded with history and meaning for the Black body and history, but as Nicholas Powers was braced for, the space was overrun by a sea of White visitors, who by that time, had gentrified Brooklyn a former predominantly minority based borough, where the installation was located. They permeated the event space, and to Powers anguish, showed no respect to the work of Walker, nor the history she represented through her work. Powers describes his experience, writing-- "The anxiety increased when I saw the factory — in line, nearly everyone was white.

Pbs.org. (2019). *Culture Shock: You Decide: The Art of Kara Walker: The Critics*. [online] Available at: <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/provocations/kara/3.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

The alarm rang louder. The ‘alarm’ is a reflex most minorities have, it’s a rising anxiety that signals you are surrounded by people too privileged to know they’re hurting you.



(fig 18.

Kara Walker *A subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, 2014)

Or who would not care if they did. It can beep quietly. Or blare like a foghorn. The alarm is part of the psychological package that W.E.B. Du Bois described in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk* as, double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others.” As Powers traversed through the space and around Walkers monumental sculpture, his anxieties came to fruition.

“Anger shot up my body like a hot thermometer. Face flushed, I walked to the Mammy sphinx. Couples posed in front of it, smiling as others took their photos. So here it was,

an artwork about how Black people's pain was transformed into money was a tourist attraction for them. A few weeks ago, I had gone to the 9/11 museum and no one, absolutely no one, posed for smiling pictures in front of the wreckage. I forced myself to go the backside of the statue and saw there what I expected to see, White visitors making obscene poses in front of the ass and vulva of the 'Subtlety.' A heavy sigh fell out me. 'Don't they see that this is about rape?' I muttered as another visitor stuck out his tongue."³³

The invisibility that Powers felt in that moment is all too familiar to myself and countless other African Americans. Blacks have been subjected to a level of invisibility, which requires us to carry the burdens of racism on our own backs, while Whites carry on, maybe unaffected, maybe mocking, maybe showing reverence, but never bearing the brunt of their ancestors creation. Walker is fully aware of all of these things. The complacency of White viewers, the displeasure, misunderstanding, and judgment of Black viewers, but she also knew that the revolution can not be carried of her shoulders alone. Throughout her career, Walker has made it clear that she has grown tired of the stereotypes that continue to plague her, even through the liberation of her work. She has grappled with, and artistically expressed the meaning and feeling of Blackness through her hands, but now comes the expectation of fixing these problems, not only visualizing them "Ms. Walker is, as she writes in the artist statement for her new show at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York, tired of 'having a voice' or worse, 'being a role model.' She is fed up with 'being a featured member of my racial group and/or gender niche.' She also notes that her new work is not "activist" and we shouldn't expect answers from her: "I roll my eyes, fold my arms and wait."³⁴ Some have regarded this stance of Walkers, as irresponsible. Certainly, the attitude

³³Powers, N. (2014). *Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit*. [online] Independent.org. Available at: <https://independent.org/2014/06/why-i-yelled-at-the-kara-walker-exhibit/> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

³⁴Mzezewa, T. (2017). *Opinion | Kara Walker Is Tired of Talking. But Her Canvases Scream..* [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/opinion/kara-walker-is-tired-of-talking-but-her-canvases-scream.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

exudes a stubbornness, but this stubbornness is not against her race, it is rather against the ideal that it is on the shoulders of Black people, to fix the issue of racial discrimination. While Walker creates stunning visuals to represent the history, and present struggles of African Americans, her work is not a foretelling of the future for Black people. It is a response to a struggle that she deals with daily, an anxiety that will live with her forever. She worry's for her race, and for the future of Black people, in her view, there is no end in sight to the racist practices that are so deeply ingrained in the American fabric. It is so blatant and so deeply affects her life and the life of her family. Within recent years, Walker made a point of showing, how racism still permeates American society, despite widespread claims of immense social progression. During the height of African American progression, the election of President Obama, the first African American to ever be voted into the presidential office, many believed that racism was a sin of the past. Walker however, was not convinced, after she experienced racism in plain sight from the deep corners of the South to the presumed social sophistication of the North.

“She took a road trip last year with her daughter from Brooklyn, where she lives, to the southern states. They visited diners where the heads of old white men turned to give them "the 20-second stare". They swam in a motel pool, watching the other (white) bathers suddenly vanish; Walker heard a small girl say to her father: 'I thought there were no niggers here.' Then there is the rise of the Tea Party movement, and the distasteful obsession with Barack Obama's skin colour. "There's so much suspicion around having a biracial president," she says, "around Obama's presence on the world stage – the fact that the Tea Party gets coverage as anything other than a fringe group. There's nothing Obama can say or do as a black man that they're [willing] to hear."³⁵

³⁵Barnett, L. (2013). *Kara Walker's art: shadows of slavery*. [online] theGuardian.com. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2013/oct/10/kara-walker-art-shadows-of-slavery> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019].

Grappling with the realities of racism, creating art to libertate herself from the evils that surround her, and being criticised for even that, undoubtedly has take a toll on Walker, just as much as the previous African American artist I have studied here. She has shown disdain and exasperation with the issues facing Black Americans, and the critics who coin her work as too radical, and somehow betraying of modern day African Americans; What many fail to realise, is that “Her finger-wagging critics are missing the point when they go after her artist statement, which is nothing less than a big middle finger to our current culture of flame wars and empty words. Her statement is another way of saying: Ignore the hot air. Open your eyes and look at the work. The work is saying something strong and clear. It said to this viewer that this country is sick and perhaps we congratulated ourselves too much and too early for moving forward. Progress can so quickly crumble into chaos.”³⁶ Walker continues to create work that pushes the boundaries of black creativity and response. The refuses to be subdued, and to have her radicalism diluted; after all, the struggle of being a woman, African American and an artist is not one that is softened or reduced.

Kerry James Marshall, Jacob Lawrence, and Kara Walker, share more commonalities than one may imagine, in exploring the success and plights of each individual artist, I was able to identify the ways in which each artist has built off of one anothers, the evolution of Black artists was never singular. Marshall, Lawrence, and Walker all took advantage of stereotypes used against African Americans to recreate a narrative that was based in a lived experience, not

³⁶ Mzezewa, T. (2017). *Opinion | Kara Walker Is Tired of Talking. But Her Canvases Scream..* [online] Nytimes.com. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/14/opinion/kara-walker-is-tired-of-talking-but-her-canvas-scream.html> [Accessed 30 Apr. 2019]

fabricated assumptions. The starkly black faces of the characters used, the scenes and setting that embody the history of migration, the sarcasm, the subtle humors and discomforts, all come from a place of commonality between these Black artists, and which is shared amongst Black Americans. Each artists approach to confronting the museum, took on a life of its own, as we know, art once it has been created and displayed, is subjected to the personal narrative that the viewer finds within the work. To find the grander meanings behind the work of these artist, would require an adequate amount of understanding, empathy, and research; it is unfortunate that these artists, rarely and inadequately, receive the analytical reverence that they require, and deserve.

Despite this, ultimately, these artist create solely as humans who desire to express a range of emotions, this simple human desire is often times lost in the chaos of their lived realities, but I intend to continue to delve into the intuition that drove me to explore the work of these artist, and connects one Black body to another, our history, our strength, our creativity, our narrative, and our homes that we carry within us through the evolving African American diaspora. It is my hope, that Black artist will continue to create the work that is necessary, the art that they want, and that the institution of the arts, art history, and the museum needs.

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SELMA BURKE artist