

Audience, Agency and Identity in Black Popular Culture

Shawan M. Worsley



**Audience, Agency
and Identity in Black
Popular Culture**

Studies in African American History and Culture

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*This book is dedicated to my husband
Marcus Andre Worsley.*

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1 Race, Racism and Black Popular Culture

“subjective objectification” is at the heart of most of my work. i am fascinated by creating myself simultaneously as subject and object. i find it empowering to examine my objectified positions in the structure of our society, then reconfigure myself as the subject of art, recreating myself as art-object, and thus re-objectifying myself on my own terms (subjectively).”

Damali Ayo

Alice Randall, Kara Walker, and the publishers of *The Source: Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture and Politics* are representative of a wave of late 20th century artists who insistently create black cultural products that incorporate degrading images and narratives of black identity. These artists hold no allegiance to traditional artistic strategies of black uplift, whose historic goal has been to rework anti-black stereotypes into more positive images. Rather, these artists assert that the continued currency of racist black stereotypes is due, in part, to the failure of these strategies. In response, these black cultural producers present anti-black stereotypes in their original forms and encourage audiences not to ignore, but to explore them. People have responded to these well-known cultural producers with extraordinary acclaim and widespread censure. In this book, I explore these artists’ decision to create controversial black cultural products with racist appropriations, the effects of this work upon audiences, and the cultural implications of this production and consumption upon late 20th century racial politics.

INTRODUCING THE EXAMPLES

Alice Randall, an African American, is the author of the novel, *The Wind Done Gone* (2001), a parody of Margaret Mitchell’s beloved story of the South, *Gone With the Wind* (1936). When Randall released *The Wind Done Gone* it garnered large amounts of press coverage and topped best seller lists such as *The New York Times* for weeks. Randall’s novel revolves around one of Mitchell’s most treasured characters, Mammy, and a character that Mitchell never considered: Cynara. Cynara is the daughter of

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Mammy and Gerald O'Hara, the white slave master and owner of the plantation. She is thereby the mulatta half-sister of Scarlett O'Hara, Mitchell's infamous protagonist. Deviating from traditional depictions by African Americans of the enslaved black woman as virtuous and heroic, Randall depicts Cynara as a jezebel. Randall consciously does so as a means to explore the contemporary potency and profitability of this entrenched stereotype of black women.

African American visual artist Kara Walker is most known for her signature work: life-sized silhouette characters that she cuts out of black paper and then pastes on the walls of museums in panoramic fashion. The scenes encapsulate the viewer, whose shadow often falls alongside the silhouettes as the viewer explores the installation. Walker's exhibits are full of demeaning black character types, such as the coon and the pickaninny, derived from racist ideology of the antebellum slave-holding South. These exaggerated characters exhibit slavery's worst racist assumptions as they engage in brutal murders, participate in debased public sexual acts, and urinate and defecate at will.

The artworld has applauded Walker's disturbing representations. She has exhibited at many of the most prestigious museums, including the Whitney Museum of Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Moria Art Museum in Tokyo, and the Centre d'Art Contemporain in Geneva. In addition to an impressive list of exhibitions, Walker's paper cutouts have sold for as much as \$329,600. In 1997, only four years after emerging on the art scene, she received the MacArthur Foundation "genius" grant. Today she is a leading contemporary artist and a professor at Columbia University.

The Source is one of the best-selling magazines for rap music and hip-hop culture. Since emerging in 1988, *The Source* has dominated the print industry with its highly influential album rating system (mics), its creation of the first awards show solely for rap music, its high-profile editors and writers, and its longevity and remarkable sales. Recognized as a highly acclaimed brand name for hip-hop music and culture, *The Source* has led the industry in relationship to those who cover hip-hop.¹ In 2000, the magazine industry rewarded *The Source* with a nomination for a National Magazine Award, in the category of General Excellence, for a magazine with a circulation of 400,000 to 1 million. It is difficult to ascertain the company's exact earnings during this time-period, but it is certain that the magazine was garnering unprecedented revenue in the tens of millions. *The Source* has outperformed nearly every other hip-hop magazine, and even managed to outsell *Vibe*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone* and *Details* on newsstands during the time period of this study, 1989–1999.

The Source creates a highly ambivalent representation of a Hip-Hop Nation during the ten-year period I investigated. The model citizen of this Hip-Hop Nation appears to be a black, uneducated male, who resides in the ghettos of the United States, regularly engages in violent acts, demeans

himself and women, and holds materialistic gain as his highest priority. This male is sexist, homophobic, and ethnocentric.

Although of vastly different genres, Randall, Walker, and *The Source* hold in common the fact that they each strategically employ pre-existing, typically racist narratives of black identity in order to dislodge them from their positions of dominance. Randall's characters first appear to be typical antebellum stereotypes, yet once she inserts unexpected information regarding their inner lives, these characters prove complex and largely unfamiliar. Walker, alternatively, physically recreates racist images and then magnifies their inconsistencies in the hope of disrupting their power. The editors at *The Source*, exercising an even different strategy, appropriate seemingly negative narratives and then rework them in what they believe to be empowering ways. In their own way, each of these cultural producers creates works that embody and revise stereotypical and demeaning imagery. Their goal is to present a counter-narrative that empowers contemporary black people. These artists believe that their work is a necessary response to the racial circumstances of this historical moment and to the ways in which race is continually ascribed and disavowed.

I address two central concerns regarding these black cultural products with racist appropriations. First, considering the vast influence of historical black artistic traditions of racial uplift and the pressure to conform to these ideals, I explore the key factors that inspired these artists to appropriate racist images and thereby transgress these particular black artistic expectations. I perform textual analyses upon Randall's *The Wind Done Gone*, Walker's silhouettes, and select columns in *The Source* to probe the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that have led these artists to engage in such a controversial cultural strategy. I consider the forces, both within and outside of black communities, that simultaneously inspired and constrained these black cultural producers, who chose not to counter negative images with positive ones. In addition, I evaluate the controversies and criticism in response to their work to detail the complex racial politics of the late 20th century, that manifested culturally in the creation and reception of these black cultural products.

Second, I explore the intriguing ramifications of these decisions upon audiences who were exposed to such controversial work. I consider critics' concerns that these types of cultural messages are indeed harmful to people. Through audience reception studies, I reconsider critics' assumptions of the power of cultural messages. I question if messages embodied within cultural products can manipulate one's identity and subjectivity so furtively that the person remains unaware of the influence. Rather than viewing culture as an all-powerful force upon a person's identity and behavior, I illustrate a multi-directional process at play, in which people actively accept, revise, and redefine particular aspects of cultural narratives. Through innovative studies of audience response, I reveal a complex process of reception, in which cultural consumers critically negotiate various ideological

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messages embodied within culture. This process is an important aspect of cultural consumption that shifts the ways in which we should evaluate black cultural products that contain racist appropriations.

RACIAL POLITICS AND BLACK POPULAR CULTURE

In his useful characterization of the contemporary racial milieu, Keith Byerman articulates how a dialectic of racism and racelessness informs the cultural works of African Americans. Contemporary black cultural producers battle to maintain the significance of race to American life, at the same time that they must critique representations and conditions that are thought to have little or no impact on black lives.² These cultural producers speak to many issues, including social desires to “be beyond race;” the backlash against affirmative action; the increasing globalization of the economy, which has led to a marked decrease in low-skilled jobs that have historically fed the black middle class; the gentrification of largely black inner-city areas with little affordable alternative housing; an increase in federal prisons, in which blacks are incredibly overrepresented; and harsher laws such as the 3 Strike Rule designed to keep blacks in the prison system.

These cultural producers also consider how such bleak circumstances could exist simultaneously with the contemporary heightened visibility of black millionaires. The glorification of these exceptions ironically obscures the social realities of the millions of black poor. Black cultural producers witness the mainstreaming of hip-hop culture and rap music, which makes it appear that society has accepted the black communities from which hip-hop culture and rap music emerged. Yet the music industry, in which blacks hold little power, performs violence upon black people through its relentless production of oversexualized, criminalized, hyper-materialistic black representations. Today’s society can embrace multiculturalism at the same time that it finds a rationale for racist practices, such as racial profiling, in the name of patriotism and national security. Black people still believe in the “American Dream,” despite the fact that there are fewer blacks in many colleges and universities now than in the 1970s. Black cultural producers who incorporate stereotypes into their art both reflect and respond to these seemingly schizophrenic aspects of the late 20th century.

At the center of some black cultural producers’ appropriation of racist stereotypes is an acknowledgement of the formidable legacy of slavery, which has caused many of these seemingly incompatible aspects of American society. Slavery is a critical ideological, cultural, and economic influence. Although African Americans today did not live as slaves, they nonetheless continue to experience the trauma of slavery. Indeed, slavery fits the definition of a cultural trauma, which Ron Eyerman, quoting Neil Smelser, defines as “a memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a)

laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions."³ Consequently, not everyone needs to feel or even experience trauma directly. The group's consistent reinterpretation and re-presentation of its collective memory of the event is motivated by future generations' recollection of trauma and the fact that these generations are consistently associated with and identified by it.

While I wholeheartedly assert that slavery was not a totalizing system of dehumanization and that blacks endured to construct vibrant and resistant constructions of blackness and black identity, one cannot ignore the residuals of slavery manifested in entrenched demeaning stereotypes. Stereotypes inherited from slavery raise a fear and loathing of blackness, at the same time that they present belittled and disparaged black subjects. They create restrictive boundaries that limit and narrow the possibilities for black subjectivity, which has an incredibly damaging effect on society's image and treatment of black people. Stereotypes are the ghosts of slavery that haunt African Americans. Although most people would likely agree that black stereotypes are gross mischaracterizations, mammys, coons, brutes, and jezebels abound in American popular culture.

Black stereotypes are a driving influence of Randall's novel, Walker's silhouettes, and *The Source* magazine. These cultural producers incorporate derogatory images into their work and then make use of a number of strategies to disrupt and undermine these stereotypes. For example, Randall's protagonist, Cynara, is the willing concubine of a married Confederate soldier. She embodies the devastating assumption that the enslaved black woman is a seductress, whose one goal is to lure the white man into an illicit sexual relationship. Randall, however, takes Cynara through a journey in which Cynara gains knowledge that makes her rethink the benefits of her life as this white man's mistress. In literary terms, the stereotype of the jezebel must compete for narrative dominance within Cynara's shifting identity.

Similarly, Walker's silhouettes depict black characters acting out in violent, obscene, and demeaning ways that appear to validate racist ideologies. These characters seem to justify slavery in the antebellum South and the supposed criminality of these slaves' descendants, the contemporary black community. Walker, however, magnifies these stereotypical and racist images until they appear at their most absurd and illogical. It becomes increasingly difficult to take these characters' behaviors as truthful and accurate.

Lastly, *The Source* also depicts negative notions about blacks by championing an image of a Hip-Hop Nation whose ideal citizen is a violent, ghetto black male, who glorifies in sexual-gratification, criminal activity, and material consumption. However, the magazine also points to the hostile ideological legacy surrounding the black subject, and insists upon a worldview that subverts by valorizing the negative. The magazine takes pride in what society says is bad, and seeks to empower young black males whom society often labels as outcasts.

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Consequently, within each of these cultural products, racist narratives lose their power because they cannot maintain their demeaning and defeating characterizations. These cultural producers' goal is not to buttress stereotypes. Rather, in their use of racist imagery, these cultural producers critically expose faulty assumptions regarding black identity to empower people to resist these stereotypes' racist appeal.

BLACK CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND RACIST APPROPRIATIONS

In addition to their critique of racist stereotypes, Randall, Walker, and *The Source* also fight against narrow definitions of black identity created within resistant black cultural traditions. Walker has been explicit in numerous interviews regarding her concern with simplistic representations of black identity. Her artistic persona, The Negress, purposefully "acts out" and resists any easy categorization as a heroic black female. Randall also questions historical black constructions of the freedwoman's journey from slavery to freedom. Randall concludes *The Wind Done Gone* with Cynara alone, living on the outskirts of the black community. She is unable to transfer her story to her son, whom she has given up "for the race" in payment for her past racial sins. This ending implies that efforts at black uplift often lead to the policing of individuals who do not conform to particular ideals. They are denied the right to participate fully in the black community. This is hardly a "happy ending." In addition, *The Source* rejects the notion that by conforming to particular moral ideals, black people will gain the rights they seek. *The Source's* violent, materialistic, ghetto citizen of the Hip-Hop Nation addresses young people's belief that existing black narratives do not speak to their unique sensibilities as late 20th century Americans, or to the increasing repression of blacks since the Civil Rights Movement.

Each of these cultural products therefore calls for the creation of alternative narratives of black identity, different from the pre-existing ones largely hailed within black literary, historical, and visual traditions. In their cultural representations, Randall, Walker, and *The Source* refuse traditional narratives of black uplift. In other words, these artists strategically choose to deviate from historical black cultural endeavors to present a "proper" and "respectable" black subject to counter the debased and stereotyped black figure. They do not maintain that a "good" image can wrestle dominance from a racist representation. They opt to engage racist and negative narratives of black identity, rather than creating new, seemingly positive counter-representations, in a process that they hope will ultimately lead to the disruption of these narratives' power. These artistic strategies make the audacious claim that black people cannot be represented outside of racist constructions. Racism has a critical influence on black representation. Anti-racist black images (those created to counter racist stereotypes)

are always created and viewed in opposition to racist ideology because of the dominance and entrenched nature of stereotypes. These constructions, whether visible or not, always shape perceptions of black people.

This claim and its implications have caused intense public discourse and debates surrounding Randall, Walker, and *The Source*. Many critics reveal a heightened anxiety caused by the exposure granted to these works and their regressive imagery. Unable to control the visibility or reception of these representations, the popular nature of these products both enliven questions of race and representation, and create a crisis of representation for many black people. Walker and *The Source*, in particular, face vehement and unprecedented attempts to censor their work, much of which comes from black communities. Many members of the African American community believe that black artists and cultural producers have a responsibility to “uplift the race,” therefore, in their eyes, these producers transgress acceptable racial roles that dictate conformity to this strategy of resistance. The representations of black identity and subjectivity by these producers stir up both intense anger and abundant support.

The critical reception of each of these cultural producers points to a key tension within contemporary black cultural production: the question of ownership. The appropriation of the black body and its labor (including its cultural labor) during slavery has created an ongoing crisis of legitimacy. Concerns of what is black and what is black art/culture come to the forefront. It leads one to ask, “What is the purpose of black art/culture?” “Who is authorized (read, ‘black enough’) to create it?”

This question of ownership becomes especially loaded with Randall, Walker, and *The Source* because they use negative imagery of blacks and run the risk of reifying racist ideology by further associating black identity with stereotypes. Of equal concern are the cultural producers’ aims. Are they utilizing stereotypes in a way that supports the goals of African American communities, or do monetary motivations drive their work? Additionally, from whom do they receive patronage? Do they cater (advertently or inadvertently) to the exoticization and exploitation of black people? Slavery and its legacy make these questions salient by raising the stakes of black cultural representations. Black cultural producers must navigate the concerns and desires of black communities that are driven by fears of appropriation and the further entrenchment of stereotypes.

Despite their sometimes-contentious relationship with black communities, Randall, Walker, and *The Source* do not intentionally alienate themselves or their work. Alternatively, they utilize and operate within many African American traditions and scholarship. For instance, *The Wind Done Gone* draws from earlier slave narratives and functions within the contemporary genre of neo-slave narratives. In published talks, Walker asserts that many African American visual artists have influenced her work. She also discusses the inspiration of African American novels and the scholarship of contemporary theorists such as Toni Morrison. Likewise, *The Source*,

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although less explicit about its borrowings, uses components of the black nationalism of the 1960s and 70s in its depiction of a nation and in its rationale for the existence of this nation. This black nationalism gives the magazine coherence and offers readers a framework for their participation within hip-hop culture. Additionally, *The Source* continuously highlights the fact that hip-hop emerged within the African American community (the magazine tends to ignore Latino contributions) amongst the influence of multiple black cultures and sensibilities, thereby situating both hip-hop and the magazine itself squarely within the African Diaspora. Although many people criticize each of these cultural producers for their representations, the artists themselves are intimately influenced by and connected to a range of black cultural traditions.

CONCLUSION

With the reversal of many of the gains from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, and the persistence of racism, racial violence, and institutionalized inequality, the compelling question of why race is still so significant remains. In the 1990s, numerous black cultural producers asked this question and were often led to re-explore the history and role of slavery in the lives of African Americans. They created cultural products that questioned both racist narratives of black identity inherited from slavery and revisionist narratives designed to counter them. In this interdisciplinary project I examine how three of these post-Civil Rights cultural producers (re)define the dilemmas of the contemporary moment in relation to slavery and its legacy, through the trope of black identity.

Within separate chapters, I introduce Alice Randall's novel *The Wind Done Gone*, Kara Walker's silhouettes, and *The Source* magazine as examples of this contemporary aesthetic. Through textual analyses of these examples, I explore contemporary black cultural productions that appropriate anti-black stereotypes with the goal of disrupting entrenched racism. I explain the historical circumstances that fostered this aesthetic and argue that these cultural representations are intentional responses to these circumstances. I situate these cultural representations within larger black cultural traditions that depict black subjects with seemingly negative characteristics.

Following each of these chapters, I introduce the content and methodology of my reception studies for each example. These studies demonstrate how audiences respond to these particular representations and assess the effectiveness of the appropriation of anti-black stereotypes as an artistic strategy and as a political agenda. In addition, I consider the racial anxiety over demeaning images that often leads to censorship and discuss the impact that these pressures have on contemporary black cultural production. While people have pondered these issues for over a century, cultural products such

as those of Kara Walker, Alice Randall, and *The Source* enliven these conversations. Their controversial representations require a new consideration of black art and its consequences. This contemporary aesthetic also causes us to rethink the role of race and racism in society today.

The two primary concerns of this book, the motivations for this type of black cultural product and the effects upon audiences, are important in and of themselves for they illuminate the rationale and consequences of some of the most widespread and influential types of black popular culture of the late 20th century.⁴ This study participates in public debates regarding the appropriateness and effectiveness of these types of contemporary black cultural products, an issue at the intersection of cultural theory, media studies, and literary history. By exploring the historical circumstances that influence contemporary black representations that are purposefully derogatory, I provide a rationale for the creation of polarizing black cultural products. These analyses make sense of these controversial depictions as intentional responses to particular circumstances, and not as unselfconscious or deviant acts.

By detailing the influence of these black cultural products with racist appropriations upon audiences through reception studies, I provide a window into a complex process of active interpretation and meaning making that expand our understanding of identity formation and the effects of racist cultural messages upon people.⁵ I seek to shift critical commentary from a need to censor these questionable images to a complex consideration of the value of and problems with these alternative anti-racist strategies, in light of stereotypes' persistence. Moreover, I use these investigations and analyses to uncover, define, and explicate the complex racial politics of the late 20th century that manifested within and through the creation and consumption of black popular culture with racist appropriations.

2 Making the Past Accountable

The Wind Done Gone and Stereotypes of Black Women

This chapter introduces my first example of a black cultural product that engages and depicts racist stereotypes: Alice Randall's novel *The Wind Done Gone* (2001). Drawing from public interviews, I begin with a discussion of the motivations for Randall's novel. I consider why Randall rewrote Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind* (1936), and why she chose to revolve her novel around two racist stereotypes of black women, the mammy and the jezebel. The black woman's body and sexuality are at the center of each of these stereotypes, therefore I discuss the ambivalence and agency found within black women's sexual use of their bodies.

To contextualize how some black women writers have commented upon the ways in which these stereotypes complicate how a black woman engages her sexuality, I analyze Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861)—one of the first and most prominent black literary attempts to depict a sexualized black woman outside of dominant black female stereotypes. I explore the connections between Jacobs's difficulty in depicting herself as a sexual being, and Cynara's constraints, which black women today still face. I explain how Randall utilizes Cynara to demonstrate that contemporary narratives of black female identity are still constrained by the same racist stereotypes that Jacobs negotiated almost 150 years ago.

In addition to highlighting the problems embodied in racist stereotypes of black female identity, *The Wind Done Gone* largely functions as a road-map for Randall's readers. As the novel's protagonist, Cynara, learns more about Mammy, she becomes increasingly empowered. Randall invites the reader to do the same. As both Cynara and the reader begin to see the black enslaved foremother as more than a simple stereotype, they also begin to see the ways in which their own identities have been influenced by racist ideology. Furthermore, Randall deconstructs racist narratives of white masculinity and femininity, to demonstrate how these notions of white manhood and womanhood are logical only when positioned in opposition to racist narratives of black female identity. Moreover, she presents the black community as the site through which one can learn of an alternative subjectivity for black women beyond simple stereotypes.

I discuss Randall's treatment of these critical ideological connections and then conclude by comparing *The Wind Done Gone* to contemporary narratives of slavery, otherwise known as neo-slave narratives. Randall's literary strategy of appropriating and engaging racist narratives of black female identity functions largely within the rationale and content of this growing field of black literature.

In summary, this discussion of *The Wind Done Gone* explains the primary motivations behind Randall's decision to appropriate the mammy and jezebel stereotypes into her parody of *Gone With the Wind*. I discuss her artistic intentions and literary strategies in order to contextualize this controversial cultural product and to provide insight into the racial politics that Randall engaged. This contextualization is important background for the next chapter, which considers the controversies, reception, and consequences of the creation and consumption of *The Wind Done Gone*.

THE RATIONALE FOR *THE WIND DONE GONE*

Gone With the Wind begins with a depiction of the peaceful pastoral life on Tara, a slave-holding plantation, and quickly moves into a dramatic tale of upheaval and devastation. Scarlett O'Hara, Mitchell's protagonist, is a fiery Southern belle who weathers the trials of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Scarlett heroically overcomes the tragedies of war and social change in this enticing legend of the loves and losses of the South.

Randall retells Mitchell's professed historical depiction of the institution of slavery by ironically renaming and recasting *Gone With the Wind*'s major characters. Randall turns *Gone With the Wind* on its head by bringing its nearly invisible black characters to the forefront, while transforming major white characters into generic types. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Scarlett becomes Other, her father Gerald becomes Planter, her mother Ellen becomes Lady, Melanie becomes Mealy Mouth, and Ashley becomes Dreamy Gentleman. Taking her reversal of Mitchell a step further, Randall reduces the names of key characters, such as Rhett Butler and the Tarleton twins, to single letters. By contrast, Randall gives names and histories to the slaves. Pork is renamed Garlic and his wife becomes Mrs. Garlic. Prissy becomes Miss Priss and Mammy's name is Pallas. Randall also adds one new primary character, Cynara. She is the daughter of Mammy and Gerald and thereby the mulatta half-sister of Scarlett O'Hara.

In defense of her novel to the court, Alice Randall claims in a legal declaration,

Whatever others may think of its literary value, I believe that the main significance of *Gone With the Wind* in American culture is how it has inaccurately created harmful perceptions of African Americans in the South. By presenting an image of blacks as intellectually inferior to

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whites in the guise of a grand entertainment, the book—and the movie as well—helped convince millions of Americans that the system under which blacks were denied the vote, shunted to “separate but equal” schools, and otherwise treated as second-class citizens in the Jim Crow South of the 1930’s, 1940’s, and 1950’s, was fully justified.¹

Specifically, Randall believes that the proliferation of racist anti-black stereotypes (such as those found in Mitchell’s novel), coupled with African Americans’ inability to liberate their ancestors, both fictional and actual, from these stereotypes, have dramatically impaired African Americans’ ability to create empowered identities. By writing *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall seeks to endow the enslaved characters within *Gone With the Wind* with identity, agency, and history. She hopes her novel will heal wounds in American society caused by the pain of seeing millions adore shameful and inarticulate caricatures of African Americans. Randall, however, is not interested in delving into the interiority of enslaved African Americans in order to present a more accurate picture of their lives; she does not care to create a different history for the sake of correcting the record. As Thomas F. Haddox notes, “What we can discover in *The Wind Done Gone* is not a fuller understanding of the past, but a portrait of our present moment, when many politically engaged writers and academics have ceased to think in terms of social transformation and content themselves with promoting “strong,” “positive” images of socially marginalized groups or playfully pointing to the contradictions of oppressive ideologies.”² Indeed, Randall is concerned with how stereotypical depictions of these lives influence future generations, and how these generations can break free from them.

Understanding the entrenched and profitable nature of *Gone With the Wind*, Randall and her publishing company, Houghton Mifflin, articulate the importance of Randall’s novel. On their website, in response to the case, they state that Randall wrote *The Wind Done Gone* to (1) “heal some of our culture’s oldest and deepest wounds by forcing readers to confront their own experience of reading *Gone With the Wind*” and (2) to “undermine its myths, make readers question its world, and explode the archetypes that have leapt off its pages into America’s consciousness.”³ Randall wants to alleviate the damage done to slaves’ descendants via racist representations of their ancestors. Her strategy for accomplishing this goal is to shatter the assumption that *Gone With the Wind* is merely a story about a heroic young woman who braves the dangers of the Civil War and Reconstruction that brought a devastating end to the idyllic life she once knew. In *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall refuses to let slavery form an inconsequential historical backdrop for Scarlett O’Hara’s life.

Within the media, many reporters, writers, and academics find fault with Randall. They claim that race and representation are no longer relevant questions and abhor what they see as the strategic and unnecessary creation of yet another “race issue.” Stanley Crouch, a controversial African

American writer and critic notes, “*The Wind Done Gone* justified itself as not more than a race hustle, from my point of view . . . There’s often lots of whining and crying about real and unreal racial exploitation. My feeling about the matter is quite simple. Drop the race talk.”⁴ Crouch’s comments echo many Americans’ growing impatience with ongoing discussions of slavery and racism. They want people to “get over it.” Despite this resistance, Randall consistently defends *The Wind Done Gone*.

When one reads the novel, it becomes clear that not only is Randall concerned with *Gone With the Wind*’s general stereotyping of all black people, but that she is especially fixated on Mitchell’s treatment of enslaved black women. Mammy is arguably one of Mitchell’s favorite characters; perhaps second only to Scarlett. Mammy is a staple of antebellum Southern folklore. Typically depicted as asexual, she is rarely seen with a family of her own. She solely exists for her white master, her white mistress, and their children. People so loved Mitchell’s treatment of this typecast of the black woman that Hattie McDaniel received the 1939 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her Mammy role in the film version of *Gone With the Wind*. With this award she became the first African American to win an Oscar. Because of the popularity of this stereotype, one might expect Mammy to be the character with which Randall is most concerned, but Randall refuses to engage her. Randall recognizes the power of this deep-rooted stereotype, therefore she focuses her attention on Mammy’s child, a character that white racist ideology has refused to acknowledge.

The Wind Done Gone begins in the immediate post-Emancipation South, with Cynara at a critical crossroads in her life. Although now a freedwoman, her world revolves around her lover R., who is a white, aristocratic ex-slave owner. R. is also Cynara’s sister’s husband. Throughout her life, Cynara has made personal choices that have led the black community to alienate her. Her relationship with R. leads her towards yet another disaster, all of which is caused by the idea that her mother, Mammy, never loved her. Cynara sees Mammy as “a faithful darky,” whose sole goal in life is to love and care for white people. By being able to see her mother only through the lens of a stereotype, Cynara loses sight of the possibilities for her own life. She becomes just as disempowered and exploited as she thinks her mother to be. Believing that she has few resources, Cynara chooses to embody the jezebel image, utilizing it to gain the little material and emotional advantages that it brings.

Randall proposes a single solution for Cynara: she must learn the truth about her mother in order to free them both from the vicious stereotypes that their black female bodies appear to embody. Once Cynara learns that her mother has a name, Pallas, and that Pallas lived a life far more complex than Cynara imagined, she begins a journey that gives her the opportunity to create a different life for herself. As Cynara learns more about her mother, she (and ostensibly the reader also) begins to see Mammy as an

individual, endowed with an identity and community. By revising Mammy's story through the eyes of her daughter, Randall creates a witness to an alternative identity for the enslaved black mother. As Cynara embarks on this journey, she also begins to reconsider her own identity, especially in regards to her sexuality. *The Wind Done Gone* therefore both represents Randall's recognition of the staying power of stereotypes of black women and is her attempt to disrupt this power.

AMBIVALENCE AND AGENCY IN BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY

Although much of the critique of Randall's novel positions the book solely in relationship to *Gone With the Wind*, the text that it parodies, *The Wind Done Gone* also participates in a number of other conversations within larger African American cultural traditions. Randall states that she wrote *The Wind Done Gone* to engage racist narratives found in *Gone With the Wind*. However, her work is also inspired by, indebted to, and in conversation with slave narratives. Slave narratives are some of the first texts that function as a political gesture to give a "face to the race" and to counter racist slave ideology.⁵ As much scholarship has shown, slavery and the antebellum slave narrative in particular, have a fundamental influence on contemporary African American literature.⁶

While most narratives of slavery operate in a tradition with common rhetorical and textual strategies, there are crucial differences in content and purpose among these narratives.⁷ Deborah McDowell states that men wrote most of the published narratives of slavery, therefore the genre taken as a whole represents "expressions of male subjectivity" and "narratives of history." In many of these narratives, male authors present women as sexual victims, whereas narratives created by black women "posit female gendered subjectivity, more complex in dimension, that dramatizes not what was done to slave women, but what they *did* with what was done to them."⁸

These earlier narratives critically influence contemporary texts that have the representation of enslaved black women as their focus. Harriet Jacobs's autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) is an important precursor text that sets the themes and discourse for later narratives with enslaved women at their center.⁹ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* works as a critical text for Randall because it is one of the first to depict an enslaved black woman, her body, and her use of sexuality as a means of countering racist narratives of black women. Jacobs negotiates racist and sexist narratives of the enslaved black woman in the hopes of achieving freedom and security. She also labors to disrupt negative images of black women and aid the abolition movement by eliciting the sympathies of white, Northern women. Jacobs manipulates the 19th century domestic novel and the rhetoric of sentimentalism by using autobiographic, maternal constructions to express a desire for a distinctly classed and gendered freedom. She

carefully reworks male narratives of slavery and female domestic narratives to present “a vision of female self-authority.”¹⁰

As Claudia Tate shows, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* both domesticizes and feminizes the presumably gender-free discourse of slavery by highlighting the sexually violated female slave and the morally outraged enslaved mother. It defines freedom as an escape from the political conditions of slavery *and* as the ability to experience motherhood, family, and home. It also sketches a view of the enslaved mother as a woman with agency, an indestructible love and bond to her children, and a desire for the moral and virtuous life afforded to white women. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, thereby, sets much of the formal structure and themes for later discussions of black womanhood and sexuality.

Both her physical body and her assumed sexuality are critical to Jacobs’s status as a non-citizen and her limited options for freedom. According to Hortense Spillers, the captive African body represents the very state of servitude within which it is trapped. The body was thought to symbolize an irresistible destructive sensuality, with no subject position. It merely represented captured sexualities that expressed physical and biological otherness as well as physical and general powerlessness.¹¹ Accordingly, the ways Dr. Flint perceives Jacobs’s body largely defines the nature and condition of her enslavement. Nonetheless, her body is also a marker of Jacobs’s agency and subjectivity, as she uses it to secure certain ends.

Jacobs’s initial strategies of resistance involve alternately presenting and withdrawing herself. When she offers her body to Mr. Sands and becomes pregnant, Jacobs effectively removes herself from Dr. Flint’s grasp. Her choice to conceive outside of the desires of her master alters the identity that slave ideology assumes for her. While Jacobs is pregnant, Dr. Flint cannot read her body as an object available for his sexual consumption. By exercising a choice in her sexual acts, which the majority of enslaved women were brutally prohibited from doing, Jacobs disrupts the ideology of slavery that positions the enslaved black woman as willing and available to the master for his sexual enjoyment. Within her text, then, Jacobs presents a counter-narrative that renders her a subject with agency and courage.

Jacobs makes a “deliberate calculation” to take Mr. Sands as her lover. This choice provides her with a measure of safety *and* a certain amount of pleasure. She explains, “It seems less degrading to give one’s self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.”¹² Jacobs feels flattered, grateful and encouraged, and has a “tender feeling” for Mr. Sands that culminates in a sense of dignity and agency. She enjoys his attentions and they make her feel desirable and empowered.

Simultaneously, Jacobs describes this time as something she “would gladly forget.” Although the act successfully keeps her outside of the sexual predations of Dr. Flint, it fills her with “sorrow and shame.” She is ashamed to have transgressed her grandmother’s Christian tenets through premarital

sex. Her previously virtuous lifestyle provided a large measure of pride that slavery otherwise denied Jacobs. She loses this source of pride once she sleeps with Mr. Sands. Moreover, she also regrets this period of her life because she earnestly desires what society presents as the rights of white women: a home, marriage, family, and legal protection. The very fact that she feels forced to commit such an act cruelly demonstrates her inability, as a slave, to acquire these privileges.

Additionally, Jacobs's sexual act runs the risk of undermining her goal of presenting the enslaved woman as virtuous and worthy of sympathy and freedom. By choosing to detail these sexual relations, Jacobs's already critical, white, Northern, female readership can perceive her as a seductress or jezebel. In certain ways, therefore, her discourse has the potential of legitimizing damaging stereotypes. To ensure that it does not, Jacobs inserts a rationale and plea for understanding: "Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; entirely unprotected by law or custom . . . I know I did wrong . . . The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not to be judged by the same standard as others."¹³ Jacobs implores for understanding, yet composedly asserts that she will not allow her readers' possible condemnation to be her ultimate judgment. Jacobs demonstrates that she will not lose control over her narrative or allow misinformed opinions to malign her image. Her pleas for understanding, however, demonstrate the difficulty in manipulating the discourse surrounding an enslaved black woman's body and sexuality. Her shame shows that her image does become prey to stereotypical notions of the sexually aggressive female slave. Even with her skillful authorial strategies, pre-existing notions of black women beset her narrative. Her attempts at agency, by using her body, both disrupt and emphasize stereotypical narratives of the enslaved black female.

The ambivalent discourse surrounding the black woman's body remains. Contemporary black women's bodies are continuously read in ways consistent with racist slave ideology. As Spillers notes, "Even though the captive flesh/body has been 'liberated' . . . dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement."¹⁴ As a result, the double-sided and dangerous nature of black women's sexuality, which Jacobs highlights, is a primary concern today.

Randall builds upon Jacobs's assertion that agency and exploitation both exist at the site of black female sexuality. She mimics the first-person voice and autobiographical thrust of Jacobs and incorporates this essential theme into *The Wind Done Gone*. Similar to Jacobs, through diary entries, Cynara details her sexual choices that she believes are in her best interest. She too feels ambivalent about her decisions. Although her acts benefit her materially, Cynara realizes that she hardly embodies the idealized black

woman of the Reconstruction South. She is the willing mistress of an ex-Confederate aristocrat, woefully ignorant of her family and history, and severely disconnected from the black community. Like Jacobs, she receives certain benefits from her consensual sex with a white man, but also like Jacobs, she pays a high cost for her choice.

Although there are many thematic similarities, Cynara's story is different from Jacobs's in several key ways. First, Jacobs remains connected to her family and community, while Cynara is sold away as a child and does not go back to the place of her birth until the death of her mother. Moreover, after a temporary reconnection with the community of slaves at the plantation, she leaves again and ultimately relocates to a desolate area without neighbors. This further impedes Cynara's ability to create an empowered identity. Second, Jacobs has children, who eventually become the motive and justification for their mother's actions. They become the only witnesses and judges of their mother, providing legitimacy for Jacobs that she might not find elsewhere. Cynara has a child but gives him away and chooses to remain alone. The child never meets his mother, nor hears her story. He can provide no emotional support for the difficulties she must face. His presence within the story does little to advance Cynara's narrative. Last, unlike Cynara, Jacobs maintains authorial control of her narrative. At the end of *The Wind Done Gone*, Cynara has relinquished her right to tell her story to the Congressman. Her connection to her family and the next generation is lost. She can only hope that someone will find her diary and tell of her life.

These differences point to the distinctiveness of Randall's goals in writing *The Wind Done Gone*, as compared to earlier slave narratives' goals. Randall builds upon Jacobs's themes, but goes beyond Jacobs's intentions of countering racist narratives and contextualizing the life and actions of the enslaved black woman. Instead, Randall directly addresses the problematic nature of current representations of black women's sexuality.

On its most superficial level, *The Wind Done Gone* asserts the existence of modernized stereotypical images and narratives of black women inherited from slavery. For example, images of the mammy continuously resurface in popular culture. Contemporary narratives of the loyal black servant attending to the needs of her white household appear in the 1980s through popular sitcoms like *Gimme a Break*, featuring Nell Carter; in the 1990s, with movies like *Corinna*, *Corinna*, featuring Whoopi Goldberg; and as recently as 2003, with *Bringing Down the House*, starring Queen Latifah. Additionally, images of powerful women such as Oprah Winfrey continue to evoke a largely non-sexualized identity, in which Oprah's primary motivation appears to be the nurturing of her largely white, female, suburban housewife audience.

The jezebel stereotype also remains prominent. Abundant images of hypersexualized black women inundate mass media. R&B and hip-hop artists such as Beyoncé and Trina, for example, are presented scantily clothed and sexually aggressive. Their onstage appearances emphasize and

exaggerate their sexualities in increasingly pornographic ways. These sexualized images produce higher sales and popularity for these artists, yet there should be some concern over why these images are so appealing. For instance, the controversy over Halle Berry's role in *Monster's Ball* (2001), which resulted in her being the first African American woman to win an Oscar for Best Actress in a Leading Role, highlights the pros and cons of such depictions. While Berry indeed gave a stellar performance, her depiction of a poor, rural black woman, who begs the white warden who killed her husband to make her "feel good," presents a disturbing image of black womanhood—an image that was richly rewarded.

Some of the most disturbing signs of the enduring distortions of racial ideology are images that depict a modern usage of black female sexuality in order to achieve social and economic gains. The rapper Lil' Kim is probably the most famous example of a black woman artist who unashamedly promotes the use of her body. She has both scandalized and empowered contemporary women with her displays of aggressive sexuality. She condones the use of her body to achieve fame and fortune, while insisting upon her physical pleasure in the experience of sexual interactions. Her image, however, constantly turns on itself, alternatively positioning Lil' Kim as empowered and exploited. Images such as these reinforce the myth of the jezebel and seemingly condone the castigation of black women, such as Anita Hill, whose allegations of sexual harassment from Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas were met with scorn and disbelief. Stereotypical narratives of black women still negatively affect contemporary representations of black women and their sexual agency. Attempts to rework these images always run the risk of reifying them.

The Wind Done Gone highlights this representational dilemma. As black women practice agency over their body through sexual displays, they also find that they must constantly struggle for control over their representations. The past and the present merge at the site of their sexuality. Stereotypes complicate assertions of sexual agency. Racist ideologies distort these images and challenge the artist's intended message. Black women must battle for control over their images and narratives. Contemporary narratives must negotiate modern sensibilities with existing limitations due to racist ideological legacies. These battles have very real effects, which Randall explores through Cynara.

WHY CYNARA IS NOT A HEROIC BLACK FEMALE SLAVE

The reader meets Cynara on her twenty-eighth birthday and learns that she is the mistress of R. (Rhett Butler), her half-sister's husband. Cynara is disconnected from the black community, including her mother, who she knows only through the racist and sexist lens of the mammy stereotype. Cynara does not see her mother as a person with ideas, thoughts, or an

identity outside of this stereotype. She sees Mammy as not “the marrying kind” and “big as two houses,” and states that she would be scared to be big like that, yet not “big enough to have a name.” Thinking of her mother in these ways profoundly affects Cynara’s sense of self.

Scholars have well documented the contours of the mammy stereotype. Mammy was often depicted as a robust, dark-skinned, middle-aged or older black woman. She was largely asexual, caring little for her own family, if she had one. Mammy existed only for the white family. Next to Uncle Tom, she was their most loyal servant. Their needs consumed her days and nights, and she always chose the little white children, of whom she often functioned as wet nurse, over her own children.

Because Cynara does not know her mother outside of the seeming truths of her mother’s identity as Mammy, Cynara cannot imagine that her mother could ever want or love her. In her diary, Cynara pens her doubts, “It hurts not to love her. And it hurt more when I didn’t—I still don’t—believe she ever loved me.”¹⁵ Cynara loses all hope that Mammy will ever love her when Planter, her master-father, sells her from Cotton Farm, the plantation where she grew up. Unable to speak to Mammy before leaving, Cynara spends much of her life believing that Mammy consented to the sale. Mammy’s supposed complicity in the sale becomes the final act of betrayal that breaks the tenuous bond between her and Cynara. Thinking back upon the painful memory, Cynara reflects, “I have never forgiven Mammy for the hours I stood bare-breasted in the market in Charleston. I don’t know how to forgive her and love myself.” (31) Thinking that her own mother had no room for Cynara in her heart, Cynara comes to believe that she must be unlovable.

Cynara’s inability to find love and affirmation in Mammy plunges her into a desperate search for acceptance. At the base of her need for love is an envy of Other, who seems to have everyone’s love and affection, including that of Mammy. Remembering her lonely childhood Cynara states, “I know the angels weep every time a dusky Mama is blind to the beauty of her darky child, her ebony jewel, and hungers only for the rosebud mouth to cling to the plum moon of her breast.” (43) At first, Cynara thinks she can achieve recognition from those around her by accumulating material objects. Her collection soon disappoints her for she realizes that the ultimate possession is not a thing, but a person. She admits, “There are so many things of Other’s I have wanted. Things, then people. People more than things.” (42) As slavery has objectified her, so Cynara begins to see people as objects available for ownership and consumption. Racist slave ideology informs her inhumane logic.

By gaining people as her own emotional property, Cynara believes she will finally feel loved and accepted. She is unable to see the pitfalls of this line of thinking and pursues Other’s husband, R. In her diary, Cynara states, “I wanted someone who loved her to love me more than her . . . I didn’t believe anybody who knew us both could love me more, but I hoped

for it, and I had to know.” (47) Cynara successfully seduces R., and she is happy for a time.

Initially, Cynara is unaware that R.’s attention and affection do not amount to love, but merely to sex. All that she knows is that he saves her, at first, from pain and insecurity. She remembers their early relationship as “sweet years, a time I sought to lose myself in him. It took a white-hot grown-man flame to distract me from little-girl pain. He did that for me. And I remember it.” (91) Cynara is intensely grateful for this, and does not realize how her act of agency has put her into a questionable position.

Although R. is technically Cynara’s master, she speaks little of coercion when discussing their early relationship. In her ambivalent reference, she does not speak of horror or shame, but defines their affair as “a season of candle-flame concubinage.” She typically describes this concubinage in erotic, sensual, and happy terms. She talks of telling R. jokes, making him dinners, inviting him to pleasure her, and enjoying his time and attention. In fact, once R. chooses Cynara over Other, his attention and lovemaking make Cynara feel saved and restored to a position of love and acceptance. She realizes, “I didn’t start loving him till he preferred me to her. Oh God, I loved him then. So much was reconciled for me in his reach for my nipple before her breast, my kiss before her breath, so much reconciled and so much redeemed, forever reconciled and forever redeemed.” (147) R. becomes more than Cynara’s lover. He also becomes her savior when he rescues her from the vicious anonymity and dehumanization of racist ideology. Racism defines Cynara as less than a person. R.’s love and attention, however, insist that she is indeed human and desirable.

As a white man, R. redeems Cynara through his recognition and preference. R.’s atonement of her racial sin leads Cynara to believe that she must now be acceptable. To Cynara, R. completely reconciles the racist barriers to her happiness. She must not be chattel if he loves her. She cannot be the cursed daughter of Ham if R. chooses her as his own. R.’s love seemingly disrupts the ideology that a black slave is unlovable. He makes the seeming inconsistency, that a black woman is beautiful and worthy of love, appear possible.

Randall underscores the dubious nature of Cynara’s decision to be with R. and the feelings of love and acceptance these sexual choices bring. Although Cynara describes experiencing vast amounts of pleasure, she also tells the reader that her relationship with R. leaves her feeling insignificant: “Sometimes it feels good, sometimes feeling good is enough. Sometimes I don’t remember nothing ‘cept being a fresh boiled shrimp between his teeth, swallowed but not devoured in the hours when it seemed that I was born to be no more than a taste on his tongue.” (30) These are the first implications of the precariousness of Cynara’s position. Her relationship with R. does have some positive results, but it also degrades her. It, at times, leaves her feeling less like a person and more like an object that he consumes and forgets. Ultimately, her relationship with R. undermines Cynara’s subjectivity.

He largely exploits her for his sexual satisfaction. Cynara exercises agency by using her body for specific gains, but then loses the ability to maintain control of her body and thereby her narrative. Her sexual actions, consequently, render her both subject and object.

Despite her mixed feelings about her life with R., once the Civil War ends and Cynara is legally free, she chooses to stay with him because there are financial, physical, sexual, and emotional gains from the relationship. Cynara knows no other way to fill the void in her life. She is trapped in an ideological dilemma. Her relationship with R. makes her feel whole. Yet, it also steals her humanity and reduces her to a stereotype that is incongruously embodied in flesh and available for consumption. Cynara has yet to realize that her desire for R. is only a substitute for her mother's love. Without this love, Cynara pursues unhealthy and unsatisfying relationships.

Cynara reflects Randall's deliberation on the dramatic effect of stereotypes of the black enslaved foremother on later black female identity. Because Cynara is so severely disengaged from her mother, she is divorced from any real knowledge of her mother's life. She erroneously believes that her mother did not love her because racist ideology has so consistently denied the fact that a black enslaved mother could and would want to care for her children. Without her mother's guidance, Randall falls into another ideological trap. She believes that she must use her body to fulfill the sexual needs of her master. Her sexuality becomes the logic for her existence, and a means to gain her goal of being loved.

Through Cynara, Randall makes a key point: without a depiction of the black enslaved mother as empowered, black women have few resources to use in the creation of their own identities. Both the mammy and jezebel stereotypes influence popular images of black women today. Many people, both black and white, expect and see little problem with the pervasive overrepresentation of contemporary black women as hypersexualized and aggressive in mass media. Randall intervenes with this novel in order to recuperate the enslaved black mother, to make room for her child, and to disrupt the logic of longstanding racist representations of both that consistently reappear today.

RANDALL'S STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT OF STEREOTYPES

A critical analysis of *The Wind Done Gone* reveals Randall's complex and multi-layered appropriation of stereotypes intended to disrupt racist narratives of black female identity. To achieve this goal, Randall first situates the enslaved black mother's story within a community of enslaved blacks. This provides a basis for reversing Mitchell by reconstructing *Gone With the Wind's* flat black stereotypical characters. Randall's black characters have voices and agency. They teach Cynara about her mother. By granting all of the enslaved blacks agency and voice, Randall demonstrates that an

understanding of the black community is the first part of any recuperation of narratives of black female identity. Within this community, black women have a multiplicity of possible lives and identities that hold more coherence and agency than racist ideology allows.

In an interesting move, Randall kills Mammy early in the story. The reader never meets her. Mammy never comes to voice. The black community introduces Cynara to Pallas through stories and reminiscences of her life. Cynara learns that Pallas manipulated Lady into marrying Planter to allow herself a large measure of freedom. Cynara also finds out how Pallas bettered her circumstances, despite the constraints of her servitude. She realizes that Pallas slept with Planter to prevent Lady from having to face up to the fact that she did not love him. This kept Planter content, kept the living situation intact, and ensured Pallas's limited, but important, control over her circumstances. Cynara also learns that Pallas did not know Cynara was to be sold and that she had done all she could to protect her and the other enslaved people on the plantation.

These stories shock Cynara. She finds them difficult to believe. She remains unable to comprehend these tales' ramifications until Miss Priss tells her about the death of Lady's three sons.¹⁶ When Cynara learns of the possibility that the babies did not die by accident, but that Pallas may have killed each of them, she finally feels convinced that slavery had not deluded her mother. When Cynara asks Miss Priss why Pallas would kill the children, Miss Priss responds with what must have seemed obvious to her: "What would we a done with a sober white man on this place?" (63) Her question causes Cynara to see that Pallas understood the nature of her enslavement and actively worked to ameliorate her circumstances. Previously, Cynara had been unable to view her mother's true identity; as she states at her mother's funeral, "I knew for sure that Mammy had stopped wearing the mask and the mask had worn her." (54) These new stories, however, enable Cynara to understand that her enslaved mother possessed more power than she previously considered. Mammy killed the little white boys to ensure the future of the child that she loved the most: Cynara—her black child. With the possibility that her mother could have done something so terrible in order to keep her family safe, Cynara is able to see that her mother acted within her very limited means and was motivated by love. Cynara's acceptance of such an appalling act complicates the reader's view of Mammy, helping the reader contextualize Pallas's actions. It is now difficult to condemn her. Neither the reader nor Cynara are able to fit Pallas into Mammy's limited world, which effectively disrupts the stereotype's power.

Concurrently, in what seems a punitive move, Randall flattens Mitchell's primary white characters. The white characters in *The Wind Done Gone* all represent hegemonic stereotypical representations of white masculinity and femininity. This is part of Randall's second strategy in her goal of recuperating black female identity. Randall understands that the myths of the mammy and jezebel buttress narratives of white masculinity and white

womanhood. Consequently, she deconstructs white narratives of identity derived in the antebellum South in order to help free narratives of black female identity.

For example, as Planter and R. interact with black women in *The Wind Done Gone*, Randall disrupts the ideological power of the white master. Randall drastically reduces R.'s status as the white master who maintains all power over his slave, most especially in terms of his sexual rights. She positions Cynara as the initiator and ultimate decision-maker in this relationship, even as R. attempts to exploit her.

When discussing the earliest days of their relationship, Cynara asserts herself as the seducer even though she was still a child. She states, "There's a low wide couch in my bedroom upholstered in green velvet. He loves it when I'm sweet to him on it. I feel it calling to us now. When I was young I would invite him by saying, 'The morning dew is on the southern lawn,' and he would laugh at the proper way I invited him to impropriety. I was barely out of my childhood, just fifteen . . ." (29) In addition to deciding when sex will begin, Cynara also decides when the relationship will end. After meeting a young "colored Congressman," Cynara begins an affair that forever changes her life. She realizes that R. sees her as exotic, does not truly respect her, and will never see her as an equal. He can only see her as "a doll come to life. A pretty nigger doll dressed up in finery, hair pressed for play." (164) She views his exploitative and limited love as a burden she has acquired in exchange for the small measures of self-esteem and security that she once held so important. After loving the Congressman, she rejects R: "You have been a father to me, and now that you look the part, I don't want you. His eyes well up." (197) Crying and destitute because Cynara, his former slave, is leaving him, R. dramatically alters the reader's image of the all-powerful white master.

Randall also deconstructs the ideology of white womanhood that presents the white mistress as the embodiment of all that is good and pure simply because of her white racial identity. Lady represents this ideal in *The Wind Done Gone*. She is based upon Ellen in *Gone With the Wind*. *Gone With the Wind's* narrator describes Ellen as a "thrifty and kind mistress," a "good mother and devoted wife," and so highly respected that she is the "best-loved neighbor in the County." Scarlett thought her mother to be so virtuous and pure that she likened her to the Virgin Mary, "the embodiment of justice, truth, loving tenderness and profound wisdom—a great lady."¹⁷ Yet, in *The Wind Done Gone*, Lady can never measure up to this ideal because Randall calls her whiteness into question.

From old love letters between Lady and her cousin Feelepee, Cynara learns more of Lady's racial history. In these letters, Cynara reads that Lady's mother prohibited the marriage of the pair, because she feared that their children might be born with brown skin. This would then expose the fact that Lady and Feelepee have a black ancestor. Cynara is pleasantly surprised to also find out that Lady still wanted to marry Feelepee. Lady was

all too willing to take the risk that people would find out that she was part black. The information now possessed by Cynara entirely disrupts Lady's narrative of purity and whiteness.

The other white female character, Beauty, is also a tenuous figure of white womanhood. Although one may assume that Beauty is white, her status as a "lady" is unconfirmed. Her claims to white womanhood are weak because of her working-class position, her lack of a marriage, her child born out of wedlock, her involvement in the sale of female sexuality, and her interactions in the public sphere. Her position is uncertain and she even buys Cynara in the hope that owning a slave will give her the appearance of being a "lady." Through Beauty's character, Randall also dismantles the seeming naturalness and permanence of the narrative of white womanhood, which functioned in opposition to the narrative of black female identity.

In each of these strategic engagements of stereotypes, sexuality is a key site through which Randall destabilizes each stereotype's ideological power. For example, Lady's desire for Feelepee, even after knowing he was part black, is an untenable sexual yearning for a white woman. By desiring to sleep with a black man, Lady transgresses an important racist boundary. Similarly, Beauty's vocation as a prostitute disrupts images of white female purity and morality. Her sexual choices run far outside of the marriage bed. According to the ideology of white womanhood, the white woman belongs in the home, as a wife and mother, which was far from true for Beauty.

Finally, both Mammy and Cynara use their sexuality to manipulate white male desire, which demonstrates the instability of the white master's power and renders black female stereotypes indefensible. Asexuality is a key characteristic of the mammy stereotype, yet by asserting that Pallas purposefully slept with Planter to maintain a certain amount of control, Randall recuperates the enslaved black mother's sexuality. Additionally, Cynara, at first, is the eager mistress of the white master, easily marking her as a jezebel figure. Yet, by the end of the tale, Cynara chooses to anonymously have a child for the colored Congressman and his wife, who cannot conceive. This is more than a gift to them; it is her gift to all black people and her contribution to black uplift. When the baby is born she tells the Congressman to tell this child, who will never know her, ". . . if we are as a people to rise again, it will be in him." (206) With this move, she recuperates her body for the race, and alters her seemingly permanent position as a jezebel. Her sexual characterization is now markedly complex.

THE WIND DONE GONE AND THE CONTEMPORARY NARRATIVE OF SLAVERY

The Wind Done Gone functions alongside the literary tradition of contemporary narratives of slavery. These texts build upon revisionist African

American literary history, and endeavor to depict a more accurate account of the identity and subjectivity of black people. These contemporary narratives of slavery are “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative.”¹⁸ Contemporary narratives of slavery counter racist depictions of blacks and build upon the work of slave narratives by engaging themes often silent within these texts.

One of the earliest contemporary narratives of slavery that presents a revisionist narrative of the enslaved and then freed black woman is Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee* (1966). Walker’s protagonist is a young African American enslaved woman named Vyry. Vyry transitions from slavery to freedom through the Civil War. *Jubilee* is the story of her struggles in slavery and later as a freedwoman. According to Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Walker’s *Jubilee* is significant to our understanding of *The Wind Done Gone* because it is the first contemporary literary depiction of the material condition of slavery from the perspective of the enslaved woman.¹⁹ *Jubilee* embodies a dominant narrative of the enslaved and freed black woman that depicts her as a heroic actor, who valiantly endures both slavery and the hardships of freedom. The rigorous research and detail that Walker includes in this text makes it an invaluable resource for later depictions of the lives of black women both during and after slavery.²⁰ As Beaulieu holds, *Jubilee* has significantly passed down a tradition of an empowered enslaved woman to contemporary novels of slavery written by black women, such as Randall’s *The Wind Done Gone*.

Furthermore, because *Jubilee* is one of the first contemporary novels, by an African American woman, containing the life of an enslaved woman during the Civil War and Reconstruction at the center of its story, it is an important precursor to Randall’s text, which has a similar theme and setting. Walker documents the many problems that freedpeople and their families faced. She focuses on the mobility of black people and their use of travel in attempts to secure better lives. This becomes an important theme within *The Wind Done Gone*, as movement is one of Cynara’s primary methods of altering her life and constructing an alternative identity. Additionally, Walker highlights the importance of family and its impact upon the stability and happiness of the freedpeople. As previously discussed, Cynara’s ability, or lack thereof, to connect to a black community severely impairs her ability to develop an empowered sense of self.

Critics compare *Jubilee* to Mitchell’s image of the South and have even called it “the Black *Gone With the Wind*.” Walker admits that she had *Gone With the Wind* in mind when she wrote *Jubilee*. However, the book is far from reactionary for *Jubilee* is the fulfillment of Walker’s promise to her grandmother to tell her great-grandmother’s story. Having heard tales of their lives time and again, Walker created what she describes as a folk novel and a historical novel. Her objectives were to construct a more accurate version of the historical period of slavery, the Civil War, segregation, and Reconstruction.

She claims that she wanted to tell the story that the segregated society in which she grew up did not want to hear. Walker's story, therefore, is that of a strong, loving black woman who heroically overcomes the trials of both slavery and Reconstruction—which is, in her opinion, not the story found in *Gone With the Wind*.²¹ Consequently, *Jubilee's* heroine Vyry is meant to counter racist images such as those in *Gone With the Wind* and to present an alternative narrative of the enslaved black woman. Walker's depiction is inadequate, for Randall however, because Randall still felt compelled to offer yet another narrative that could disrupt *Gone With the Wind's* racism.

As a realistic text with historical underpinnings, Walker's narrative of black womanhood is vastly different from that of Randall. Cynara and Vyry are dissimilar examples of enslaved women and their struggles transitioning through Reconstruction as freedwomen. Vyry is a strong figure who leaves behind the ideological influences of slavery, despite enduring numerous hardships due to the continued racism of the South. *Jubilee* operates similarly to other post-bellum slave narratives, which largely depict the black person who has overcome slavery and ultimately been made stronger, better, and more worthy of rights because of it. *The Wind Done Gone*, alternatively, does not contain this narrative of progression. Cynara's internalized racism, inability to sustain meaningful connections to a black community, and difficulty in developing an empowered sense of self mark the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in the midst of the realities of freedom.

Moreover, *Jubilee* depicts the obstacles newly freed persons experienced. This portrayal casts black people as ultimately triumphant, emotionally and psychologically. The vestiges of slavery lie in structural inequality and ideological racism, not in the developing sense of self of the freedpeople. Vyry's story does not highlight the internal struggles that she may have had with slavery as a black woman, or slavery's continued psychic effects. Accordingly, Walker's protagonist does not work for Randall because Vyry does not reflect the complexities of black womanhood and sexuality that Randall wishes to emphasize.

By contrast, Randall presents a layered narrative of agency, where resistance embodied in sexual acts results in the experience of an ambiguous freedom. The limitations of this freedom mark Randall's gendered critique of the liberating potential of the black female body. Randall does not convey a progressive, linear narrative of a single heroic event that results in freedom.²² She depicts a black woman's agency, rather, as a series of strategic maneuvers, calculated to negotiate the unintended and at times undesired consequences of her actions. Sexuality, in the book, thereby becomes the terrain through which the reader views the physical and discursive difficulties embodied in an enslaved woman's struggle for freedom. Any attempts to create an empowering image and narrative of the black woman must confront the continued currency of stereotypical narratives.

Randall's Cynara, therefore, is more fruitfully compared to the protagonists in contemporary narratives of slavery, such as Gayl Jones's

Corregidora (1975), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). Each of these novels describes an African American woman protagonist whose past literally disrupts her present. Unlike texts like *Jubilee*, which are primarily concerned with "the politics of respectability," *Corregidora*, *Beloved*, and *Kindred* force an engagement with slavery's impact on black women. They depict the horror of slavery, its legacy in black women's lives, and their agency alongside their inadequacy in dealing with these problems.

Contemporary narratives of slavery highlight the continued influence of slavery upon black women. Jones's Ursa struggles with her knowledge of the incest and rape experienced by her female ancestors at the hands of her great-grandfather, who was also their master. She desires to become an empowered, self-sufficient woman and so must battle these memories and an abusive husband. Morrison's protagonist, Sethe, and her daughter Denver battle the ghost of the baby girl Sethe killed years earlier to prevent slaveholders from taking her back into slavery. This ghost drains Sethe of her energy, sabotages her loving relationship with Paul D., and threatens to destroy the life that Sethe and Denver have managed to piece together. Finally, Butler's heroine, Dana, is transported repeatedly into the slave-era South, where she physically experiences and endures the brutalities of slavery. She becomes complicit in her own enslavement as she aids a white ancestor in order to ensure her own existence. She struggles to understand her actions for survival.

Each of these stories deals with the repressed histories of the violence, terror, and sexual abuse of enslaved women and the impact of these experiences on their descendants. They show the need to expose these violations as the past threatens to destroy these women's very existence in the present. Similar to her contemporaries, Randall chooses not to create a virtuous, middle-class member of the "talented tenth." Unlike Walker, Randall is less concerned with recuperating an accurate historical image of a black woman to counter those presented within *Gone With the Wind* and other racist texts. Rather, she is interested in bringing to light stereotypical images and narratives. She insists that they remain potent and continually influence American culture.

CONCLUSION

The Wind Done Gone is one person's attempt to displace one particular racist representation of African Americans. Despite the difficulties, Randall strategically undermines the credibility of Mitchell's image of the Civil War and Reconstruction-era South. Through the voice of a new heroine, Cynara, Randall presents competing narratives of black and white identities. Most specifically, Randall comments on racial identity through a discussion of black womanhood and sexuality. Never denying the influence

of sexist and racist constructions upon narratives of black womanhood, Randall inserts alternative narratives that disrupt stereotypes' totalizing power. For example, Randall positions the story of Mammy alongside the story of Pallas. In doing so, the enslaved black mother is no longer the faithful darky servant, but a calculating individual who carefully exerts limited control over her life. Her daughter is not simply a seductive mulatta, whose sole job is the satisfaction of the sexual fantasies of white men. Rather, she is a mixed-race woman negotiating her dual identities in an attempt to construct a fulfilling life. Randall never ignores the stereotypes, but rather contextualizes them in a manner that forces one to rethink their meanings and reliability. By following Cynara's movements toward empowerment, the reader can also learn to interrogate the past, to re-evaluate the actions of her ancestors and her community, and to understand those actions better. Through Cynara's eyes, the subjectivity of other members of the community and an alternative collective identity for blacks come into view.

The articulation of this alternative collective identity is crucial to Randall because of the vast proliferation of the stereotypical representations of black subjects found in *Gone With the Wind*. It is precisely because of the widely popular nature of the story, the never ceasing emergence of spin-offs of the text, and the vast financial profitability of the book's demeaning black subjects, that Randall felt compelled to re-imagine Scarlett O'Hara's world. Both the content and the market reach of the text were primary motivations for Randall. Moreover, the global recognition of *Gone With the Wind* undoubtedly contributed to the sales of Randall's text, which would have been an important factor in Walker's ability to even get a publisher for *The Wind Done Gone*.

The influence of the market upon the creation of black popular culture, such as *The Wind Done Gone*, is important not only to understanding the artist's motivation, but also to understanding the audience's response. When Randall wrote *The Wind Done Gone*, she likely did not expect to face a \$10 million dollar lawsuit. However, the same market influence that partially inspired Randall to challenge *Gone With the Wind* is a critical factor that motivated the Mitchell Estate and many of Mitchell's supporters to defend the lawsuit. As will become evident in the next chapter, monetary concerns typically exist alongside varying legal and ideological notions regarding controversial cultural representations.

3 Audience Reception through the Lens of a \$10 Million Dollar Lawsuit

In the previous chapter, I explored how and why Randall appropriated stereotypical characters from *Gone With the Wind* into her novel *The Wind Done Gone*. That chapter brought to light the major factors that motivated Randall, including the persistence of racist stereotypes of black female identity, the pervasiveness of these stereotypes in media, and the ways in which these stereotypes compete with positive representations of black women. It detailed the compelling rationales that led Randall to reject an artistic strategy of black uplift in which she would counter *Gone With the Wind's* negative stereotypes with positive representations. That chapter also grounded Randall's novel within important African American literary traditions such as slave narratives and contemporary narratives of slavery. With this contextualization, I move into this chapter, which considers the largest controversy surrounding the novel, the court case against Alice Randall and her publisher, Houghton Mifflin.

In 2001, *Margaret Mitchell Estate vs. Houghton Mifflin* was a widely debated court case. In addition to a large amount of press coverage, approximately 53 individuals and 15 organizations submitted sworn statements and amicus curiae briefs to the court.¹ The participation of varied actors highlights the fraught nature of identity politics and the on-going battle over narratives of slavery that influenced many Americans at the end of the 20th century. In an instructive parallel, *The Wind Done Gone*, as a novel unto itself and as the object of this highly contested lawsuit, represents a story about the present and the ways in which we deal with our past. It shows how black popular culture influences not only African Americans, but also all Americans.

This court case and its sworn testimony regarding the impact of *The Wind Done Gone* on the reader provides a valuable resource that I use to engage critical concerns regarding the book and its consequences. I draw from this testimony to conduct a study of audience response to *The Wind Done Gone* that opens a window into the cultural consumption of the novel. This response explains some of the ways in which Randall's particular use of stereotypes affects the reader, and offers a way to evaluate the effectiveness of her artistic strategy. As part of this response, I investigate

(1) the importance of *Gone With the Wind's* racism to the reader, (2) whether the reader believed that racist copyrighted texts should be legally and socially sanctioned, and (3) whether Randall's text and her controversial authorial strategy effectively disrupted stereotypes. I reproduce many readers' comments to highlight the actual process of reception that took place. These comments demonstrate a complex interpretation of the text, in which readers actively negotiate multiple and varied meanings dependent upon their social identities. Consequently, this study exposes elements of the book's reception that are important to consider when evaluating controversial black cultural products such as *The Wind Done Gone*, and gives greater insight into the agency of consumers when they engage these products.

THE BATTLE OVER REPRESENTATIONS

Upon learning of the forthcoming publication of *The Wind Done Gone* in 2001, the Trusts of the Margaret Mitchell Estate promptly sued the author Alice Randall. They claimed that Randall's novel violated their copyright. The Mitchell Estate argued that *The Wind Done Gone* duplicated characters, fictional settings, scenes, and verbatim dialogue from *Gone With the Wind*. To them, *The Wind Done Gone* effectively operated as a sequel, trading off the success and popularity of *Gone With the Wind*. As an unauthorized sequel, *The Wind Done Gone* jeopardized the Trusts' ability to financially profit from *Gone With the Wind*.

The Mitchell Estate initiated their lawsuit with the sole purpose of maintaining the integrity of images and narratives within *Gone With the Wind*. Because of its depictions, according to the Mitchell Estate, *The Wind Done Gone* did "irreparable harm and damage" to "the artistic reputation and goodwill of [*Gone With the Wind*]."² In other words, by writing her book, Randall undermined the status of *Gone With the Wind* and lessened the Mitchell Estate's right to use the Mitchell name as they had previously. Randall's book usurped control over Mitchell's artistic creation, which, legally and financially, solely belonged to the Mitchell Estate.

The Mitchell Estate dismissed all claims that this case had anything to do with the representation of black people. In their opinion, this case was simply about property that Randall had illegally appropriated. As compensation for this violation, the Mitchell Estate demanded that the court grant an injunction prohibiting publication of *The Wind Done Gone*. They also asked the court to award them \$10 million in damages, all of the defendant's profits, all the costs and expenses of the action, and to order the recall and destruction of all copies of *The Wind Done Gone*.

The Mitchell Estate's insistence on their ownership of any derivative of Mitchell's treasured depiction of the antebellum and Reconstruction South sheds light on the subversive nature of Randall's commitment to writing

and publishing *The Wind Done Gone*. Underlying the Mitchell Estate's defense is the suggestion that *Gone With the Wind* is essentially harmless. Slavery is over—an event of our past that lives only in history books. With the Civil Rights Movement, black people gained the legal right to full social and political equality. *Gone With the Wind's* depiction of slavery could do no harm, and the Estate should continue to profit from racist narratives of black people and slavery.

Many critics of *The Wind Done Gone* agreed with the Mitchell Estate and argued that Randall's book was unnecessary in light of advances for black people. They claimed that it stirred up racial problems that no longer existed. They also believed that the book offered little to the reader in terms of racial insight, and in fact created erroneous assumptions. These critics implied that Randall's publication was actually harmful, especially to readers who loved *Gone With the Wind* and have experienced great pleasure and joy from the book.

Randall and her publisher Houghton Mifflin asserted that *The Wind Done Gone* was neither a sequel nor a copyright violation. It was, instead, a purposeful parody of a racist text. Defining parody as a "work which imitates another work and in doing so comments on that work in order to ridicule it or suggest its limitations," Randall held that *The Wind Done Gone* should be protected.³ Because she tells the story from a slave's perspective, uses black vernacular, reverses stereotypes, and endows black characters with agency, Randall argued that her work is a criticism of *Gone With the Wind* that makes a powerful political, artistic, and social statement. Additionally, she claimed that even if she had sought permission from the Mitchell Estate, the Estate would never have authorized *The Wind Done Gone*, because the Estate refuses to contract derivative work that contains miscegenation or homosexuality. Consequently, they would never have approved *The Wind Done Gone*, because it uses these themes to disrupt and expose the racism of *Gone With the Wind*.

In April 2001, approximately eight weeks before the scheduled release of *The Wind Done Gone*, a district court in Atlanta, Georgia granted the Mitchell Estate a preliminary injunction that prohibited Randall from producing, publishing, selling, or distributing her book. Months later, after considering the two sides, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta found that the temporary restraining order prohibiting Houghton Mifflin from publishing the book was an unlawful prior restraint in violation of Randall's First Amendment rights.⁴ The Appeals Court found that a copyright does not immune a work from comment or criticism and that *The Wind Done Gone* is indeed a parody that makes specific criticism about the depiction of slavery and the relationship of whites and blacks. The Mitchell Estate immediately launched an appeal. On May 9, 2002, the two camps reached a compromise. Randall could publish the book, but would have to include a distribution label that read "The Unauthorized Parody."

DOES *GONE WITH THE WIND*'S RACIST IMAGERY MATTER?

Many of the individuals who submitted testimony to the court were unconvinced by Randall's assertion that American society needed *The Wind Done Gone* to disrupt the power of the stereotypes found in *Gone With the Wind*. In a formal declaration to the court, one person insisted that people know the difference between stereotypes and accurate depictions of black people. In his opinion, no one today would find truth in Mitchell's text, because "The racial stereotypes have long since been exploded, and it would be difficult to imagine many contemporary readers who believe that the depiction of the black-white, slave-master relationships in *Gone With the Wind* are historically realistic."⁵ This person claimed that many books, such as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Robert Penn Warren's *Band of Angels*, have corrected negative narratives of black people. To this person, Randall really had nothing new to offer.

In agreement, others believed that even if one did want to tell a different story of blacks, Randall's work was still inappropriate because "several serious writers of fiction and non-fiction have shown (for example, Toni Morrison, William Styron, and C. Vann Woodward), one can write about the lives of slaves in the United States without reference to Margaret Mitchell's novel, and certainly without appropriating characters, themes, settings, and even the language of that classic work of fiction."⁶ For the people making these declarations, there was no pressing rationale for Randall's text.

Although these individuals expressed a belief in and approval of the revisionist scholarship and literature that labors to displace stereotypes, their comments, ironically, justify the preservation of these stereotypes. If stereotypical images are intolerable, why is it important to allow their existence in works such as *Gone With the Wind* to continue unchallenged? Perhaps it is because *Gone With the Wind*'s racist narratives feed unacknowledged, nostalgic perceptions of a racially harmonious American past, in which the Civil War and Reconstruction are not moments of racial discord, but simply the result of the growing pains of an emerging nation. Even more problematic, the preservation of popular narratives like *Gone With the Wind* and a denial (whether based on sincere belief that racial problems no longer exist, wishful thinking, or ignorance) of their harmful racist ideologies justify conservative objections to radical attempts to redress American racial inequalities and injustices. These factors distract from many of the real and consequential racial issues still very much at play in society today.

Vastly different from those readers who attempted to distance *Gone With the Wind* from racial concerns, other readers of the book saw race as central to the court case because of the book's cultural importance and iconic status. These readers' comments underscored the text's immense popularity both nationally and internationally, noting that its depiction of the South had achieved a large measure of credibility. Its images are "staples of American cultural reference," and "many regard its depictions of these periods as an accurate portrayal of history."⁷

Still other people stated, “. . . the portrait of slavery done by Margaret Mitchell is one of the most smiley-faced and happy darkies in the field we have in American literature,” and that “Margaret Mitchell’s much-loved book contains many passages that are deeply, repugnantly racist. . . . The book’s racism is as often implicit as it is explicit.”⁸ These comments show that although the Mitchell Estate pointed to the seeming innocence of the text, many readers thought that *Gone With the Wind* saturates popular consciousness with racist imagery and has a devastating effect on the world’s memory of slavery and Reconstruction. This reader explained the book’s harmful consequences: “Although *Gone With the Wind* is a fiction, its portrayal of black and white, North and South, and men and women continue to impact contemporary American culture and media in ways that conflict with the accomplishments and ideals of the Civil Rights movement. For many who have not read histories of the South, it is their only frame of reference.”⁹ She believed that *Gone With the Wind*’s depictions actually hamper progress towards racial and social equality.

Similarly, another reader claimed that there should be an ongoing discussion of the book’s content and impact on society because “*Gone With the Wind* is an entrenched part of the American psyche. As with most literature that is engrained in the collective consciousness of a nation, rigorous and robust debate, parody or criticism about it should be without limitation.”¹⁰ The Mitchell Estate’s refusal to allow any derivative alternatives to *Gone With the Wind*’s dominant ideas, thereby, seemed specious.

For Toni Morrison and others, *The Wind Done Gone* is necessary and important because it is a critical way to expose the racism of the text and destroy its ideological power. In her brief, Morrison brought up a key issue by stating: “The real point of the request to enjoin, the question that seems to me to underlie the debate is ‘Who controls how history is imagined?’ ‘Who gets to say what slavery was like for the slaves?’ The implication of the claims suggests a kind of “ownership” of its slaves unto all future generations and keeps in place the racial structures *Gone With the Wind* describes, depends upon, and about which a war was fought.”¹¹ Another reader noted,

The Wind Done Gone is not a garden hose, and it is not a pirated copy of anyone’s text. It is a book with a wholly new protagonist and a new story. It is a book that punctures cultural myths. It is above all, a book with a clear political message: that *Gone With the Wind*—today the canonical work of popular American culture concerning the Old South—inviciously suppresses the realities, the miseries, the suffering and strivings, indeed the entire life-world of blacks enslaved on the plantation where that beautiful story unfolds.¹²

Because of these injustices, these readers believed that Randall had a right to challenge the book.

SHOULD RACIST COPYRIGHTED TEXTS BE PROTECTED?

In other attempts to discredit *The Wind Done Gone*, many people asserted that Randall's text not only copies, but also grossly plagiarizes *Gone With the Wind*. In their briefs, individuals stated that *The Wind Done Gone* is "an aggregation of characters, themes and language lifted virtually intact from *Gone With the Wind*," that "in crucial ways [it is] a product of the fictional imagination of Margaret Mitchell," and is ultimately a "subliterary parasitical work."¹³ As one person argued: "It seems very clear indeed, therefore, that *The Wind Done Gone* has plagiarized its literary ancestor so as to capitalize on and thus benefit from the resulting notoriety that will accrue to it as the reading public makes the inevitable comparison to *Gone With the Wind* which has become and remains a popular classic since its publication."¹⁴ Commentary such as this evaded the issue of the social consequences of literature by either invoking the primacy of copyright law or by attacking the critical literary value of Randall's text. These claims were meant to nullify Randall's arguments that *Gone With the Wind* contains overt racism, which should be contested.

Because she draws so heavily on Mitchell's work, according to these readers, Randall ultimately undermines her own work. Readers stated, "The book's mission is continually weakened by the lack of originality in language, in scene making, in character naming or character creation,"¹⁵ and "while parody may allude to another work or figure, it does so briefly while securing its own imaginative plot and language so that the parodied work is ultimately put aside in the reader's imagination, replaced by the work being read. In the case of *The Wind Done Gone*, the reader's imagination is always anchored to *Gone With the Wind* precisely because of the constant misappropriation of Margaret Mitchell's characters, language, and plot."¹⁶ These comments maintain that Randall's use of select aspects of Mitchell's text did not undermine *Gone With the Wind*, but rather, continuously reinforced it. They believed that Randall stole from Mitchell. For these readers, *The Wind Done Gone* was a fraud.

A critical positioning of *The Wind Done Gone* within African American literary traditions would have helped critics analyze the book's relationship to and borrowings from *Gone With the Wind*. By situating Randall within the context and workings of other African American novels, one begins to understand how her text complexly builds upon African American literary themes and structures while critiquing *Gone With the Wind*. The centrality of sexuality for her heroine, the revisions of the mulatto figure, the structure and setting of the Reconstruction era with a black female protagonist, and the autobiographical impulse of a slave narrative all mark her participation within multiple African American literary discourses. Her use of elements from *Gone With the Wind* is one artistic strategy, amongst numerous others. *Gone With the Wind* is the fuel for Randall's fire, but it is not the foundation for her work.

While Randall's apparent borrowings were a primary concern for some, many other readers were ultimately unconcerned with Randall's reworking of negative narratives or with her appropriation of aspects of *Gone With the Wind*. They were more bothered by a belief that Randall damaged the Mitchell Estate's ability to benefit from sequels. These readers saw *The Wind Done Gone* as an unauthorized sequel that threatened the Estate's potential profits because "[a] large part of the appeal, and financial success of sequels is due to the fact that they satisfy the public's desire to have filled in additional details about the lives of characters they already know. As those details become filled in with each subsequent book, the mystery and suspense that drove the market for those sequels in the first place begin to dissipate."¹⁷ Indeed, the ability to maintain profits is what these readers saw as most important. They believed that the courts should protect Mitchell's work so that the Mitchell Estate could continue to rightfully make monetary gains from the book.

One person noted, "I can well understand the need of the representative of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* to protect the reputation and credibility of any works which appear to be sequels to the ongoing saga, given the extremely high sales performance of the published works authorized to date. I can appreciate their need to protect and maintain the consistency of the character relationships to support possible future authorized sequels."¹⁸ Therefore, the point that Randall insists is most critical, that *Gone With the Wind* performs an extreme injustice to blacks, ultimately does not matter. As one reader explained,

Simply because a work is popular and recognized as a literary classic, copyright law does not allow any aspiring author to rewrite the original novel or tell it from a different point of view. One cannot with impunity rewrite Mario Puzo's "The Godfather" from a different perspective to correct some perceived slight against Italian immigrants. . . . Similarly, Alice Randall must not be allowed to rewrite Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, even if she wishes (as is her stated intention) to portray the slaves and their role in Southern life at that time in a "truer" light.¹⁹

This statement makes the claim that although particular groups may disagree with the way a work artistically portrays them, copyright law should still protect these portrayals. Hence, because a profitable, although derogatory image achieves a higher goal of monetary gain, its harmful depictions should be rewarded with state sanction. Money becomes the salient subject and not racist imagery.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF RANDALL'S APPROPRIATIONS

Some readers found *The Wind Done Gone* to be an engaging and convincing text. For them, Randall accomplished her goals by reinterpreting

Mitchell's text and introducing characters and settings that do not exist in *Gone With the Wind*. As one person suggested, "The *Wind Done Gone* is ultimately a story of the self-development and coming of age of a person invisible in the world of *Gone With the Wind*, a person that the author of *Gone With the Wind* did not (and perhaps could not) conceive." Moreover, for this person, Randall has created an altogether novel text because she "presents settings that are populated by educated, literate, cultured, and successful blacks, settings that are absent from *Gone With the Wind*."²⁰

In addition, Randall's complex black characters and one-dimensional white characters disrupted the racism in Mitchell's text for many readers. Seeing its connections to other copyright cases in popular culture, one person claimed that "*The Wind Done Gone* . . . is no more a "sequel" to *Gone With the Wind* than 2 Live Crew's rap version of "Pretty Woman" was a sequel to Roy Orbison's song. In both instances—indeed, even more so in this case—radically different social and cultural perspectives were brought to the same material, making what appeared to be attractive in the original work unattractive in the accused's work."²¹ Accordingly, these readers judged *The Wind Done Gone* to be an original text that offered many interesting insights to its readers.

Despite the overwhelming positivity of these comments and their professed beliefs that Randall had indeed accomplished her goals, some readers stated that *The Wind Done Gone* would have little impact on those who were fond of *Gone With the Wind*. Not only would fans of *Gone With the Wind* not see *The Wind Done Gone* as a sequel, they ultimately would not even be the people who would purchase Randall's book: "*The Wind Done Gone* appeals to a distinctly contemporary sensibility for fresh, irreverent, realistic works of fiction that turn old ideas upside down. . . . These market segments would include African-Americans, urbanites, empathetic white liberals, and younger audience members."²² According to comments such as this one, Randall's text effectively "preaches to the choir." Those who would find nothing racist about *Gone With the Wind*, or who would even dismiss its racism for aesthetic or sentimental reasons, would not be attracted to Randall's narrative. One person even held that "It is easier to imagine a buyer of *The Wind Done Gone* wanting to read *Gone With the Wind* to find a reference point, than it is to imagine a reader who loved *Gone With the Wind* wanting to read a book such as *The Wind Done Gone* that parodies and puts it in a critical light."²³ In this way, *The Wind Done Gone* apparently has limited reach and effect upon its desired audience.

AN OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF *THE WIND DONE GONE*

Alice Randall wrote *The Wind Done Gone* to engage and disempower many of the demeaning stereotypes of enslaved black people found in *Gone With the Wind*. Randall is one of a host of black cultural producers

who strategically appropriate racist anti-black stereotypes in an effort to free society from their destructive influence. She chose to revise *Gone With the Wind* because it is a fantastical work of fiction that offers a racist representation of America that resonates with millions. Its widespread global popularity and its unceasing financial success made it a likely choice for Randall.

The Wind Done Gone and the court case to prevent its publication show that *Gone With the Wind* is not simply a beloved story of our past. It is a legal asset with demonstrative value, both ideological and material. It does not appear that Alice Randall expected the Mitchell Estate to respond with a multimillion dollar lawsuit, yet her very act of writing *The Wind Done Gone* shows that she appreciated the entrenched and profitable nature of Mitchell's racist ideas and images.

The enthusiastic response from supporters of the book presents an eerie caution; too many Americans are willing to tolerate prejudice as long as it maintains some aesthetic, sentimental or financial appeal. Many of the respondents in the court case did not dispute the book's racist depictions, implying that the courts should protect the Mitchell Estate's right to profit from the book's inaccuracies and prejudices. Many readers maintained that how we imagine the past has little effect on society today. However, the vigorous attempts to defend this popular image of the South demonstrate that the past is indeed quite influential to the present.

The historical narrative within the pages of *Gone With the Wind*, and the court case to protect this story reflect the power structures and struggles surrounding historical representations and national memory. Accounts of the past often reflect not the actual documentation of historical events, but rather the ways in which societies choose to represent and remember the events. Memory, while often historically based, is contingent and the result of the contestation of competing representations. Some narratives gain primacy. Therefore, Randall's creation of an alternative narrative that consciously makes use of racial stereotypes to disrupt the effect of a popular narrative that has critically impaired national and international understandings of slavery is a political intervention that seeks to usurp ideological power and influence.

The power of *The Wind Done Gone* is not its mere offering of a revision of a popular depiction of the South. Indeed, it seems highly unlikely that the people most immune to *Gone With the Wind*'s racism would even read *The Wind Done Gone*. Ironically, the exposure granted to the book through the court case created the conditions for a significant discursive arena to arise, which opened up a new space for a critical discussion of race, racism, and representation in America. Because of the way in which Randall pointedly manipulated anti-black racist images and narratives that have become staples of American culture, readers rethought these images and narratives, which have remained largely unexamined in regards to their racial ideologies. These realizations happened as an active, communal process as people

exposed to the text shared ideas and opinions through the court case. By offering an alternative way to view this era in American history, *The Wind Done Gone* disrupted the seeming naturalness of a popular racist image of the past. *Gone With the Wind's* stereotypical narrative had to compete for legitimacy, as its once unquestioned reliability faltered.

The reader forms an essential part of any discussion of *The Wind Done Gone*, as Randall's primary motivation in writing the book was to help the reader heal from the racist ideological legacies of slavery. For those who are open to Randall's ideas, *The Wind Done Gone* offers instructive and potentially liberating alternative narratives. By taking the image of the enslaved black woman as her starting point, Randall creates the context for the re-imagining of the lives of all those around her. Randall aids the reader by illuminating a path to empowerment for her protagonist Cynara that she hopes her reader will also take. Exposure to competing narratives of identity helps Cynara begin to break free from racist and sexist understandings of herself and her community. By the end of *The Wind Done Gone*, Cynara gains knowledge that frees her from the grips of some destructive stereotypes. Nevertheless, these lessons are not the final solution for Cynara, as is evident by the open-ended conclusion.

Through this ending, Randall leaves the reader with an understanding of a process—the process by which slavery and its legacy impact generation after generation of blacks and whites. There is no closure for Cynara's story in order to underscore the on-going problem of race and representation. Cynara's struggles represent the continual battle against stereotypical ideas embedded within narratives of racial identities. The reader can thereby be encouraged by Randall's acknowledgement of the continuing problems of racism and by her assertion of the need to disrupt entrenched and ultimately inappropriate narratives.

Through Cynara, the reader also sees the possibilities for growth and healing. Her story concludes not with a "fairy tale happy ending," but with the hope that with time and continuous effort she will arrive at a place of greater empowerment. Cynara's emotional growth is dependent upon her honest confrontation of her internalized stereotypes and racist ideologies. By exploring how she has unwittingly been influenced by these narratives and images, Cynara breaks free from some of the most damaging ones, and imagines a more fulfilling life for herself. She realizes incredible possibilities for her life by reconstituting her memory of the past and of her community.

Not all of Randall's readers, however, were convinced of, or positively influenced by *The Wind Done Gone*. Many of the people who were able to imagine alternative narratives of identities were those who were initially open to the idea. Those who found nothing inherently racist about *Gone With the Wind* were hostile to Randall's text and largely closed to its content.

Despite these limitations, Randall's alternative narrative of a black collective identity contains three important assertions. The first is that the

black community has a hidden and subversive history for which one must actively search. Historical narratives have not always depicted black peoples' varied acts and beliefs. However, upon learning about or simply imagining alternative lives, racist narratives lose some of their power. As Toni Morrison has pointed out, memory and the act of remembering are crucial to the continuous construction of identity and the viability of that identity. What is remarkable about Randall's writing is that she is able to use the accepted, racially motivated history of the slave era as a starting point for the creation of an alternative narrative that completely turns accepted notions upside down.

Second, alongside this often-hidden history are veiled acts of agency that have been important to the survival of members of black communities. Randall does not present this agency as either romanticized or heroic. Cynara uses her resources to exert some control over her life. Her efforts, however, are always constrained by the complexities of racial politics and by the enduring effects of slave ideology. We see then that her agency is in fact a limited one, which speaks to the pervasive power of racism. The mixed results of her actions show that we must always contextualize actions in order to understand the many possible outcomes.

Third, the history and agency of black people demonstrate that freedom existed and exists in various and ambiguous states. Again, Randall does not present a romanticized notion of freedom. Cynara's struggle shows that freedom does not rest in the movement north or the attainment of education, literacy, wealth, or even a family and home. Cynara has experienced all of these things, yet she is still in a state of psychological bondage. As she notes, "and now I have drunk from the pitcher of love, and the pitcher of safety, and the pitcher of propriety till I feel the water shaking in my ears. But thirst still burns. What I want now is what I always wanted and never knew—I want not to be exotic. I want to be the rule itself, not the exception that proves it."²⁴ Freedom entails the dismantling of slavery's ideological and discursive legacy represented by negative narratives and images of black identity, agency, and history. Simply attaining the right of movement or property is not all that blacks should seek in their quest for freedom.

Through these assertions about black identity, *The Wind Done Gone* helps a contemporary audience free itself from some of the negative effects of problematic images and stereotypes presented in the media. By imagining alternatives to racist depictions of blacks, a contemporary audience can find some psychological freedom from the disempowering influence of these images. A contemporary audience can look at its past and those people in it and reevaluate their lives and actions. They can find peace with the Hattie McDaniels and Stepin Fetchits. They can also begin to see the constructed and dependent nature of many of the images of whiteness they have always enjoyed, yet not thought about critically. Readers are given the opportunity to see that there are other useful images and narratives, different from the ones that often dominate American culture. Randall's

contribution, therefore, is a roadmap, a path that one can use to reconstruct identities, black and white. The possibility of an alternative past and an alternative collective image of ancestors provides the possibility for a new image in the present and the future.

CONCLUSION

Many of the comments made in the lawsuit initiated to prevent the publication of *The Wind Done Gone* demonstrate that numerous people need to be able to re-imagine the past in order to create more compelling and empowered narratives of identity in the present. However, the contentious nature of the suit also shows that many others are invested in the maintenance of existing images, even racist ones for ideological and financial reasons. The different comments reveal that people did not uniformly accept the cultural narratives implied in *The Wind Done Gone*. Instead, people held different meanings for the text based upon their social identities and experiences. These different receptions show that the novel did not simply impose its revision of *Gone With the Wind* upon individuals to the possible detriment of the reader. Instead, as demonstrated through the testimonies, readers accepted, revised, and redefined many aspects of the book. There was an active process of reception and meaning making. In addition, the possibility that Randall's appropriation of stereotypes might reify racist narratives of black identity, an issue for critics of black culture with racist appropriations, was not a major concern for readers. For readers, the salient issues were those of monetary rights and the effects of racist ideology. Many people based their justification for or objection to the book upon their understanding of the current role of race and racism in society. Their comments and this court case were thereby largely about racial politics, and about an individual's ability to negotiate the messages found within cultural products that engaged these politics.

4 Unholy Narratives and Shameless Acts

Kara Walker's Side-Long Glance

In 1994, a young artist named Kara Walker stunned the art world with the introduction of her defining work: life-sized, panoramic silhouettes. Walker transformed the silhouette, a medium that has been around since the mid 17th century, with her subject choice. She quickly became a “star” with exhibitions such as “The High Sweet Laughter of Nigger Wenches at Night,” “Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!,” and “From the Bowels to the Bosom.” Other contemporary artists have used the silhouette, but Walker’s installations are distinct for several reasons. First, she chooses the stereotyped and exaggerated black body as the inspiration and focus of her art. She then creates narratives in which to immerse these images. Walker’s silhouettes feature gross black stereotypes such as the coon, jezebel, and black brute. These scenes depict repressed fantasies, grotesque notions, inappropriate activities, and beguiling ambiguities.

Most stunning of all is her expert technique of drawing figures, cutting them out on black paper, and then attaching them to gallery walls in a panoramic fashion. Recent pieces have included projected kinetic light for cinematic effects. Viewers become part of the scene when they walk around the installation and their shadows play with the paper images. In Walker’s utilization of the silhouette, she creates a world of blackness and whiteness that emphasizes the centrality of race, at the same time that she presents a gendered and classed critique of notions of racial identity.

In this chapter, I explore Walker’s creative process, beginning with a discussion of the key moments in Walker’s life that led her to work with representations of grossly stereotyped black bodies. I detail how the silhouette, as an artistic medium, allows Walker to engage entrenched stereotypes. I then provide an analysis of the Negress, one of Walker’s primary characters and artistic persona. I explain how she renders characters like the Negress unreliable and ambiguous despite their apparent familiarity. I conclude this chapter by situating Walker alongside other African American artists who engage derogatory images. I highlight major critiques of Walker, including the letter-writing campaign against Walker initiated by

Betye Saar, a prominent African American woman artist. I explore the differences between Walker's and Saar's appropriation of racist stereotypes, and the concerns that Walker raises for critics like Saar. This analysis helps the reader to understand Walker's silhouettes, which viewers often refuse to engage because of the discomfort and confusion created by the images. This information prepares the reader for the following chapter, which considers museum patrons' reactions to the silhouettes.

CONSIDERING BLACK ART WITH RACIST IMAGES

The technical beauty and horrific visual contrast of Walker's silhouettes are fascinating. Her elite status in the art world and the silhouettes' disturbingly graphic content have given Walker a visibility that reaches far beyond the art world's boundaries. Her demeaning images have managed to provoke as much criticism as praise. Walker has aroused the ire of many artists, journalists, scholars, and writers, who have described her work as "unholy narratives," "shameless three times over," and showing black people as "the perpetrators and victims of sadomasochism, bestiality, sexual abuse of children, infanticide and bizarre procreation."¹ Critics have protested her work and have coerced some museums into pulling Walker's art from their walls. She has been the subject of numerous papers, journals, and conferences. Walker has also come under considerable fire for her commentary regarding her own work.

For many other people, however, Walker's use of the stereotype makes her work cutting-edge and important. In 2004, the Smithsonian American Art Museum awarded Walker the Lucelia Artists Award. The museum's juror statement indicated that Walker's winning was due to her manipulation of the silhouette in a way that has "set a precedent for inhabiting and investigating stereotypes." That is indeed an accomplishment, because Walker works within an extensive tradition of artists who continue to find innovative ways to deal with stereotypical depictions of the black body. While her work may indeed be unsettling and off-putting for some, it has enlivened the beleaguered issue of "appropriate" racial representation in insightful and productive ways for many people who have not usually privileged visual art in their consideration of identity issues.

The public discourse surrounding Walker's work reflects a twist on "the problem of visibility in African-American culture" that Michele Wallace delineates. Walker's silhouettes do indeed reflect concerns surrounding "the lie of black invisibility" and an uneasiness with particular representations of race, gender, and sexuality.² The difference, however, is that the conversations that Walker's work generate do not demonstrate the disavowal of the work of black visual artists; these conversations point to an increasing, if reluctant, recognition of the influence and importance of these artists' work.

Building upon the writings of cultural critics and theorists like Wallace and Kobena Mercer, who expand cultural analyses beyond the realm of black music, the sheer availability of Walker's images and the ongoing dialogue regarding her work and its influence speak to the increasing acknowledgement of these types of cultural products. Walker's work is exhibited in growing numbers of college galleries and public and private museums. It is also available via the Internet, numerous catalogues, DVDs, scholarly texts, and full-length books. In addition, scholars in Women's Studies, Literature, American Studies, History, Cultural Studies, and Ethnic Studies view Walker's silhouettes as productive sites for dialogue and analysis. Her provocative interrogation of American history and racial politics along the lines of gender and race makes Walker's silhouettes a rich resource for critique and discussion.

In many ways, Walker's silhouettes have had a profound impact on American society's ongoing concern with race and representation. The tension between the white-dominated art world's enthusiastic and profitable reception of Walker's work and black communities' concerns over her representations creates a dynamic discursive arena through which one can investigate contemporary representations of racial identities.

THE SIDE-LONG GLANCE AND WALKER'S CREATIVE PROCESS

Kara Walker was born in 1969 and raised in Stockton, California. Her early experiences in California shaped her initial sense of identity, which she admits was largely devoid of a consideration of race. She declares, "I can safely admit that I also have a very white, middle-class background . . . So my experience of racism is similar in that, for a very long time, there were issues that weren't really discussed in the household, which meant that they didn't really exist."³ However, in 1982, the family moved to Georgia, and with this relocation, the South became a pivotal place for Walker, both personally and artistically. In an early interview, Walker describes her feelings regarding the South: "when I was coming along in Georgia, I became black in more senses than just the kind of multicultural acceptance that I grew up with in California. Blackness became a very loaded subject, a very loaded thing to be—all about forbidden passions and desires, and all about a history that's still living, very present . . . the shame of the South and the shame of the South's past; its legacy and its contemporary troubles. Race issues are always at the heart of these matters."⁴ This move catalyzed a fierce process of racialization that catapulted Walker into a reluctant and uncertain awareness of her multiple positions as a black woman within American society.

In the PBS series, "Art 21—Art in the Twenty-First Century," Walker describes her enormous fear of the South. Walker feared moving to Georgia because of her vivid mental images of the South's violent history and

treatment of blacks. Yet, her only experiences of racism arose out of her seemingly unconscious decision to transgress particular racial boundaries. Walker realized that her black skin did not function as the dominant marker of her “racial sin.” The larger problem was that she was a black woman who chose to date white men.

Walker’s partners bore the brunt of racial anger; people called them “nigger lover” or “race traitor.” These reactions surprised Walker. She states, “It thrust me and the other person into a situation that we’re thinking we had surpassed in the 1990s. [I thought] the thirty years or so between the Civil Rights Movement and where I am today had somehow wiped all of that out, you know, and we were all getting along and holding hands.”⁵ Walker also realized that racial ideology influenced some of the white men she dated, as when, in some instances, she became a sexual milestone and an exoticized black sexual object for her partners.

Experiences with black people also contributed to Walker’s racialization. Living in a state that functions as a preeminent site of the memorialization of the Civil Rights Movement, Walker found herself immersed within a black community that was heavily invested in the creation and maintenance of particular narratives of black identity. Walker felt pressure to conform to these narratives, personally and artistically. As an example of this experience, Walker relates her feelings about an art exhibition that occurred each Black History Month:

There’s an annual show in particular that takes place every February or so in Atlanta. I forget what it’s called, but it features black artists. And this is the show that I despise the most . . . I guess what I’m saying is that I considered it almost a joke in itself to begin making work that employs characters from the history of slavery and the ante-bellum myth and literature as subject matter. It’s too perfect for artists, and way too expected of me. When I came up north, to freedom as it were, I was determined to expose all the injustices of being me.⁶

From this commentary, Walker makes clear that she also questioned anti-racist narratives of black identity. She found them just as hegemonic as racist narratives, and longed to subvert them all.

Recognizing the curious nature of these racial and sexual dramas, Walker likened her life to a bad novel that “is set in the South, with all of the dripping Spanish moss and illicit desires and politics and stuff that come with history and blackness.”⁷ As a black woman, she was part of a social plot in which she exerted little control over the ways in which people read her body and identity. Walker’s experience of racialization in the South effectively turned her personal life into a silhouette—a dark outline of her figure. Stereotypical images and narratives dominated people’s perceptions and expectations of Walker, as entrenched racist ideologies overshadowed the unique attributes of her identity.

Questioning the power of these stereotypes, Walker began to explore various visual representations of the exaggerated black body within early 20th century racist advertising. She also explored images within literary texts, such as popular romance novels like *Gone With the Wind* (1936), pornographic novels like *The Master's Revenge* (1984), and slave narratives. In what Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw has come to see as a “postblack artistic practice,” Walker incorporates these textual and literary elements into her art. By signifying upon various American literary and visual texts, Walker both “engages the long history of the representation of the African American body in the United States and strains against African American attempts to control negative images of blacks.”⁸

Despite her purposeful manipulation of black representations, Walker initially resisted doing work that held “black” themes or that one could easily label “black art.” However, in graduate school, she found herself compelled to consider the many hegemonic narratives of black identity that encroached upon her initial desire and ability to inhabit an identity unencumbered by race. Eventually, Walker realized that the silhouette was an excellent medium for her exploration of racialized bodies. With technical expertise, Walker skillfully draws silhouettes that seem to express their racial identities reliably. Utilizing familiar racial markers such as hair texture, the fullness of one’s lips, or the shape of the nose, viewers “recognize” dominant characters from histories of the antebellum south. Characters like the pickanniny and the brute correspond to dominant racist narratives. Other characters, such as the brutal slave master, the jealous white mistress, and the heroic female slave emerge from anti-racist counter-narratives. However, at the moment when the viewer finds comfort in her “racial knowledge”—her ability to appropriately discern a shadow’s character through racial cues—the reader realizes that the character is engaging in unexpected and completely unacceptable activities. The heroic female slave no longer appears noble as she participates in a seemingly pleasure-filled moment of oral copulation with a young white boy. The brutal slave master becomes the weak victim of a willful pickanniny, who defecates and dances around him. The white mistress seems a monstrosity, standing on four legs, instead of two.

Through these deviant actions, the characters in Walker’s silhouettes, although visually familiar, refuse to conform to the dominant narratives of racial identity from which they emerged. Their disconcerting and unfamiliar behavior disrupts the power of the racial cues—the features that seem to define racial identity. The viewer becomes disconnected and confused, as her racial knowledge, her ability to categorize and anticipate a character’s subjectivity through its racial markers, proves untrustworthy. Walker’s silhouettes, thereby, highlight the constructedness and unreliability of racial stereotypes.

The silhouette gained its name from the eighteenth-century Controleur General of France, Etienne de Silhouette. French people remember de

Silhouette mostly for his undesired frugal financial policies. They ridiculed his “penny-pinching,” making his name synonymous with cheapness. The paper cut-outs he helped popularize became known as silhouettes largely because of their inexpensive nature.

Walker appreciates the non-elite and even pejorative status of the historical silhouette. Through the historical silhouette’s connection to economy, Walker symbolically distances herself from her middle-class status, which helped blind her to American society’s racial realities. Simultaneously, she makes a classed critique of the production of art by choosing a form historically beloved by the elite for its entertaining value, yet mocked for its inability to attain the status of high art. She then elevates the form to the status of a precious art object as her silhouettes sell for tens of thousands of dollars. Walker’s use and manipulation of the form continuously turns established notions of value and status around. She raises important questions about the seeming naturalness of structures of hierarchy and significance.

The silhouette is also an apt choice of medium because it corresponds to Walker’s chosen subject matter, the stereotype, in productive ways. Both are inexpensive, make economic use of resources, and are highly effective in conveying information. Moreover, Walker prizes the silhouette because it obscures visible characteristics, or phenotypes, which are the very aspects used to mark racial difference. Walker’s silhouette characters are all the same: dark shadows that imply that a unique figure exists, yet purposely hide any identifying details, which deemphasizes individuality. Both the stereotype and silhouette disguise and conceal, but their illusions consistently hint at their unreliability because they always reflect the presence of a real person.

Walker also appreciates the subversive nature of the silhouette found in its offering of a “side-long glance.” Walker defines the side-long glance as “the little look [that is] full of suspicion, potential ill will, or desire. It’s a look unreliable women give.”⁹ To visualize a side-long glance, imagine yourself standing in front of an audience. If you make a 90-degree turn to the left, you are now facing the side of the room. The audience can only view your profile, not your entire face. If you would like to view the crowd without turning your head, you must look out from the sides of your eyes—a darting glance that only partially reveals your intentions to those in front of you. It is a bit of a suspicious look, as you refuse a full disclosure of your face and emotions.

Walker’s silhouette characters view and engage the world through a side-long glance. In this moment of suspicion, Walker’s characters reveal their distrust of those around them. This sense of suspicion and distrust leads the characters to engage in rebellious acts designed to empower and to ensure their survival. These rebellious acts lay waste to notions of truth embodied in racialized narratives of identity. Characters deviate from expected narratives at whim. They never truly are who they appear to be.

The side-long glance is at the heart of Walker’s artistic practice. Walker states that it acts as a response to the male gaze. However, her commentary suggests that the side-long glance also functions as a critique of familiar

representations of the history of slavery and their attendant racialized images and narratives. The side-long glance interrogates racist and sexist images of the black body, like those found in black memorabilia. It also finds fault with seemingly positive images found in progressive black visual art. Additionally, the glance also responds to epic narratives of slavery, such as racist historical romances like *Gone With the Wind* (1936) and revisionist historical dramas like *Roots* (1976) that rework those narratives.

Walker's art is largely preoccupied with history. Yet, she is less concerned with the actualities of "History," the texts that much of society has deemed accurate and acceptable accounts of America's past. Walker is more concerned with how Americans produce and reproduce memory.¹⁰ She questions what Americans choose to remember about the past, the methods used to create these memories, and how Americans represent these memories to themselves and others. Walker, in other words, is reflecting upon the ways Americans construct a narrative of the past from the historical resources available. Her work is "silhouetting a fiction, the fiction of history: the fiction that has come out of history."¹¹ Therefore, Walker does not construct an alternative "History," or grand and authoritative narrative to counter racist or revisionist ones. Instead, as she describes it, "a 'low,' 'dainty' and 'feminine' American craft is retooled to uncover the disguised, horrific thoughts that she, the artist, is incapable and unworthy of producing . . . Historical accuracy, like its documentation panders to subjective, even corrupt desires."¹² Consequently, Walker is not attempting to reify "History," but rather to explore and explode its seeming consistencies. She uses the side-long glance to untangle sexual and racial myths embodied in historical images and narratives of the black body.

Walker has always imagined her audience partaking in her artistic process. She states, "I thought I could act out a couple of roles I was unwittingly playing down South, that I could embody an assortment of stereotypes and cull art out of them. I wanted to seduce an audience into participating in this humiliating exercise/exorcise with me."¹³ Highlighting her playful character, Walker also discloses that she derives a certain amount of pleasure from her viewers' participation. She demonstrates Robin D. G. Kelley's important assertion that the study of black cultural forms should take into account notions of pleasure and play when she admits, "To some extent I'm grinning while all this is happening . . . A side-long glance at the viewer. I was thinking about creating a situation where the viewer would come in, be shocked or horrified, but interested, so I could see what that reaction was."¹⁴

Walker does not allow her audiences to simply witness the horror of the scenes. Her audiences actively, although not necessarily voluntarily, engage the art when their own shadows become part of the silhouette scenes as they view the images. Some of her later works have included projected light to "put the viewer back in his place, literally to have his/her shadow inserted into the dramas . . . Every time the viewers walk by the work they become part of it."¹⁵ Audiences cannot avoid participating within the

scenes. Their real shadows interact with Walker's created shadows. The shock of the scenes, the horror of participation in the grotesque narrative, and the beguiling beauty of Walker's technically precise form create a dynamic and often ambiguous experience.

The viewing experience that Walker attempts to create for her audience reflects the deeply personal and public nature of racialization. Museum patrons respond to their own internalization of stereotypes and to the public exposure of this internalization, as their own shadows prove uncontrollable and all too eager to interact with the other dark figures on the walls. Thus, Walker's art draws the audience into the difficult experiences of her life; just as she was made to participate in racial dramas, so too must her audience.

In the creation of such a viewing experience, Walker's work functions as a fantasy space. It is a place where history and the present merge, forcing the artist and her audience to become aware of their participation in the mythologies that influence their lives.¹⁶ It is a site through which she gives individuals the opportunity to rethink and negotiate their understanding of American racial history, their participation in and relationship to this history, and the ongoing consequences of slavery for them individually and the nation collectively. Viewers are invited to return the gaze of the historian, artist, or collector, and to offer up their own gaze or, as Walker would have it, their own side-long glance. By taking part in this imaginative reconstruction, audiences are encouraged to consider how the racial imagery embedded in national histories influences their social identities and personal lives.

THE NEGRESS'S ROLE IN THE SILHOUETTES

Walker's artistic persona, the Negress, is one of the principal strategies Walker uses to disrupt stereotypical understandings of identity and subjectivity. The inspiration for the Negress came from Thomas Dixon's novel, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905). In *The Clansman*, Walker found a description of a black girl who is "trouble," and has "the shifty eyes, the cunning mind, power hungry, dark."¹⁷ Walker merges Dixon's racist image with the image of a heroic female slave, such as is found in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). As an outgrowth of Dixon's racist characterization of the black female and Jacobs's anti-racist representation of the heroic black enslaved female, Walker's Negress simultaneously evokes power, powerlessness, fear, familiarity, chaos, and uncertainty.

As an artistic persona, the Negress's power resides in her ability to both create and act within the narratives. As the author/narrator, the Negress tells stories from her unique point of view, thereby granting the viewer access to an unexpected narrative of black identity and subjectivity. As a character, the Negress exerts agency and determination to gain power. She can perform stereotypical narratives, racist or anti-racist, in her desire to attain and wield power. She can also deviate from existing narratives and present an entirely new way of being.

The unpredictable Negress contains and at times reveals impulses that black and non-black communities find disturbing. She exhibits the grossest fears of amalgamation. She is an ideological figure that reflects both racist and anti-racist rhetoric. She refuses to conform to any grand narrative. Nevertheless, the Negress's power is often unstable. She never fully controls the viewer's perceptions; neither can she fully dictate the other shadow figures' behavior.

In a study on the history of the shadow, Victor Stoichita makes an interesting point about Johann Laventer's theories of physiognomy that is relevant to the Negress. Laventer's theory claimed that by tracing one's profile, otherwise known as the shadow, he could reveal a person's inner traits, in essence, a person's soul. Stoichita argues that Laventer's vocation as a Protestant minister, along with Enlightenment thought that held that the devil exists only in the hearts of men, influenced Laventer's theories. As a Christian who believed in the Biblical story of the fall of man that resulted in the inherent sinful nature of all of mankind, Laventer thought the shadow was necessarily "the imaginary area where the soul revealed itself to be full of sin."¹⁸ Consequently, despite constant revisions, Laventer was unable to find the perfect profile that expressed ultimate good. In his second volume, Laventer necessarily resorted to profiles of Christ to reveal the "prototype of physiognomical perfection."¹⁹ While Laventer may have hoped to find something good, he ultimately believed that shadows revealed what was worst in man.

Scholars have long since disproved physiognomy, yet the idea that one's shadow reveals one's base evil sheds light into the antics of Walker's artistic persona. The Negress is full of vice. She is the personification of the dark shadow and its inherent malevolence. She is the projection of this evil onto the black body through stereotypes. The Negress is not real, but real ideas and concerns that have influenced people and their actions for centuries are at the center of this character.

The Negress is an effective element of Walker's art because she complements and embodies the ambiguity and unreliability of the silhouette. Both the Negress and the silhouette are constructed forms that highlight the unreliable contours of racial perception. Both the Negress and the silhouette blur boundaries, mixing the real with the imagined. The Negress appears to resemble the black woman, yet she is a fictional construction based upon racist notions and fears. Likewise, the silhouette appears to show the real, yet it is a mere representation with no substance of its own. The Negress in Walker's scenes disturbs many people because of her disconcerting actions, but her chaotic behaviors are consistent with the history and theory behind Walker's medium and artistic choices.

In the three exhibits included in the reception study, in the next chapter, the Negress plays a prominent role. However, she is not a static character, and each exhibit explores various aspects of this character. The limits of this chapter do not allow for a full examination of the Negress's presence in each exhibit, but a look at the following piece from the Williams College exhibit allows a brief exploration of key characteristics of the Negress.



Figure 4.1 Kara Walker. *Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994. Cut paper and adhesive on wall. 180 x 600 inches (15 x 50 feet). 396.2 x 1524 cm. Installation view at The Hammer Museum at UCLA, photo by Joshua White, Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

In *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of a Young Negress and Her Heart* (1994), the viewer encounters a narrative from the Negress's point of view. The first part of the scene (Figure 4.2), pictures an antebellum young white couple. Their racial identity is evident by their fancy clothing. They are about to engage in a kiss. The sorceress-like figure (possibly another Negress) looming out of the trees, who points a snake-shaped staff at the couple, sits ominously above the two. The white woman's "extra legs" are unnatural and distort her otherwise normal human figure. The additional legs undermine a reading of the white woman character as beautiful and pure, and instead make this body freakish. Additionally, the hint of peril from the black woman in the tree shows that these two white people are not beyond the dangers of slavery. She watches them, ever poised to bless or curse, even if the couple is unaware of her existence or capabilities.

To the far right of the scene, off in the water, another Negress is pictured. She appears to chastise a black child for choking a duck to death.²⁰ The fact that the child does not wear clothing lends to the idea that he is a young slave, still not old enough to work, which was often a prerequisite for clothing. The child has horns, similar to those of popular representations of the devil. He seems to be enjoying his sadistic activity, emphasizing a reading of him as evil by nature. The sword of the man is poised to prod the child, but the man has his back turned. He appears relatively unconcerned with the child's actions, yet prepared to punish him nonetheless. The Negress, in



Figure 4.2 *Gone* Detail, Part I

contrast, appears incapable or unwilling to “back up” her scolding, as her extended figure idly floats on the water. Separated from the action in the scene, the Negress’s body resembles a canoe, a vessel waiting to be used by the couple as they please. She appears incapable of doing anything other than floating and waiting as her elongated figure is no longer a body, but a tool for white people’s enjoyment.

In the second part of the scene (Figure 4.3), three Negresses appear. The first Negress is engaged in oral sex with a white youth, on top of a cliff. She is kneeling, a subservient role. The white male is missing an arm and a leg. It is unclear how he has lost these body parts. Is this the price of his actions? As he lifts his hand toward a floating figure, the Negress consumes him, sexually and literally. She simultaneously devours and pleasures him. Perhaps she is a victim, but one cannot be sure that she is not the victimizer.

To the bottom and right of the scene is another Negress. The short stubby braids pointing out from her head define her as a pickanniny stereotype. She gleefully lifts her elongated legs and drops babies to the ground. Their heads crush as they crash down. She appears to dance as they fall. This Negress is gruesome in her movements and callous in her unconcern for the children. She represents many of the worst fears of slavery. She could be killing the children who are the unwanted results of her sexual violations. Alternatively, her joy could be based on the knowledge that her dead children will never be slaves. Her reasons for killing the children are unknown and perhaps unknowable.



Figure 4.3 *Gone* Detail, Part II

A final figure is floating at the top of the scene. The figure is limp, helplessly held by a rising blob. It is impossible to tell the figure's gender; however, one could read it as the soul of the Negress floating above the horror of the life below. If this is indeed the Negress's soul, how and why does it leave her body? Does the sexual trauma of slavery, experienced by the first Negress, cause her to have an out of body experience? Alternatively, is the floating image the soul of the second Negress, who'd have to be soulless to kill her children? In this scene, Walker references the internal harm done to slaves with the soul floating away, yet complicates the reference with this final figure killing babies. The ambiguity is captivating and leaves open many possible readings. Many meanings are present, and none are absolute.

In the final part of this scene (Figure 4.4), there is a black woman being lifted into the air by a white man who can be identified by his legs, pants,



Figure 4.4 *Gone* Detail, Part III

and jacket; he is yet another distorted figure, for we cannot see his head. With the Negress's legs spread wide, the man penetrates the Negress with his head and torso. Losing hold of the broom, the woman appears in shock at her circumstances. She is helpless to change them, despite the strength in her body indicated by her muscular legs. From her clothing and broom, we know that she is a slave, and thereby a servant without agency. This man exerts considerable power to do to her as he pleases.

The Negresses in *Gone* reflect multiple and contradictory subjectivities. An anti-racist narrative would want to render them victims who should ultimately emerge as noble figures. A racist narrative would read them as base characters, whose enslavement is justified by their horrific actions. Nevertheless, it is difficult to assign simple meanings to their actions or to place them within any easy categories. Although the Negress looks like a familiar figure, the viewer is unable to recognize her within any single, dominant narrative of black female identity.

From Walker's comments, some critics have taken the autobiographical impulse in Walker's work to mean that the Negress is her alter ego. It is more useful to think of the Negress as a character within the scenes created to engender a multi-layered analysis of race and representation and as an artistic persona or tool that Walker uses to accomplish three goals. Walker's first goal is to remain critical of her position as a black woman artist and of the history of the production and consumption of black culture. Within several interviews, Walker has positioned herself as a black woman artist working in an art world dominated by white patronage. She understands the contradictions and implications of her role and status. The Negress allows her to critique herself, other artists, museums, and consumers of her work. By signing her work under the name of the Negress, she is not simply Kara Walker, the artist, but a figure who disdains and invites the rewards and difficulties that her work produces. Through this character, Walker can self-critique and parody her tenuous position.

In addition to creating this critical stance, the Negress is also the method through which Walker connects the past and the present. Walker's scenes often reference the mythologized antebellum South. Walker enters this fictional world through the Negress and sensationalizes it. The Negress is, at times, the narrator of the scenes, and allows Walker to engage this past while commenting on its impact on the present. The Negress is also often the protagonist within the scenes, occupying an outsider/insider position simultaneously. Indeed, as Darby English notes, the Negress is the "vitaly important way that Walker advances a notion of the subject that is ruthless in its critical historicity and yet stands clear of the temptation to simply lose oneself in the simulacrum."²¹ The Negress is the ideal shadowy ghostly form that moves between space and time in order to question the viewer's assumptions.

Additionally, with the Negress, Walker presents a gendered critique of racial identities. As a female character, the Negress allows Walker to insert

this gendered component into her work. Asserting that black identity goes beyond an assumed male subjectivity, Walker brings to the forefront issues of motherhood, nurture, infanticide, rape, desire, sexual power, and victimization. Scholars have shown how the image of the woman in nationalist discourse often represents the nation, its traditions and need for purity.²² Walker disrupts such a symbolic utilization of the black female body, as the Negress acts in a manner that questions acceptable behavior and representation for blacks and women. The Negress transgresses boundaries unthinkable for an enslaved woman in the 19th century. Her circumstances and actions raise questions about the nature of slavery and the influence that it had and continues to have.

Walker also highlights the physical exploitation of the black female body within slavery. She constantly portrays the Negress's progeny and emphasizes the consumption of mother's milk, generated to nourish a child. She presents a classed critique through the Negress by pointing out that the female slave embodies the economics of slavery through her physical labor and reproduction. All of the "natural" functions of her body become grotesque as her body provides financial gains for her master. The assertion of the exploitative production and consumption of the enslaved woman's blackness (physical, cultural, and ideological) is a critique that extends to slavery and the present moment.

CRITIQUES OF WALKER AND HER WORK

Kara Walker's art is an outgrowth of a third wave of artistic creativity by African Americans that emerged in the 1980s. According to Lisa Gail Collins, the first two waves were the New Negro Movement and the Black Arts Movement. Third wave black art is unique because of its ability to work with contradictions, its borrowings from both Western and black diasporic traditions, and the influence of popular culture and high theory. The social and intellectual climate that led to the creation of this work involves the following: an increase in the number of African Americans in art schools in the mid 1980s and 1990s; an increasing number of people willing to buy African American art; and the emergence of theories of postmodernism and multiculturalism, which opened up discursive spaces through which artists could experiment with neglected histories, subjectivities, and mediums.²³ In this climate, Walker studied art and began to use the silhouette to explore representations of the black body.

Although the third wave black art movement may have indeed opened spaces for innovation, members of many black communities are still heavily invested in the production of particular representations of black people. Walker is part of a controversial group of contemporary artists who explore and re-present degrading images of black people, in order to revise stereotypical, racist imagery. Many critics disdain this art, claiming that the work

of artists like Robert Colescott, Glenn Ligon, David Levinthal, and Michael Ray Charles reifies racist imagery and disregards the pain and suffering of enslaved people. However, Kara Walker, whom an influential art journal called the “Jerry Springer of the fine arts world,” evokes both the most ongoing praise and the most virulent condemnation.²⁴

Never denying the grotesque nature of Walker’s scenes, many art critics praise Walker for finding a novel and productive way to discuss blackness as a construct. Anne Wagner applauds Walker’s “complex process of figuration and reference” in the narrative scenes of the silhouettes. The black figures’ performance of grossly distorted notions of black identity speaks to the falsity of these representations, demonstrating that blackness is a loaded sign and not something marked by a living body. The silhouettes deny that either blackness or whiteness is available via the “observable epidermal real,” alternatively asserting that the two are constructs that mutually define each other. Additionally, with all of the sexual interactions between white and black characters within the silhouette scenes, one can assume that some of the characters are biracial. However, biracial or multiracial identity is never confirmed. This is a world of black and white, yet the viewer can never be certain of a shadow’s racial identity. Walker’s greatest transgression, therefore, is her Fanonian insistence that even seemingly progressive images of black people fall prey to the notions of whiteness and the racist caricatures that they so actively attempt to subvert.²⁵

Other admirers of Walker, such as Darby English, commend Walker’s ability to deal with the realities and complexities of representing blackness and the black body in a society that proclaims to be “beyond race” due to the seeming acceptance of theories of multiculturalism. Walker presents multiple notions of identity that complicate easily appropriated and manipulated representations. English praises Walker’s refusal of “timid, self-memorial, ‘one-identity-at-a-time, please’ positions” and “give-’em-what-they-want representation.”²⁶ Indeed, one of the most challenging aspects of Walker’s work is its questioning of the seeming truth of history and the ways in which it asserts a past in which identity and subjectivity deny simple representation.

Desiring appropriate cultural critique, English cautions the viewer not to confuse who Walker is with what she is doing in her work. This is an important point for the inability to separate the artist and the art is a prominent feature of negative critiques of Walker. In one notable article, the editor of the *International Review of African American Art* believed it was fair game to discuss Walker’s marriage to a white German man, her hairstyle of braided extensions, and her pregnancy. Although this reputable art journal could have focused the article on Walker’s art, the editor criticizes the artist’s personal life choices. The author implies that Walker’s decision to marry a white man and wear false hair somehow makes her inadequate to represent African Americans in her art. Additionally, by describing Walker as “a dejected girl” whose approaching motherhood may help her rise to

create great art, the editor suggests that pregnancy and motherhood will somehow make Walker a better person and artist. She assumes that the creation of a black child will somehow enable Walker to better represent their blackness. These offensive comments attempt to wound the black artist and force her to conform to particular ideals and behaviors.

In her discussion of Walker's images as part of African American post-memorial art that engages the continuous sexual domination and familial relationships of female slaves and the master class, Arlene Keizer notes that much of the controversy surrounding Walker's images is caused by her refusal to represent the raped enslaved black woman with an "attitude of mourning or outrage." The complexity and ambiguity of Walker's images, which raises the possibility of numerous contradictory subjectivities, provide an uneasy experience for viewers. Despite critics' reactions to Walker's "hubris" and the "indeterminancy" of her images, Keizer finds Walker's work to be a great success for it is "the first widely disseminated body of visual artwork by an African American woman practitioner that engages questions of race deeply and avoids prescriptive or proscriptive answers."²⁷

The debates surrounding Walker and the influence of her work is reminiscent of the historical social conflict within African American communities regarding black artistic practices. In particular, one is reminded of the controversy surrounding Zora Neale Hurston and her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Most notably, Richard Wright hotly protested the novel because of its portrayal of black folk culture. Wright believed that Hurston depicted damaging stereotypes and demeaning imagery. In addition to her reliance on white patronage and focus on rural (read by some critics as backward) black Southern culture, critics disdained Hurston for antics such as signing letters to white friends, "Your pickanniny, Zora."²⁸

By seemingly deviating from acceptable lifestyle and artistic choices, artists such as Hurston and Walker often become targets. Some black communities have historically expected educated and talented black people, such as these women, to participate in, if not lead, sanctioned activities that ultimately aid in the achievement of these communities' goals.²⁹ In the eyes of these African American elites, individuality, nonconformity, and deviation from "appropriate" images of black uplift count as cultural misbehavior and will not be condoned.

Moving from her person to her work, others have focused their critique on the negative aspects of Walker's images. For example, in 1999, the Detroit Institute of the Arts felt the pressure behind such worries when community members objected to the inclusion of one of Walker's pieces. The DIA chose to pull Walker's work out of their show, "Where the Girls Are: Prints by Women," until they could present it with "appropriate didactic material."³⁰

A second example, comes from the actions of Betye Saar, a prominent African American woman artist, who launched the most striking attempt to censor Walker when she mounted a letter-writing campaign against Walker.

Saar faxed and mailed a letter throughout the country to artists, museums, writers, and community leaders, asking, "Are African-Americans being betrayed under the guise of art?" and why has Walker been "rewarded for this imagery with a \$190,000 award from the prestigious MacArthur Foundation?" In the letter, Saar is critical of Walker's success, which includes the sale of installations for as much as \$80,000. Saar even offers to send more information on Walker if one is willing to send her a self-addressed envelope. She urges readers to contact their local art museum, cautioning, "these images may be in your city next."

Saar's attempt to censor Walker is ironic because Saar also uses derogatory images in some of her art. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) is the most well known. When Saar created this piece, she became one of the most prominent artists engaging stereotypes and demeaning images. In *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* Saar takes on the mammy myth embodied in the image of Aunt Jemima. A repeating image of Aunt Jemima from the well-known pancake brand lines the back of an open box. In front of this wallpaper is a standing ceramic mammy figurine that had previously functioned as a notepad holder. Another mammy holding a crying and distressed small child stands where the notepad had been located.

Saar disrupts mammy's benevolent familiarity with weapons of self-defense or pre-emptive violence, evident by the gun in the mammy figure's left hand. Saar provides mammy with alternative cultural moorings by including a black fist, which is representative of Black Power. Through this assemblage, Saar alters the servile racist image of mammy and inserts a competing meaning of the smile on the face of the black woman. With a gun, it becomes conceivable that mammy wants to do something more than just nurture her "white family," as the myth suggests. The peace and joy that the mammy image soothingly brings is undermined by the potential for liberating violence that Saar depicts. Saar continues to engage derogatory images, particularly using those of black women pictured as servants. Her solo exhibitions "Workers and Warriors: The Return of Aunt Jemima" (1998) and "In Service: A Version of Survival" (2000) are completely devoted to an examination of stereotypes.

Although one may agree that *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* and Saar's other exhibitions effectively rework the mammy construction, one must still ask, what is the difference in her use of derogatory images and Walker's silhouettes? What is so different and offensive about Walker's work? Is it that Walker's installations are highly sought after by white elites and purchased for vast sums of money? Alternatively, is it the perceived unfairness of the art world's acclaim for such a young artist, while disregarding other, more established artists who present similarly engaging work? Perhaps it is rather that Saar uses found racist objects in her work, while Walker constructs these images anew. In addition, it appears that Saar's objective is more apparent. Saar wants to re-create the racist image in an empowering way, while Walker's narratives are fueled by ambiguity and complexity that



Figure 4.5 Betye Saar (b.1926). *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972. Mixed media assemblage. 11 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 8" x 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", signed. Collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum; purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (selected by The Committee for the Acquisition of Afro-American Art). Photograph courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY.

leave the viewer to fill in the gaps. The potential that viewers will leave the exhibit without a clear interpretation of the ills of racism is seemingly greater in Walker's art.³¹

Another of the critical differences between Saar and Walker is each artist's primary concern in her artwork. While stereotypes are the major theme for both women, Saar is most concerned with the actualities of history—with the women upon whom derogatory images such as mammy are so erroneously based. She reworks derogatory representations and forces them to speak to the individuality, the cultural specificity, and the beauty of the people they fail to adequately model. As Jane Carpenter points out, Saar transforms "each stereotype as an actor: a character with agency in a narrative of survival."³² Saar's work functions as a historical revision of narratives of African American identity. It is a political intervention that asserts grand and beautiful images to refute derogatory ones. Walker's project is neither a narrative of uplift nor a recognizable visual trope of black resistance.

WALKER'S RACIST APPROPRIATIONS VS. TRADITIONAL BLACK ARTISTIC STRATEGIES

Walker's silhouettes represent an artistic alternative to black communities historic anti-racist representational strategies. Her silhouettes manipulate familiar images and narratives of racial identities to make room for non-hegemonic ones. However, Walker does not feel the need to present "positive" or traditionally accepted images of the black or white body. She refuses to use traditional, progressive imagery and narratives of black uplift, hoping that her audience will realize that these familiar representations deny the complexity of black experience and identity. Walker implicitly rejects the premise that progress lies in the outcome of traditional anti-racist representations of slavery. For Walker, freedom is the ability to resist all hegemonic narratives and to inhabit any position that gives one pleasure and a sense of power.

This definition of freedom troubles Walker's black critics, in part, because Walker's art challenges the notion of historical truth. It questions if we can ever really know what happened in slavery. This is a difficult premise for many blacks, as many writers, artists, and revisionist historians have actively tried to (re)member and revise dominant accounts of slavery. Many have tried to create a "usable past" out of the era of slavery, in particular, to create a past in which black people go through slavery's flames to emerge as strong and noble.³³ Walker questions who black people would be if they did not have this history. Who would white people be? What happens to black people if they cannot claim the history of slavery in an empowering way? How would each group understand their present realities without these particular histories?

Although the silhouettes reference history, Walker is not trying to create an alternative History. Rather, she is most concerned with the psyche and the imagination. Her silhouettes are full of dark, fantastic scenes that visualize narratives that many do not want to see or experience. In an interview, Walker states:

Confronting the viewer with the contradictory desires and interpretations that s/he cannot bear to acknowledge, my work reveals images that I too am shocked to encounter in the dark alleys of my imagination. You may be seduced, you may be outraged. Therein lay the unspeakable trappings of our visual codes. While accusations and infantilizing critiques fly, the impassioned connections that many people have with these images suggest the continued currency of an exaggerated black body in American culture that refuses to be buried and is clearly intact enough to warrant further investigation.³⁴

Walker does not transform derogatory images into dignified ones, because she is not attempting to correct the histories these images deform. Rather, she wants to delve into the darkest part of the subconscious where these historical images play, to force the viewer to recognize and deal with these images, which have devastating consequences for Americans, socially and culturally. The lack of a desire to remake these images into a “thing of beauty” consistent with the political and aesthetic sensibilities of moments such as the Civil Rights Movement, makes Walker’s work, for some, an act of sabotage. The ambiguity of Walker’s work and its seeming reification of stereotypes prove difficult for others. Without a clear alternative to the derogatory components, there are many concerns regarding the work’s final message.

In 1926, W.E.B. Du Bois stated, “Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.”³⁵ Criticism of Walker points to the continued currency of a DuBoisian concept of the role of art and the black artist, and to a historical and central problem within black cultural production: What should be the purpose of black art? This debate emerged as early as the turn of the 20th century. Should Walker be able to create these images that present, at best, ambiguous images of blacks and, at worst, stereotypically racist images? As a female artist who is African American, is she responsible to black communities? What exactly is at stake in the artistic (re)presentation of the racialized body, both black and white?

There is often much contention around these representations because, historically, black lives have been at stake. Moments of brutality against the African Diaspora, such as the Middle Passage, slavery, post-Reconstruction white violence, and segregation, were largely premised upon narratives

of black difference and white superiority supported by demeaning representations of black people. In "New Cultural Politics of Difference," Cornel West discusses how many black people have attempted to counter degrading representations, in part, because of such moments. However, he finds these attempts at subversion moralistic and communal, because they depict seemingly positive black images that ultimately hold an assimilationist and homogenizing impulse. Some black people have posited these alternative images as "more real" and "true" representations of the black community. However, West cautions that these anti-racist images are purposeful social constructions, and that "[a]ny notions of 'the real Black community' and 'positive' images are value-laden, socially loaded, and ideologically charged."³⁶

A fundamental tension within black cultural production arises from the continued currency of racist narratives of black identity that impose static and largely derogatory definitions upon the black body. The stakes are high for black artists, as they know all too well that narratives of identity tied to the black body are important determinants of the treatment and livelihood of members of the African Diaspora. This reality has created a second oppressive force that pressures black artists to create work that not only resists racist ideology, but that does so by conforming to particular demands for traditionally accepted anti-racist counter narratives. Kobena Mercer defines this phenomenon as the "social responsibility of the artist paradigm," in which black artists are "burdened with a whole range of extra-artistic concerns precisely because . . . they are seen as 'representatives' who speak on behalf of, and are thus accountable to, their communities."³⁷ This push to speak for "the race" reproduces the Black Arts Movement's trope of authenticity, which then reinforces an authoritarian black cultural criticism that focuses on value rather than on the creation of an open dialogue that helps one understand how these works operate in the public sphere.

Maintaining the existence of a vicious representational quagmire, Walker poses something that has proved difficult for much of her audience and especially her black critics. Instead of uncritically rejecting the stereotype, she engages it. She decreases the aesthetic difference between seemingly progressive and explicitly racist images. Her work does not move away from the ugliness and pain of the stereotype. It amplifies it.

The silhouettes encourage viewers to take the stereotype to its extreme conclusions and then explore the space in which they find themselves. This exploration proves even more difficult as Walker denies African Americans the comfort and shielding of privacy. Walker boldly draws the images larger than life and then exhibits them in the white and Eurocentric spaces that have historically perpetuated the fetishization of the black body. She does not shy away from or disavow the homogenization or commodification found in black culture. Both processes, homogenization and commodification, are central to the construction and the representation of identities

in and through black culture. She simply says, "This is how it is, deal with it." Many refuse to engage Walker's work at this level, and instead focus their critique on the artist. Indeed, "by inhabiting and purveying an interracial, post-Negritude encounter for her spectator, Walker is the 'bad girl' who rejects the role that her community would have her assume."³⁸

Walker's artistic move is important, not only because of its censure, which highlights this historic problem in black cultural production, but also because it moves against the growing impulse in the United States to see ourselves as "beyond race." Walker, as do other artists, insists that race still matters. The discomfort that her work creates for many black people points to the continued negative impact of racial ideologies. That reality drives the push for homogenizing artistic strategies of black uplift. Until these racial realities are addressed adequately, black cultural production, such as that of Kara Walker, will continue to fall within a simplified discourse and critique that impede other important conversations. In addition, this simplified discourse obscures and detracts from more pressing scholarly concerns, including ongoing questions regarding the effects of Walker's work on her audience, and its effectiveness in disrupting stereotypes. As the next chapter explains, audience response reflects largely different issues regarding Walker's work. These responses greatly expand our understanding of the influence of contemporary black cultural products with demeaning imagery, a key issue in one's consideration of this contemporary artistic strategy and aesthetic.

5 Racist Visual Images? Museum Comment Books and Viewer Response

Public critical discourse positions Kara Walker's work within debates of race and racial responsibility. Critics are largely concerned with Walker's open-ended use of painful anti-black stereotypes, which could possibly reinforce racism. For many of these critics, the viewer's interpretation of the silhouettes is a primary focus. However, almost none of this commentary gives museumgoers space to voice their ideas regarding Walker and her art. Viewers' voices are nonexistent within the discussion. Additionally, to date, there has been no scholarly study of audience reception of Walker's silhouettes in order to assess the possible influences of the silhouettes on Walker's audience.

This chapter seeks to begin this conversation by introducing a novel source of audience response: museum comment books. I begin with an explanation of why I chose each comment book included in this study, and why these comment books are useful for audience reception studies. A comparison of viewers' concerns with scholarly concerns is a central point of this section. I then move into an investigation of the issues viewers raised in the comment books. I focus on four key areas of response: (1) Did viewers understand what they saw? (2) What emotional responses emerged due to difficult images? (3) Could viewers discern what was true and what was fiction; did misreadings occur? (4) How did viewers respond to the graphic sexual imagery? Throughout the chapter, I provide context for the different responses, providing insight into the consequences of Walker's art on her viewers. Moreover, through this analysis I highlight and detail the audience's process of active interpretation and meaning making, which presents further factors to consider when assessing the consequences of the anti-black stereotypes in Walker's art.

THE USEFULNESS OF COMMENT BOOKS

Museum comment books are blank notebooks that museums provide to patrons to record their thoughts on the exhibits. These "found" sources of audience response provide a wealth of anecdotal information regarding one of the primary issues in debates regarding Walker's silhouettes. Often,

comment books are just records of attendance at an exhibition; however, the comment books provided for Walker's exhibits proved to be an ideal place for viewers to disclose and work through the many emotions aroused by the silhouettes.

When writing in the book, upon leaving the exhibit, patrons who chose to contribute carried different assumptions regarding who would read their comments. Some addressed their words to the museum, others wrote to Kara Walker, still others wrote to other individuals who had written comments.¹ The existence of a number of ongoing dialogues challenging particular comments suggests that anonymity also emboldened viewers to respond to each other.

Much of the critical commentary surrounding Walker from scholars, journalists, and other artists either valorizes Walker for her outrageous, yet technically precise art, or vilifies her for perceived racial transgressions. Viewers, however, maintained a different relationship to these debates. They were less concerned with the artist's racial identity or about the art's engagement with the traditions or concerns of black communities.² Although some viewers did identify with the work along racial lines, most people did not find Walker's work "good" because it depicted negative imagery in a seemingly innovative or productive way, or "bad" simply because it depicted negative images of black people in a seemingly derogatory way.³ Viewers predicated their comments largely on the emotion and the response that the images evoked. In other words, what mattered to viewers most was the impact that the art had on them personally—how it made them feel, what it made them think about, and what it could do for other viewers. Viewers went into these exhibits with preconceived, although perhaps subconscious, notions about what art should and should not do. If the images met these unstated expectations, viewers expressed positive responses to the work. Viewers offered critical responses if the images did not.

The comments from viewers demonstrate a diversity of issues regarding the artwork that are not reflected in published (academic, journalistic) commentaries. Additionally, viewer comments broaden the analysis of Walker's images and provide a richer set of factors to consider in a discussion of the impact of the use of stereotypical imagery. My analysis of viewer comments explores these expectations and highlights what the audience believed art should do and how this shaped their viewing experience. There was no majority response and comments reflected a range of reactions to the work, including praise, disdain, and responses somewhere in the middle.

I chose comment books from the following three solo exhibitions:

- *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Where Such May Be Found by Myself, Missus K.E.B. Walker, Colored*. The Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington. September 12-November 30, 1997.

- *Kara Walker: An Abbreviated Emancipation (from the Emancipation Approximation)*. University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, Michigan. March 9-May 26, 2002.
- *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress*. Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts. August 30-December 5, 2003.

The comment books from these exhibitions have several important similarities. Each of them comes from an exhibit that occurred at a university museum where the administration hosted a number of educational programs about Walker. These programs included presentations by curators, scholars, other artists, and at times, Walker. These talks offered background biographical information on Walker, as well as an explanation of her artistic strategies. In each of these instances, comment book writers had access to a large amount of interpretative information, prior to or in conjunction with their viewing, largely unavailable at other art institutions not connected to the academy. Potentially, these viewers were highly informed and educated regarding Walker's work. The availability of didactic materials that explained Walker's work and intentions often enabled viewers to move beyond initial discomfort and to evaluate the work in light of the given information.

Additionally, each of these exhibitions coincided with the publication of a book on Walker and her work. *Presenting Negro Scenes* was a traveling exhibit that began at the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago. Its catalogue, *Kara Walker: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago* (1997), includes images of the silhouettes and Walker's writings. *An Abbreviated Emancipation* coincided with the publication of *Kara Walker: Pictures from Another Time* (2002), which also includes images of Walker's work, as well as a critical essay and an interview with Walker. Lastly, *Narratives of a Negress* resulted in the publication of *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress* (2003), which includes several scholarly essays on Walker, in addition to some of her own writings. Each publication features essays by the curator and or scholars connected with the exhibition. This reveals not only each institution's critical investment in the Walker exhibit, but also the existence of individuals who were capable of producing interpretations of her work. The presence of such individuals, the scholarly talks and abundant publicity given to promote the work and publications, in addition to the large quantity of didactic material made available to viewers, are influential to the viewing experience.

DID VIEWERS GET IT?

Viewers' comments in the books indicate that some patrons held the artist and the museum jointly responsible for the viewing experience. These patrons praised the exhibit if the curator displayed the images in what the

viewer believed to be a stimulating and easily understood manner. As one viewer stated, “This was a truly provocative exhibit—thoughtfully and evocatively presented.” In addition, at the Williams exhibit, people were highly impressed with the museum and its docents, as shown by comments such as, “Museum associates are wonderful.” Perhaps this satisfaction was due to the content of the didactic material and its perceived high quality. Comments such as, “Not always easy, certainly a challenge, but as ever we are impressed by the level of scholarship,” imply that education and positive promotion of Walker helped viewers understand her work and enhanced the viewing experience. Comments in this book largely praised the museum for the thought-provoking and thoughtful presentation of materials, which seemed to translate into greater approval of the images and artist. These statements imply a resistance to Walker’s purposeful obfuscation and an appreciation for the guidance and clarity the museum provided.

Alternatively, at the Henry museum viewers implied that easily understood exhibits were unnecessary and expressed admiration for the show precisely because it left them with feelings of confusion. These viewers expressed a greater willingness to explore the difficult narratives, as Walker had so hoped. One viewer wrote, “Thanks for putting this up (even though it may take a few more visits for me to have *any* real idea of what to make of it) and challenging us with it . . . its *nice* to leave unsure of what you saw.” This viewer did not want the museum to tell her what to think and enjoyed having a mental morsel on which to chew.

Further comments in the book suggest that many of these viewers appreciated the confusion, believing it fostered dialogue amongst people. Patrons exclaimed, “Kara Walker should be proud. Her confusion realized in these images is a much needed forum for discussion among all people” and “one of the great aspects of your work is that you don’t explain it all to ‘us.’ We are left to ourselves to determine meanings yet—and the other great aspect is it invites dialogue and discussion which [is] so absent in wider American culture.” For these viewers, artwork should be challenging and should not contain an imposing explanatory message. The purpose should be to get people to think and engage other people in a discussion.

At the Michigan exhibit, comments reflected both sensibilities. Debates emerged within the Michigan comment book regarding the desirability of didactic materials versus the problem with or benefits of confusion. Unlike the exhibits at the Williams and Henry museums, the Michigan museum displayed Walker’s silhouettes without titles or captions, forcing viewers to confront the images on their own terms. While Walker lectured at the Michigan museum, and the museum posted an explanatory wall-sized essay at the exhibit’s entrance, many viewers were simply not satisfied.

Some viewers complained of a dearth of didactic material and a difficult viewing experience. Initial comments indicated that these viewers disliked having to “figure it out.” Similar to patrons at the Williams museum, they desired accessible and easy interpretations, claiming, “Very interesting and

unique, but the exhibit would be better explained if there were titles and/or captions to get a better idea to what they mean.” Another agreed, writing, “It would be nice if you had someone explaining the draws [*sic*] ‘cause they are pretty hard to figure out.” One viewer, in his desire for additional information, stated, “This is brilliant—beautiful in both concept and execution. Now—how about an African-American docent/instructor to properly explain it to the uninformed?” His comment makes clear that the museum should consider the race of its representative person. For this patron, it was necessary to have an African American interpretation of work dealing with African Americans and slavery.

These comments reflect viewers’ perception that they were unable to understand and interpret the materials. Although these viewers had access to explanatory materials, their comments reflected unfamiliarity with the art and the history behind the silhouette. This may have contributed to their feelings of confusion and disconcertion. These viewers did not believe that they had the tools to interpret the art and preferred to have “a professional” to guide their viewing. In this sense, these viewers implied that the understanding of art is for the trained, the elite, and that these experts are then responsible for disseminating the information. Additionally, it showed a reluctance to participate in the exhibit as Walker had hoped. Patrons did not want to personally explore the scenes or to grapple with their insinuations on their own. They resisted such an engagement with the art, and they preferred a mediating force.

However, within the same Michigan comment book, other viewers challenged these notions. Writing directly next to, or underneath comments asking for clarification, people indicated that they deplored the idea of having to be told what the images meant. One person maintained, “I appreciate the lack of explanatory titles, etc. I find that people today prefer to be told what to think and what everything means—I find this trend to be quite disturbing.” Another person wrote, “No captions are necessary for the horror it conveys. The viewer should leave bewildered, shocked, appalled . . . tantalized to learn more about America’s filthy secrets and patriarchy’s devastating lies.” Similar to patrons at the Williams museum, these viewers appreciated the difficult material and their struggle to work through the exhibit. Unlike the majority of their fellow patrons, they felt entirely capable of understanding and evaluating the images.

It is possible that the Michigan museum did not anticipate these viewers’ discomfort. However, it seems more probable that the museum critically chose to expose viewers to the silhouettes without didactic material. There is some evidence for this assertion in *Kara Walker: Pictures From Another Time*, the publication documenting the Michigan exhibit. In the foreword of the book, the director of the museum, James Christen Steward, discusses Walker’s images of the antebellum South. He writes that the museum was well aware that the images were not only controversial, but also “problematic for viewers.” Despite this point, Steward states that the

concerns present in Walker's work were so important that the University of Michigan Museum of Art wanted "a site-specific installation from Walker for its [the museum's] most public space, the Apse."⁴ Instead of breaking down Walker's images into discernible pieces with titles and/or captions, the Michigan Museum of Art left out words that would disrupt the Apse's amplified effect.

The Apse's semicircular structure conforms to Walker's professed admiration of the cyclorama and her desire to mimic its presentation of history. In a previous interview, Walker stated, "just like the Cyclorama in Atlanta that goes around and around in an endless cycle of history locked up in a room, I thought that it would be possible to arrange the silhouettes in such a way that they would make a kind of history painting encompassing the whole room."⁵ Walker plays on the fact that the Cyclorama is exhibited in a fairground, suggesting that museums and galleries are similarly "carnival-like" and full of "spectators." The Apse was ideal for it allowed Walker to display her images in an imposing and inescapable way that inevitably drew the viewer into Walker's uncomfortable world, while signifying on the very space that allowed this uneasy viewing.

EMOTIONAL RESPONSES TO DIFFICULT IMAGES

In addition to the ability to interpret the images, comments also referenced the emotional aspect of the viewing. Within all three books viewers alluded to how the silhouettes made them feel, with comments such as, "Its amazing how much detail and emotion you can convey with a silhouette!" The silhouettes' surprising ability to present a wealth of information with such an economic use of detail beguiled many viewers.

The silhouettes became even more forceful as they caused pleasure or pain through their representations. Some members of the audience did not know what to do with the emotions that the scenes engendered, with one person responding, "I still don't know how I feel after seeing [Kara Walker's exhibit]. It stirs and disturbs the soul." The majority of viewers, however, sat on one side of the fence or the other, claiming on the one hand that the work should evoke strong emotions, or on the other that the reactions that Walker generated were difficult and ultimately counterproductive.

Some viewers came to the exhibit, in part, because they wanted to be shook up. This is evident from comments such as "scary and disturbing but needed;" "this show woke me up, great job;" and "evoking unprecedented emotions within myself. Thank you." These comments show that some people no longer felt an emotional response to images and narratives of slavery and desired art that challenged them intellectually and emotionally. These viewers wanted images that were shocking and difficult to ignore. As one person wrote, "The best exhibit I've seen in the Henry so far. People are afraid to look at it. They see sh** and mill around and try not to make

any noise. Powerful work.” In the same book another agreed, stating, “So much of “modern art” is vacuous and self indulgent and then just plain bullsh** . . . it isn’t memorable, meaningful or sustaining . . . I suppose I want to be moved, provoked, touched . . . something and your work has that effect upon me.” Comments such as these showed that not only did components of Walker’s audience feel that society had become immune to visual imagery, but that art institutions and artists were complicit in the trivialization of artwork. For these people, Walker’s innovation came from the fact that she forced her audience out of the familiar and thereby energized the art world.

While the shock of Walker’s scenes invigorated many, some audience members intimated that their jarring nature also made the viewing difficult. One viewer wrote that the work was like “pain and beauty. Can this stew be ingested? Digested?” After reading this comment, another person wrote directly underneath, “I am sorry for those who feel they must reject the beauty and the pain of this exhibit.” Despite the discomfort, however, some viewers praised Walker because the images made them think differently and question their assumptions. Viewers declared, “Very thought provoking and disturbing—each time you see it . . . It makes you confront assumptions about history, race, gender, class and sexuality head on” and “The work is extremely disturbing. However with the issues that are placed on the table by the artist the work comes alive. The work has left me to wonder, with questions, but above all it has opened my eyes to a new aspect/view.” These comments suggested that the disconcerting nature of the exhibit left viewers incapable of ignoring Walker’s message, although they were often unclear as to the meaning of the message. Viewers often did find themselves thinking, questioning history and contemporary society in new ways. Consequently, for many of these people, the viewing experience was uncomfortable, but the subsequent insight and awareness was productive.

While there were strong responses both praising and criticizing the work, many people were unsettled in their opinions and felt conflicting feelings during the exhibit. One viewer stated, “It’s amazing! And painful to look at. It makes me want to rip it up in a rage AND sit before it and cry helplessly. It gets in the gut.” Another claimed, “It made me sick to my stomach (literally), and laugh and wonder.” These people pointed out that for them the experience was both painful and pleasurable. There were no easy explanations. These viewers were awed by the artist’s ability to bring out such contradictory emotions in them simultaneously.

One viewer eloquently commented on the duality experienced in the viewing, stating, “With your graceful, delicate cutting you have created an emotionally supercharged world which smacks you right upside the head, and sends you right back into that odd, uncomfortable dream-like state.” This same viewer revealed that part of the reason for this polarizing good and bad experience was the formal aspects of Walker’s artistic technique.

The viewer asserted, "You have created a world that while on the surface, is graphic and decorative, a beautiful interplay of form and white space, is in content both surreal and disturbing, yet dreamy . . . It is a delicate balancing act not many can master." For this person, the beauty of the silhouette, the precision of the cut and the mastery of subtle detail all strikingly contrasted with the graphic, horrific narratives the silhouettes illustrated.

For some, this contrast was productive, as one person revealed, "The images are beautiful, provocative and daring. It is a wondrous showing of how detail can convey dramatic messages." For others, the combination proved burdensome, as the work held "[s]ome decent technique and motion" but "[o]verall the content vastly overruns the form however." Whether positive or negative, comments such as these demonstrate that this contrast was fundamental to the viewing experience. The superficial beauty of the form combined with the horror of the images created an incredibly ambivalent experience with which the viewer had to contend.

DISCERNING TRUTH FROM FICTION— DID MISREADINGS OCCUR?

Many viewers believed the silhouette scenes expressed a readily discernible truth and/or reality about black peoples' experience in slavery. For example, viewers wrote, "Ms. Walker, thank you for telling the truth," and "Thank you for your creative and fearless expression of the truth!" Viewers also wrote, "Wonderfully challenging work involving painful stereotypes and unfortunate realities of slavery and aftermath," and "True, true, true, true. It happens and did happen. No denying." These comments implied a societal disavowal of important aspects of the slaves' experiences and asserted that one must courageously go against mainstream thought to correct these erroneous histories. They liked Walker's images because they expressed this seemingly neglected information.

By stating that Walker's silhouettes boldly depict the truth and reality of slavery, viewers declared that existing representations of slavery were somehow false. However, considering the growing body of revisionist historical, social, and cultural research, I would suggest that the reason that existing narratives and images of slavery no longer ring true for a contemporary audience is less because of an inaccuracy in the content of these representations, and more because these representations no longer appear effective with regard to their perceived function in society. People have become desensitized to images of slavery and many current human rights violations. Instead of arousing indignation at the horrors of slavery, or at the inequalities of contemporary society, existing representations often lead to desires for black people to "get over it."

Additionally, autobiographical accounts of slavery such as Harriet Jacobs's *The Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), or even fictional

renditions such as Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), while excellent examples of the horrors of slavery, create a temporal and emotional distance for the reader. The same is true of the famous images of civil rights protesters attacked by dogs and fire hoses, photographs of lynchings in contemporary visual art exhibits, or history books with images of slaves packed "sardine style" in the hulls of ships during the Middle Passage. Those situations are of the past, historical accounts that are no longer happening today. It is quite easy to claim that that was then and now is a different time.

There were some viewers, however, who resisted the idea that the scenes were about America, past or present. They instead believed that the work was extremely personal and resented what they perceived to be an imposition of the artist and her issues upon the viewer. One viewer thought the silhouettes were merely an expression of Walker's own individual ideas and problems, questioning, "But if they're just an expression of personal sex/power fantasies, why should I care?" One viewer even found the images to be, "Trite, pretentious and self-indulgent." These viewers did not see the applicability of the work to themselves or to larger society. They also did not agree with Walker's artistic contention that race and racialization are largely a function of one's personal experiences with racism in a public setting. The seeming disconnection between slavery, stereotypes, and contemporary racism caused some viewers to disdain Walker's work. They dismissed these ideas, believing that the artist was forcing her beliefs on audiences and expressing unnecessarily negative emotions.

In response to statements criticizing Walker's use of these images, a viewer castigated those who offered what s/he saw as uninformed and naïve reactions, writing, "From the perspective of someone semi-versed in the history of Afro-American studies this exhibit is pale compared to the sexual (atrocities) committed on this race." This comment suggested that slavery was more terrible than the scenes depicted by Walker, and that the images were a vehicle through which viewers could seriously contemplate such an idea. Another agreed, claiming that the silhouettes were "an indictment of the white patriarchal system we live in." These and the other comments previously discussed showed that some people believed that Walker's images depicted actual accounts of American history and truthfully portrayed aspects of African Americans' lives. This response was often predicated on the fact that Walker's art reflected and legitimated feelings the viewer did not feel empowered to express. However, this belief is a reason for concern.

Walker's images do attempt to highlight how the experience of slavery has affected American representations of history and racial identities. Her work, however, does not show the reality of slavery or depict "actual truths" of the past. Walker is more interested in the imaginative and internal process of racialization that is an outgrowth of the nation's collective experience of slavery and an inherent part of the functioning of American society. Walker's work represents the repressed, and the unknowable. While it does cast a certain amount of light into the psychological and cognitive

processes at play in racial perception and structural inequalities, it necessarily obscures “reality” in order to represent the unimaginable horrors and enduring consequences of slavery hidden deep within the individual psyche and collective imagination.

Walker suggests that the imagination plays an active role in the creation and maintenance of narratives of racial identity. In an interview, Walker discusses how her imagination influences her thoughts and her artwork, stating, “I am too aware of the role of my overzealous imagination interfering in the basic facts of history, so in a way my work is about the sincere attempt to write *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and winding up with *Mandingo* instead. A collusion of fact and fiction has informed me probably since day one.”⁶ Walker freely admits that her work is not “the truth,” but is rather a mixture of history and her imagination meant to provide a thought-provoking commentary for the viewer. She designs the silhouettes to manipulate and complicate easily read constructions of American racial history, yet she advocates no explicit narrative in replacement. Her work opens up a space for the discussion and contestation of narratives of race and identity, but then leaves a void with which the viewer must grapple.

If narrative is a determinative factor in the ways people understand their society and shapes their interactions in society, then it is important to consider the consequences of Walker’s obfuscation and potential erasure. The ambiguity of the silhouettes and the resulting confusion of viewers between fact and fiction lend credence to critics’ concerns that misreadings may occur for viewers. Viewing the images as actual representations of black and white people, or finding in the images fuel and justification for the exoticization of the black subject, are examples of possible misreadings. The latter possibility is especially worrisome considering the role of white patronage, for as Dan Cameron notes, “. . . some of this support comes from a response that is somewhat less enlightened, predicated as much on titillation and spectacle as on the precarious acuity of Walker’s post-liberationist ideas.”⁷ The comments in the books, however, showed that as a whole, the work did not reinforce stereotypes and racist assumptions about black people.

Comments from two different books showed that the sexual images, in particular, spoke to viewers about the intersecting nature of racism and sexism in their own lives. One person wrote, “I’m a mixed white and black child (13) and I was *very* disturbed by the president forcing the black woman to give him oral sex. Unfortunately a lot of people don’t know that this is how a lot of mixed people came to be . . . I was sure that I would not be able to find the strength to accept the meaning in this art piece. But I see now that it’s a part of me, of my history, of who I am and in order to change and help change the world, I must first accept me, and this truth is part of me.” Another stated, “Kara—I see that there is anger behind these images and they parallel the images that swim through my mind as a result of sexual abuse. I feel that you are lashing out and expressing what I never

could.” Walker’s work helped to heal emotional wounds for these people and other viewers who began to question issues of race in relation to sexual domination. One viewer explored the role of sex in slavery and the relationship between the two, asking, “Is slavery inherently sexual? And does sexuality necessarily involve some sort of slavery?” Another wondered if forced sexual relations were at the foundation of American society by asking, “Was our great nation borne of rape?” These comments again demonstrated the functional purpose of the artwork for the viewer—that art will achieve a greater good or purpose in society. They did not want to see art created simply for art’s sake.

Several viewers believed that the images humanized individuals by showing that racism and discrimination were a natural part of human existence that needed to be addressed and resolved, not shunned and hidden. One person stated, “I’m interested in your slant on race-based conflict . . . It transcends race . . . our human desire to create conflict in our own lives.” Another claimed, “I would hypothesize that everyone is racist, sexist or discriminatory on some level; I am not ashamed of that. I can tell you one thing, it’s a part of being human . . . not a part of being American, and to be able to embrace the idea and accept it (discrimination) only then can we control it.” For these viewers, the silhouettes were effective because they led the viewers to understand important aspects of their own lives and of society.

Although scores of comments spoke to the benefits of Walker’s images, many other viewers recorded an overwhelmingly negative experience. Some patrons felt that the work did a disservice to black people, while others claimed it negatively implicated white people. One viewer wrote, “Well at least white people are happy,” implying that blacks would not enjoy or appreciate the work. This comment pointed to the painful fear that some people would read these images as accurate representations of the identity and subjectivity of African Americans. This comment also alluded to the concerns with “airing one’s dirty laundry.” If one must have a conversation that surfaces unflattering ideas, many would be more comfortable if this discussion took place behind closed doors.

Other viewers felt offended by the work and thought it to be an insult to white people, stating, “Only black racists can understand this,” and “A little too anti-white for my taste.” These viewers were primarily concerned with what they saw as offensive, racial connotations, which made Walker’s work less useful to them in examining American society. Another viewer thought the work suggested the existence of too much racism and questioned the amount of racial conflict in the United States today. This person wondered, “Is there still so much racism like this today? Is this still a reality? At large I see mostly tolerance.” These viewers were unable or unwilling to see how the silhouettes implicated black and white people in the construction and maintenance of stereotypes.

By casting the artwork as racist, anti-white, or “biased,” these viewers attempted to strip the work of its ability to effectively critique. They seemed

to miss Walker's larger intention: to create art that made people examine their subconscious and unacknowledged racist notions. Rather, they focused on her perceived political and/or ideological stance, as represented through the art, and refused to reflect on the larger point of the exhibit.

RESPONDING TO SEXUAL IMAGERY

Some individuals stated that they gained little from the images and that the viewing left them primarily with unconstructive feelings. They called the work, ". . . sick! very sick!" and "obscene." They did not enjoy what they saw, nor did they see any value in the exhibit. One viewer summed up this sentiment by stating, "I think this exhibit and images by Kara Walker are disgusting and most definitely do not deserve the recognition that the gallery is giving it." These comments expressed a fundamental discomfort with Walker's images and a resistance to their implications. Viewers wrote, "It sucked. Well I just don't like the sex filled art. Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" and "Your focus on phallic symbols is counter-productive to your intent." As evident by these comments, the sexual content of the scenes often created barriers for the audience and left some devoid of the ability to offer any meaningful interpretation.

There are several possible reasons for the resistance to the images and discomfort felt by the audience. The first reason is that the images may have provoked feelings of guilt over the sexual violence perpetuated against enslaved persons, especially women and children. The horrific and graphic nature of the realization of these atrocities is understandably uncomfortable and may even cause feelings of guilt for one's ignorance of or relationship to such a traumatic history. A second possible reason for resistance may be due to viewers' discomfort with their personal responses to the work—some found the images not only engaging, but also sexually exciting. The realization, however, of the terrible implications of the scenes did not allow for a simple appreciation or enjoyment of the work. These images both attracted and repulsed viewers as one noted, "Interesting and uncomfortable, your freedom with sexuality is at the same time erotic and disgusting." Therefore, feelings of arousal coupled with anger or contempt at the violence of such scenes may have contributed to some viewers' disdain.

Viewers may also have been uncomfortable with how these images aroused their fellow museum-goers. Some viewers seemed to become stimulated in ways others saw as inappropriate and harmful. One viewer noted, "I will enjoy choking my chicken later thinking of those images. Or is it choking my goose?" Another viewer, seeing nothing funny about this joke, responded, "Why are you choosing to eroticize sexualized violence against women? Do you understand that this exhibit is depicting the reality (not stereotypes) of the rape of slaves in our country's history? Why do you choose to perpetuate this perpetration through such blatant sexual

exploitation of these images?” The person chastised the writer of this comment and attempted to position Walker’s work in a way that emphasized the seriousness of the sexual representations in the scenes.

There were a number of other patrons who also expressed inappropriate commentary in the book. One person penned, “I [would] like to sex you in the future,” apparently addressing this comment to Walker. Another wrote, “Kara—I think we would like each other if we met. Your work describes my subconscious—looking at racial issues and seeing the breasts of the abused instead. Looking at class structure and social formality and really only seeing a big, hard dick.” This comment reflected an interpretation of the intersecting nature of racism and sexism and their fundamental influence on American society, yet other viewers could understandably view this language as offensive. Comments of a similar nature may have also been disconcerting to patrons reading the comment book.

A final possible reason for some viewers’ resistance to the images may not be due to the impact that they had on the viewer personally, but rather due to the perceived content and nature of the images. Many viewers were uncomfortable with the children in the scenes and the sexual acts being committed by and upon them. One viewer wrote, “I immediately saw children with sexual innuendos. I saw incest, all abundant. I don’t see race and I don’t see North or South. I just see children, sex and dysfunction.” Considering the increasing sexual assault of minors and rampant child pornography on the Internet, this viewer’s apprehension reflects much societal concern for the safety of children.

Another viewer saw the images as not just distasteful, but actually as lowbrow pornography, claiming, “The artist is obviously very skilled. However, the pornographic aspects only shock and disgust.” This comment was not unique, for there were a number of other viewers who also perceived Walker’s images as both pornographic and obscene. With this consideration, many viewers were very concerned with children seeing these images. One viewer stated, “I can understand where you are coming from but younger people see these and it will probably scare them. I myself was scared because I can’t understand why you would want to bring back the horrors for African Americans!” Another wrote, “With an objective to address a social cause, there is an intent to get a little too obscene. My young kids saw this too!! Oh god!!” These viewers expressed a discomfort with the idea of their children being exposed to such images, “You should be ashamed of yourselves for allowing middle school children to view this.” This viewer even scolded the museum for exhibiting such work where young people would see it.

Although I do not insist that Walker’s work is pornography, her professed use of pornographic images provides rationale for thinking of her work in relationship to debates regarding pornography. Walker’s images vividly depict a world devoid of the professed values of many American citizens, thereby causing some moral dilemmas for her viewers. The scenes contain abundant depictions of debased sexual acts involving women and

children. As Walker's silhouettes embody characteristics of pornography that many sectors of society find negative, many of the objections and concerns found within debates regarding pornography can indeed explain some viewer resistance to the work.

The debate surrounding children proved multifaceted. Other viewers thought the exhibit was great and very useful for children. One viewer liked Walker's work for its artistic imaginings and determined she would teach her middle school students how to create silhouettes. Other viewers saw the exhibit as an opportunity to teach their children about slavery and the difficulties African Americans face. One person professed, "Kara I am so grateful for your talent and consciousness! I came from Kalamazoo when I happened upon your exhibit. It left me compelled to return with my 13 yr. old daughter . . . I will forever be educating her on the true history/actuality of your peoples American Experience." Another viewer also saw the exhibit as a great opportunity, claiming, "parents will now have to actually explain to their children about slavery and race relations in this country." These audience members appreciated Walker's work and saw it as an excellent teaching tool. They believed that the silhouettes were not merely of the past, but also had a direct bearing on the present and future. For these viewers, Walker's work provided a way for parents and educators to engage difficult subjects and help the next generation overcome today's inherited racial problems.

THE SILHOUETTES' OVERALL EFFECT ON THE VIEWER

Walker has stated that she is not a politician, and I would argue that she would even resist the label of historian. However, in her art, she is overtly engaging identity politics and their relationship to historical narratives and images. Walker's intentions are to help her viewer to distrust these images and narratives. Her end goal seems to be to complicate overly simplified histories. She attempts to demonstrate the absurdity of stereotypes through exaggeration, refusing to utilize traditional progressive imagery and narratives of black uplift, in the hopes that her audience will see that these representations deny the complexity of experience and identity. In my opinion, both the appeal and seeming heresy of Walker's work reside in the work's underlying message: neither blacks nor whites can represent themselves or America outside of existing historical narratives. She denies the existence of a pristine past utopia from which one can recover a viable image or pure form through which to represent racialized bodies.

Walker has stated in numerous interviews that her intention is to draw in the audience. She hopes the silhouettes will help people think about race and sex in American history and contemporary society. Walker distrusts existing historical narratives, believing they actively create stereotypes that cause harm, either by their racist and sexist depictions, or by their uncomplicated and superficial portrayals. She encourages her viewers to

rethink existing narratives and images of American racial identities. She purposely uses graphic imagery to shock her audience into an awareness of the hidden power of stereotypes and mythologies in their lives. She does not deny the influence of these representations and insists that her audience abandon inherited assumptions about the ways in which the American past is represented.

Her setting is the antebellum slave-holding South. The work strongly implies that this is the foremost geographic and historical space from which to cull a narrative of the American past and present. Furthermore, her work declares that this space is a biracial one, where only blackness and whiteness exist. The two mutually define each other, as neither white nor black identity is recognizable or coherent without the existence of the other. Walker makes these claims through the content of her scenes. She creates figures that can be read as black or white characters, engaged in uncontrolled scenes of miscegenation and unspeakable taboos. Within her work, Walker rejects the multicultural impulse of contemporary politics and insists that this polarized biracial landscape is the necessary starting point from which to deal with racial concerns.

Walker's utilization of stereotypes bespeaks the current generation's frustration with the seeming failure of progressive movements like the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements to (re)present the image and identity of blacks. She suggests that these historical endeavors to counter racist constructions have failed to effectively and completely overturn the power and entrenched influence of stereotypes. She hopes that her narratives will succeed in dismantling these stereotypes.

Many viewers recorded favorable impressions of the work because it challenged them intellectually, surprised them by deviating from previously viewed artwork, and provided them with seemingly truthful commentary about slavery in the United States. Statements from viewers also reflected some dissatisfaction and even anger at Walker's introduction of seemingly personal issues, her use of graphic sexualized and racialized imagery, and her critique of American race relations. Additionally, many viewers were uncomfortable with feelings of arousal expressed by other patrons and the pornographic aspects of the work that included scenes involving children. Some viewers were so offended or repulsed by the images that they were unable to interpret any viable message. Others were simply so confused that they left unsure of Walker's aim. Lastly, some people did read the silhouettes as factual history and not as an imaginative interrogation of the interaction of historical tropes and racist ideologies within the psyche.

The depth of the emotional response by viewers, both positive and negative indicates that Walker did lead most people to contemplate racial and sexual power dynamics to varying degrees. By thinking through these dynamics, people often questioned how racism and sexism have influenced their lives. Many began to earnestly reconsider how stereotypes have biased their understandings of themselves and others. Equally important, those

patrons who were unconvinced by Walker's assertions often wrote commentaries in the books that led to dialogues among viewers. Consequently, the comment books became a space where viewers discussed and debated the images. Viewers often wrote in the books in an attempt to process their feelings; it was there that they were able to ask questions and to find answers.

Overall, the majority of comments expressed feelings of both pleasure and discomfort from the viewing experience. In sum, therefore, Walker seems to have had an important impact on the viewer. While she alienated some, her work also helped many. At the very least, which is no small accomplishment, comments showed that people were enticed and engaged. They thought and discussed issues that have proved difficult to broach.

Future studies of Walker should explore these possibilities in addition to the limitations of the work, for her images leave out many important considerations and identities. While Walker is clearly concerned with how class has influenced her experience, this same realization did not manifest within the comment books for her viewers. Viewers generally did not connect the economic components of the experience of slavery, nor its very real impact on contemporary structures of class in American society.

In addition, viewers did not seem to contemplate the existence and influence of sexuality on society. There were a couple of fleeting references to homosexuality, however, there were no critiques of the implied lesbianism in the work or the otherwise rampant heterosexuality in the scenes. People generally did not question the possible existence of homosexuality during slavery. They also did not ponder the ways in which images and narratives of heterosexuality influence the construction of the history of slavery and the social identities of American citizens.

Additionally, viewers did not raise issues of gender and seemed to be little concerned with Walker's fixation on the black female. They did not question the Negress's relationship to men or to other women in the scenes. Walker's manipulation of the black female and her body did not cause viewers to question how representations of the black female enables particular constructions of identity in the United States and abroad.

Finally, viewers also did not find issue with the lack of reference to other races or even to various ethnicities amongst blacks and whites. Walker's project is to emphasize the interactions of blacks and whites, or rather between ideological representations of blackness and whiteness. The work does not call attention to the ways in which the lives and identities of other people of color also structure white/black relations. Her silhouettes do not depict the various roles of groups like Native Americans or immigrant groups in slavery. They do not show the complicated relationships between theories of inferiority structured around differences beyond black and white. Although Walker's intention is not to offer an alternative history, that does not mean that her narratives do not influence her audiences' notions of which accounts should be included in historical texts. Her silhouettes obscure important factors in an understanding of American

racial history and discourage analysis of racial interactions among multiple groups and racial ideologies. By leaving out such considerations, Walker reinforces a black/white binary.

While Walker's work does an enormous service in creating dialogue and an awareness of the continued influence of racism in American identities and culture, it leaves out other factors that are important to the construction and maintenance of these identities, such as the issues noted above. Perhaps it is unfair to suggest that a visual artist must or even could engage all of these issues, and these critiques are not meant to detract from the importance and usefulness of Walker's work. However, in an effort to further the dialogue she begins, we must consider the other important social identities not addressed, for they are essential to theories of identity formation in American society.

Kara Walker's work is important and her intentions are praiseworthy. Her dynamic art is an invigorating component of contemporary black culture that we should neither ignore nor silence, for it creates and sustains important conversations regarding race and racism. Through this analysis of comment books, it is clear that viewers did not either completely accept or reject the messages of Walker's work. They debated various components, reflected upon others, and offered up entirely different meanings for some aspects of the work. This study of audience response thereby indicates the active meaning-making that occurred at the site of Walker's silhouettes, which leads us to reconsider claims that her work is ultimately harmful to the viewer.

6 Troubling Blackness

The Source Magazine and the Hip-Hop Nation

In previous chapters, I evaluated black cultural products that purposely included demeaning black stereotypes as part of an anti-racist agenda. Controversy surrounded each of these representations as proponents and critics argued over the ramifications of the representations' message, despite the artists' intentions. I now move to an exploration of hip-hop music and culture, which contains some of the most infamous black representations. Although many social critics condemn commercial hip-hop music and culture for its strident materialism, homophobia, misogyny, vulgarity, and violence, hip-hop emerged out of the destructive forces of deindustrialization of the late 20th century as a light for disenfranchised inner-city youth. Noted scholar Tricia Rose defines hip-hop in relationship to this foundational fact when she claims that hip-hop is "a cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African American and Caribbean history, identity and community."¹ Hip-hop began as and continues to be an important, yet often, controversial source of alternative identity formation and social status.

Hip-hop as a narrative of cultural identity is neither static nor inherently consistent; it offers multiple ways of being in the world, socially, politically, culturally, and economically. It has no national, social, or political boundaries. Considering the large number of artists, their international reception, and the diverse forms within the culture and music, it is impossible to argue for the emergence of a single, understood, and recognizable "hip-hop identity." With this in mind, I do not delineate "the" hip-hop identity. Instead, I examine a particular narrative of hip-hop identity constructed within and through a monthly periodical called *The Source: Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture and Politics*.

The 1990s witnessed the height of success for *The Source*, one of the first and best-selling national magazines devoted to hip-hop music and culture. *The Source*, once deemed "the hip-hop bible," has been an important marker of and trendsetter for rap music and hip-hop culture. While other magazines such as *XXL* are notable, *The Source* has held a dominant,

although at times controversial, position within the music industry. Known for its album rating system (mics), its creation of the first awards show solely for rap music, its well-known and high-profile editors and writers, and its longevity and dominance within the print industry, *The Source's* image and depiction of hip-hop culture is significant to hip-hop scholarship and history.

In this chapter, I discuss the findings of my evaluation of the following recurring columns, published within *The Source*, over a ten-year period, 1989–1999: “Message From the Editor/Editorial,” “Media Watch,” “Ear to the Street,” “Doin’ The Knowledge,” “In the 21st Century,” “Hip-Hop 101,” “Cash Rules,” and “American Politrix.” These columns are unified by the magazine’s stated goal to educate the hip-hop community about the hostility of the American public toward hip-hop culture. “Message from the Editor,” “Ear to the Street,” and “In the 21st Century” are the primary columns through which the periodical actively constructed boundaries for engagement with hip-hop culture and inclusion in the hip-hop community. “Doin’ the Knowledge” and “American Politrix” were politically oriented columns that shaped political awareness and a sense of nationalism for the magazine’s readers. Finally, “Media Watch” actively addressed how, according to the magazine, mass media reflected American hostility for hip-hop culture by its often-biased reviews of hip-hop; the column gave alternative information to counter the negative coverage.

Throughout the 1990s, primarily through these columns, *The Source* consistently defined the hip-hop community as the Hip-Hop Nation. The notion of a hip-hop nation in itself holds little negative ramifications. However, *The Source's* articulation of the ideal citizen of the Hip-Hop Nation as a violent, materialistic black male, who resides in American ghettos proved quite challenging to many who desired to present a more socially acceptable image of African Americans. Additionally, many lovers of hip-hop did not fit *The Source's* ideal.

In this chapter, I explore (1) how *The Source* discursively constructed the Hip-Hop Nation and its citizens in demeaning ways, (2) why it chose to promote primarily disparaging representations, and (3) how these representations fit within the context of black nationalism. I begin with a discussion of the rise of *The Source*, detailing its prominence and importance in the 1990s. I then move into an exploration of *The Source's* representations, considering how the magazine crafted the Hip-Hop Nation as a black nation, and how it constructed the ideal member of this community with demeaning, although highly popular, characteristics. I consider how *The Source's* representations fit within the “badman” tradition, and thereby meets many of its readers’ psychological need for a black hero who subverts an oppressive social system. I end with an overall assessment of the consequences of these images. This chapter provides the necessary context for the proceeding chapter, which discusses the effects of *The Source's* demeaning imagery on its readers.

THE SOURCE'S DOMINANCE IN THE PRINT INDUSTRY

David Mays (former publisher) and Jonathan Spector (former editor-in-chief) founded *The Source* in 1988 as undergraduates at Harvard University. Both are white, middle-class, Jewish men. Spector is from Philadelphia and Mays is from an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. Their relationship began in 1986 as hosts of “Street Beat,” a hip-hop show on Harvard’s radio station, WHRB. They decided to do a newsletter to promote the show and hip-hop music, which led to the creation of *The Source*. Starting out as a one-page Xeroxed sheet, “Street Beat” callers became the magazine’s original subscription base. Mays prompted local record stores to buy three ads at \$75 each for the first issue.² From these humble beginnings, *The Source* became one of the first magazines to concentrate solely on hip-hop culture and target men ages 14–24.³

By 1991, record companies accounted for 95% of ads found within *The Source*. Despite utilizing a distribution company and claiming shelf space at major chains like Tower Records, the magazine’s primary sites for sale were independent Mom-and-Pop record stores. In 1991, monthly paid circulation (total number of magazines purchased) was 50,000, with only 2,000 copies circulated via subscription.⁴ By 1994, *The Source* held 50 ad pages, while boasting an increase in circulation from 87,664 to 133,470.⁵ By 1997, paid circulation in the first half of the year was 357,215 (up 55.2%—single copy sales accounted for 90% of total circulation), and ad pages numbered 492.⁶ By this point, *The Source* had carried ads for major companies including Sergio Tacchini, Calvin Klein, Gillette, Visa, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, DKNY, Visa, and the NBA, to name just a few.

Startling the magazine industry with its unexpected growth and dominance, *The Source* was nominated for a 2000 National Magazine Award in the category of General Excellence for a Magazine with Circulation of 400,000 to 1 million. Fellow nominees included *The New Yorker*, *GQ*, and *Marie Claire*. Recognized as a highly acclaimed brand name for hip-hop music and culture, *The Source* led the industry among publications that covered hip-hop. Throughout the years, major competitors have included *Right On*; *Black Beat*; *Vibe*; *XXL*; *Spin*; *Rolling Stone*; *Trace*; and the now-defunct *Rap Pages*, *Stress*, and *Blaze*. Outperforming each of the other hip-hop magazines, *The Source* even managed to outsell *Vibe*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Details* on newsstands during the time period of this study.

As one news article called it, the “Source Empire” in 2002 included “The Source: All Access” television program, platinum selling hip-hop hits compilation CDs, the annual “The Source Hip-Hop Music Awards” network television special, and “The Source Radio Network” programs and services.⁷ The “empire” also included *Source Sports*, a spinoff magazine that mixed hip-hop culture and sports coverage, and coordinated numerous events and tours to promote its products and services. Since two different

articles reported annual revenue in 2001 as \$25 million⁸ and \$10 million,⁹ respectively, it is difficult to ascertain the company's exact earnings during this time period.

Although *The Source* claimed to be a magazine about hip-hop culture in general, it largely limited its coverage to a single element of this culture: rap music. In fact, the first title of the magazine was *The Source: The Voice of the Rap Music Industry*. In the June 1989 editorial, J The Sultan (Jonathan Spector), who at that time was the editor-in-chief, made it clear that the founders of the magazine created it to be a voice for rap music: ". . . we are filling a definite void that exists in the music industry . . . prior to us, there was no serious publication that served the rap market." Additionally, Spector took rap music, not hip-hop culture, as the critical point of emphasis when he wrote, "I wonder if anyone who was down with the Old School could have foreseen the enormous success and influence that rap has achieved. It's not only a music, it's a culture, a voice, a movement . . . THE SOURCE is not only "the voice of the rap industry," but of the "rap culture as well."¹⁰ In this grand statement, *The Source* asserted its importance as the sole voice of this emerging community. Furthermore, Spector positioned rap as more than just music. Within the pages of *The Source*, rap music, and not hip-hop, emerged as a vibrant, growing culture, and as a movement that could lead to social change.

By September 1990, the editorial board of *The Source*, named the Mind Squad, had determined that the descriptive blurb for the magazine was inadequate. They changed it from "The Voice of the Rap Music Industry" to "The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture and Politics." With this change, the editorial board made room for *The Source* to cover not only rap music, but also all of the elements of hip-hop culture. *The Source*, however, repeatedly contradicted its stated repositioning. It never fully realized its goal to represent hip-hop music, culture, and politics, but instead continued to focus on rap music, rap culture, and rap politics.

The Source was able to get away with such a limited focus, despite its stated mission, because the magazine never offered a clear definition of hip-hop culture and consistently conflated the terms hip-hop and rap music during the period of this study.¹¹ For example, in January 1991, Spector proclaimed that 1990 was a great year for hip-hop, but centered all of hip-hop's accomplishments around the success of rap music. The June 1991 and October 1994 editorials also made hip-hop culture and rap music synonymous when they pondered the state of hip-hop culture. Both editorials explicitly discussed the poor state of rap music and directly correlated this with the ruin of hip-hop culture. Each editorial contained the following sentences: "If we cannot say what hip-hop is then who are we as hip-hoppers? Rap music's identity crisis is a reflection of our individual identity crisis. To ask what rap stands for is to ask ourselves what we stand for."¹² The editors also easily moved from

a comment on hip-hop broadly, to a comment on rap music specifically, implying that they are the same.

The conflation of hip-hop culture and rap music was also apparent in July 1991 in the “Declaration of Independence of the Hip-Hop Nation,” in which the author listed the grievances of the Hip-Hop Nation. The list included references to social, economic, and political power. When it discussed grievances related to hip-hop culture however, it noted problems for rappers and the rap industry only. This list included censorship, police brutality against rappers, insurance companies overcharging artists, promoters who neglect to provide adequate security at rap concerts, and illegal bootleggers.¹³ Additionally, in June 1992, in “The State of the Hip-Hop Union,” the Mind Squad discussed the recent accomplishments of hip-hop. However, they only mentioned the success of rap artists N.W.A, Ice Cube, Public Enemy, and DJ Quik, thereby equating the rise of hip-hop with the rise of rap music.¹⁴

Within the magazine as a whole, when writers discussed identity or the state of the Hip-Hop Nation, the comments frequently amounted to an articulation of the state of rap music and/or the tensions within this singular element of hip-hop culture. The majority of the columns discussed aspects of rap music and the rap music industry. Nearly all of the covers highlighted rappers and most of the features focused on rappers, their music, and issues found within the rap music industry.

The Source’s strategic conflation of rap music with hip-hop culture gave the magazine credibility and marketability. Out of all the elements of hip-hop culture, MCing, or rap music, has become the best known and the most available for capitalistic consumption and exploitation. *The Source* primarily covered rap music, which is the one component of hip-hop culture that has proven the most marketable and financially successful. The enormous popularity of rap music provided *The Source* with a large base for its readership that would not be possible if the magazine focused on one of the less commercial and less well-known elements.

CONSTRUCTING THE HIP-HOP COMMUNITY AS THE BLACK NATION

The Source also enlarged its readership by merging the power of print culture with the ideological influence of the black nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s. Within his influential text *Imagined Communities* (1991), Benedict Anderson explains how print culture provided the modes through which people of different geographies, allegiances, and temporal spaces could connect in ways so meaningful that they would begin to view themselves as a community. *The Source* drew upon the history and power of print culture to make “it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about

themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways,” to build a notion of national community among its readers.¹⁵ *The Source* accomplished this goal by stressing its status as an insider who acutely understood the codes and nuances of the hip-hop community. It affirmed hip-hop culture as a way of viewing the world for the hip-hop generation and assured its readers that reading the magazine was more than a recreational pastime. As former executive editor Selwyn Sefyu Hinds stated, “Hip-hop is no longer just about who’s nice around your way, hip-hop is a way of looking at the world. And THE SOURCE provides that lens.”¹⁶ With its professed authority within the culture, *The Source* discursively gathered the hip-hop community and defined them as a nation, the Hip-Hop Nation.

The Source constructed the Hip-Hop Nation through elements of black nationalist rhetoric and ideology. Wahneema Lubiano defines black nationalism as a narrative of identity and interests that “members of a social, political, cultural, ethnic or ‘racial’ group tell themselves, and that is predicated on some understanding—however mythologized or mystified—of a shared past, an assessment of present circumstances, and a description for a shared future.”¹⁷ While Lubiano’s essay specifically concerns black literary criticism, she notes that hip-hop culture functions in a rather similar way. For her, both are sites of nationalistic subject making and have necessarily created a “generally masculinist and heterosexist black national subject who is always working-class or poor.”¹⁸

The Source emphasized the black nationalism of the Black Power Movement to provide coherence to and a rationale for its Hip-Hop Nation. The magazine presented the Hip-Hop Nation as part of the black community, and thereby having suffered and continuing to suffer the injustices of all African Americans. *The Source*’s “cultivation of a usable past,” or version of hip-hop history, positioned hip-hop culture as a by-product of African-American oppression, culture, and political resistance. The sole article that explicitly engaged the influences of hip-hop music and culture located 1968–1974 as hip-hop’s formative years. This article cited the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr.; the riots of the 1960s; the 1968 Summer Olympics when Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised the Black Power salute; black consciousness; fashion; and soul and funk musics as the key factors that led to hip-hop’s rise.¹⁹ While these events are certainly influential to the development of hip-hop culture, in service to its particular representation of the Hip-Hop Nation, *The Source* neglected other well-documented and important influences.²⁰

The Source also left out a number of communities that played a vital role in the emergence of hip-hop culture. In particular, *The Source* rarely recognized women’s contributions. *The Source* featured relatively few articles about women, and only a handful of women made the cover of the magazine. The articles that were written about women, in the columns this project analyzed, can be summarized in the following categories:

- sexism of hip-hop and artists
- use of the words bi***/hoe
- the battering of women in hip-hop (Dee Barnes, Left Eye)
- preference of light-skinned women
- underrated female MCs
- female MCs with negative images
- general abuse of women in American society
- women's groups trying to censor sexist hip-hop artists.²¹

These articles often focused on women as victims; however, depending upon the author's views, an article could ultimately be a forceful statement calling for the end of sexism and/or the abuse of women. For example, in the October 1991 issue, Elyse Lorrel interviewed Dee Barnes, allowing her to speak about being physically attacked and beaten by Dr. Dre. Another example is found in the May 1992 issue, in which James Bernard criticized Mike Tyson and defended Desiree Washington, whom Tyson was later convicted of raping. These and several other articles are strong indictments against the abuse of women.

There were, however, disturbing instances when authors performed a sort of double-talk, where in one moment they spoke out against abuse, but in another excused or encouraged sexist and abusive behavior. For instance, in the February 1996 editorial, problematically titled "B*tch Betta," Adario Strange began by recalling a memorable time riding with his "homies, just kickin' it," while they recounted stories about physically assaulting women. Void of remorse or a critique of such actions, Strange contextualized, and perhaps even tried to justify, his and his friends' abuse. Strange pointed to the seeming ordinariness of this moment; he had heard these stories his entire life from all types of men. He then referenced Luther Campbell and cautioned readers to distinguish "healthy sexuality" from "over-the-top sexual violence" and to not "assault, rape or disrespect *any* woman." However, Strange's lack of condemnation of his friends' tales, his silent consent of the historic and widespread abuse of women simply because it is historic and widespread, and his weak proclamation to men, "If you can possibly help it, refrain from the act of abuse," negate a well-intentioned attempt at an anti-violence statement.²²

Despite moments such as these, the columns were not all negative. At times, authors did bring to light overlooked female contributions to hip-hop culture. For instance, the June 1997 issue discussed Joan Morgan's feminist tract in *Essence* magazine, while the July 1998 issue highlighted a new anthology CD solely documenting the works of women in hip-hop. The October 1997 issue was equally noteworthy. It was dedicated to women in hip-hop. It critically discussed their achievements and struggles, with numerous features that covered the careers of various women artists. One must still consider, however, how the creation of a special issue further

underscores *The Source's* marginalization of women. *The Source* allowed full coverage of women in this limited context only, instead of pursuing an editorial policy in which each issue was committed to equal consideration and coverage of women within hip-hop. Consequently, outside of several highlights, the magazine regularly excluded women, which contributed to the idea that the Hip-Hop Nation's ideal citizen was a male.

The Source also left out Latinos, whose contributions are fundamental to hip-hop culture. The denial of Latinos' role in hip-hop history significantly contributed to *The Source's* depiction of the Hip-Hop Nation as a Black Nation. Raquel Rivera states that the extent of Puerto Rican inclusion or exclusion within hip-hop historiography and popular imagination is related to the specific hip-hop artform/element. For example, Puerto Ricans' perceived entitlement to participation in hip-hop is greater in graffiti and b-boying/girling than in MCing and DJing.

According to Rivera, rap music (MCing and DJing) is primarily associated with African Americans, while at the same time being perceived as virtually synonymous with hip-hop culture. A number of factors have caused this conflation, including (1) the voicing of African American concerns by popular rap artists, (2) the lasting impact on the hip-hop collective imagination by Afrocentric/Black Nationalist rap music, and (3) marketing strategies that exoticize blackness and link rap with a ghetto-based, black male image.²³ This conflation of rap music, hip-hop, and African Americans implies that the hip-hop community is primarily composed of a population of black male rappers who reside within the inner city. *The Source* relied upon this preexisting image in American culture in its depiction of hip-hop culture.

The Source's interpretations of "the news"—important local, national and international political events—solely in relation to American blacks, also perpetuated the idea that rap music and, by extension, hip-hop culture solely belonged to African Americans. In particular, *The Source* described the Hip-Hop Nation as being in a constant state of attack. Throughout the time period of this study, the magazine highlighted a large number of cultural, racial, economic, social, and political assaults upon members of the Hip-Hop Nation, including:

- attacks on hip-hop culture evident by censorship of rap songs, the refusal of large chains to sell rap music with explicit lyrics, and baggy jeans deemed indecent exposure;
- harassment of the hip-hop community, such as the attempt to deport Slick Rick, the arrest of a person playing rap music too loud, and a law to paddle people convicted of graffiti/vandalism;
- racial issues such as police brutality, the high incarceration rates of black men, and the fact that Arizona did not celebrate MLK Day;
- economic and political issues like poverty in black communities, issues with welfare, and the low minimum wage.

The Source discussed many of these issues solely in relationship to impoverished blacks who resided primarily in low-income areas, despite the fact that these issues affected many other communities also. *The Source* linked these purportedly “black” issues with the concerns of the Hip-Hop Nation. It implied coterminous problems for the African American and hip-hop communities, effectively maintaining that the communities were the same.

Moreover, *The Source* encouraged an insider/outsider perspective that consistently positioned the hip-hop/black community as “different” and “other” so that it was constantly on the defensive in larger society. *The Source* exploited the fact that hip-hop is a resistant part of African American culture, and an important voice in the documentation of oppression and injustice against African Americans, in order to capture its readership. *The Source*’s extreme presentation of the position of members of the hip-hop community as black and under attack, although not entirely untrue, was misleading and did little to explicate the complex position of the numerous actors within this community and their relationships to larger society.

This presentation was useful, however, because the magazine’s black nationalist rhetoric operated as a viable rationale for the importance of both rap music and *The Source* itself.²⁴ *The Source*’s use of a black nationalistic discourse in response to these problems resonated with the political and social dictates of black youth communities of the 1980s and 1990s. *The Source* created an attractive way for young people to understand their social reality. However, its reliance on ideas from the Black Power Movement strapped it with many of the pitfalls and prejudices of Black Power’s politics.

As did many Black Power groups, *The Source* had to police its particular depiction of blackness in order to ensure the cohesion of its proclaimed narrative. Consequently, the exclusion of many groups, the sexist and homophobic articulations of the magazine, and the restrictive image of the hip-hop/black community were notable, although not unexpected. While asserting a sense of pride and superficial encouragement for political engagement, *The Source*’s use of black nationalism ultimately undermined its articulation of a “united community.” Many excluded groups eventually argued for their inclusion, as letters to the editors demonstrate, which I discuss in the next chapter. Although *The Source* ideally claimed that the Hip-Hop Nation was open to anyone, its utilization of this type of nationalism placed it within an ideological bind, making it difficult to live up to the magazine’s statement of universalism and inclusion. Despite these contradictions, however, *The Source* flew off the newsstands throughout the 1990s.

THE ROLE OF THE GHETTO AND VIOLENCE

Through the columns included in this study, *The Source* also aligned hip-hop identity with the black ghetto. The ghetto and its attendant images

within American popular imagination are indeed important to the development of hip-hop culture, yet the ghetto's function within the culture is more complicated than a simple one-to-one relationship supposes. In *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose shows that the local that grounds or legitimizes a hip-hop identity is indeed a "ghetto-blackness" that functions as a code and narrative primarily aimed at inhabitants of the ghetto. Collectively experiencing deindustrialization, racism, resistance, and survival, the ghetto directly shapes hip-hop culture and those who participate in it. Rose finds that the ghetto, thereby, becomes the center of hip-hop identity, and one finds community in this important local space.

Murray Forman builds upon this work and believes that "[r]ap music takes the city and its multiple spaces as the foundation of its cultural production. In the rhythm and lyrics, the city is an audible presence, explicitly cited and sonically sampled in the reproduction of the aural textures of the urban environment."²⁵ He claims that one cannot reduce the spatial elements of rap narratives to metaphor, because the ghetto functions as the foundation and marker of authenticity and "the real" for the hip-hop community.

Non-black hip-hop artists such as Eminem must rely on continuously asserted connections to blacks and/or blackness defined by the ghetto. For example, Eminem's rise was initiated and supported by Dr. Dre, who consistently rapped on Eminem's songs and appeared in his videos early in Eminem's career. In addition, publicity surrounding Eminem constantly focused on his upbringing in Detroit, a largely African American city. Lastly, in public appearances and publicity, a crew of African American males, most often the rap group D12, which he promotes, typically surrounds Eminem, which reinforces his connections to the black community.

For black artists who cannot claim origins in the ghetto, "the projection of ghetto associations is less difficult and less contentious, since the dominant social perspective 'always already' interpellates black youths, especially males, as ghetto citizens, if not ghetto thugs."²⁶ Following Forman's application of Althusser's theory, it appears that the space and place of the ghetto and its political, cultural, and ideological interactions in American society definitively states who can and cannot be part of the hip-hop community.

While this is largely the case within much of hip-hop culture, this formulation did not hold true in *The Source*. Considering Forman's definitions of space and place, while space was indeed primary to the magazine's representation of identity, the significance of place was markedly ambivalent.²⁷ *The Source* self-consciously articulated identity *not* based absolutely on the particular (or the place), but instead constructed a hip-hop community within and through the concept of nation. This strategic discursive positioning of community not within the ghetto, but within the ideological concept of a nation, enabled *The Source* to make room for the infinite differences found within its national readership. This conceptual move also allowed *The Source* to appear legitimate even though it was not a product

of the ghetto—two white males launched the magazine in the dorms of an elite, predominantly and historically white institution. *The Source* could not and did not interpellate its readers as citizens of the ghetto. To do so would have alienated all those who could not identify with the ghetto and who were not black, including the founders of the periodical. In addition, as will be shown in the following chapter on reception, interpellation could not happen because readers often resisted attempts to exclude various communities or to define the Hip-Hop Nation in particular ways.

Nevertheless, this is not to say that the ghetto is meaningless to hip-hop culture and identity, or to *The Source's* Hip-Hop Nation. Understanding the actual and the symbolic capital of the ghetto and an association with it, *The Source* did attempt to manage the importance of the local to the hip-hop community. As early as 1989, *The Source* included “Regional Reports: Rap News Across the Hip-Hop Nation,” a column written by local correspondents about hip-hop culture happening in their respective communities. This column underwent numerous changes as the magazine struggled to find a way to capture the various particularities and differences within its Hip-Hop Nation. By October 1991, the column shifted to the coasts and the title changed to “Regional Reports: Rap News around New York and Los Angeles.” By March 1992, the title of the column changed to “Regional Focus: Highlighting the hip-hop scene around the Hip-Hop Nation.” The following month it changed again to “City Profile: Highlighting the hip-hop scene around the Hip-Hop Nation.” By July of 1992, *The Source* ended these reports altogether until 1996, when it introduced “In the ‘Hood.”

The discursive geographic movement from regions, to coasts, to cities, to ‘hoods, reflects *The Source's* struggle to make meaning of place in a way that buttressed its construction of the space of the nation. As stated, *The Source* could not easily locate itself or its readership within the ghetto. Alternatively, *The Source* reinforced its legitimacy by associating itself with hip-hop created by seemingly ghetto inhabitants. Through the magazine's choice of feature artists displayed on the cover, *The Source* referenced the ghetto in an amazingly authenticating way.

In an editorial in 1990, Shecter explained the magazine's rationale for its choice of cover artists: “In a way, placing a particular artist on its cover is the ultimate endorsement a magazine can give. Excepting those rare cases when a cover story is negative, the image on the front of a magazine represents the image a magazine wants to project to its readers . . . we at THE SOURCE just seem to migrate towards the sh** that sounds the most sincere to us. And more often than not, the KRS-One's, Ice Cube's and Chuck D's are the ones we find ourselves listening to. Why waste a cover on someone we don't necessarily like?”²⁸ By aligning itself with artists such as KRS-One and Ice Cube, who had large amounts of commercial popularity, in addition, to street credibility in the 1990s, *The Source* was able to gain legitimacy from these artists' perceived authenticity. The hip-hop community, in part, grounded their perception of these artists' legitimacy

by assessing their lyrical skills and by determining their background in the ghetto or street life. In time, *The Source's* selection of artists for the cover and these artists' reputations began to reinforce each other. The artist on the cover was "real" because *The Source* chose to profile the artist. *The Source* was real because it only covered "real" rappers. In a truly unique way, *The Source* demonstrated that the key to being "authentically hip-hop" was not about being in the ghetto, but about being able to represent the ghetto.

The Source's reliance on artists with ghetto associations, however, proved challenging throughout the 1990s. Many of these "ghetto" rappers chose to rap largely about violence. Violent rap lyrics and increasing violence amongst rappers became an ever-growing problem, particularly for many of the rappers that *The Source* chose to highlight on the cover.

With the murders of Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, the hip-hop community found itself forced to deal with the issue of violence and rap music, and especially with gangsta/reality rap.²⁹ While *The Source* had not explicitly advocated violence, it had been very supportive of the right of gangsta/reality rappers to publish violent lyrics, had taken a moral stance against any and all censorship, and had garnered much of its legitimacy by covering many rappers with violent lyrics. The magazine supported these artists with favorable articles and numerous cover opportunities.

When Tupac was killed in 1996, *The Source* explored the ramifications of his death while attempting to recuperate rap music, which many were citing as the cause for the murder. *The Source* mourned the death of someone whom they deemed to be a great, yet troubled, figure. One article claimed, "Tupac was the quintessential spokesman for ghetto pain. . . . But the value of his poetry was always nagged by his inability to let the bullsh** go."³⁰ Because of his violent end, *The Source* grappled with the violence inherent in the lyrics and lifestyles of gangsta rappers: "Hardcore or "reality rap," despite its merits as a viable and integral description of a life rarely seen by mainstream America, has injected a fierce negativity and violent undercurrent into hip-hop. . . . Both the fans who buy rap music now and the rappers who create it are subconsciously killing themselves by supporting images of fatalism. Many teenagers emulate the rappers, declaring themselves thugs or shrugging off "money hungry bi**es."³¹ Ultimately, the magazine held the hip-hop community responsible for this violence and cautioned everyone to examine the role they "play in leading young black men to believe the myths they create about their own invulnerability."³² However, *The Source* did not change its editorial policy regarding violent rap music and continued to cover artists who had violent lyrics. In March 1997, when Biggie was killed, *The Source* found that it had to address, once again, its association with violence.

This time, instead of indicting violent rap music, *The Source* blamed Biggie's death on endemic violence found throughout society, irresponsible journalists who glamorized entertainment as reality, and cruel social and

economic policies that effectively destroyed the lives of inner-city people. Unlike Tupac, whom the magazine depicted as wild, violent, and rebellious, *The Source* described Biggie as a “loving father of two” and “a genuinely nice guy.” Despite Biggie’s well-known criminal past, *The Source* claimed, “While Chris Wallace was no angel—he dropped out of Brooklyn’s Boys and Girls High in the 10th grade; got bagged in North Carolina at age 17 for selling crack; and had more than his share of legal incidents after ascending to hip-hop stardom—he was hardly the character he portrayed in his music.”³³

In the coverage of Biggie’s death, writers did find issue with the violence of contemporary rap lyrics but emphatically stated, “Rap music did not kill Biggie Smalls.”³⁴ *The Source* blamed current social and economic conditions, and insisted that rap music, ostensibly including gangsta rap, was a buffer to the demoralizing conditions that many inner-city young people faced. Consequently, neither *The Source*, which valorized rappers with violent lyrics, nor the rappers who promoted violence were culpable. Instead, the magazine awarded Biggie five mics (the highest rating) for his album *Life After Death* and continues to memorialize both him and Tupac annually within the magazine.

RAPPERS AND THE BADMAN TRADITION

The artistic personae of many of the rappers *The Source* chose to feature find relevance and coherence in the badman tradition of African American ballads, legends and toasts. The badman, sometimes called the bad nigger, is an African American folk hero, created at various historical moments to meet the social and psychological needs of black people in the United States. As the name implies, he is bad, mean, often a womanizer, is bound to neither law nor custom, and has little respect for blacks or whites. His brutality, violence and disdain for authority, however, are what lend him credibility and legendary status within black communities. According to John Roberts, “the badman exists because people are oppressed.”³⁵ His role in black culture is didactic (to prepare blacks for a dangerous world) and pleasurable (to offer blacks a person who beats the system).

Moreover, while many blacks may not glorify or value violence, because of the psychological benefits of the badman, his “badness” becomes a badge of pride. According to Robert G. O’Meally, “For blacks, badmen represent not so much fearful as exemplary figures . . . Like his counterpart and sometimes his adversary, the trickster, the badman violates social conventions and spaces, virtually at will, and thereby represents not just black disdain for American oppression (and, by extension, trouble of all sorts), but the ability to face hardship and to win.”³⁶ This figure proves most viable, not just because of his deviance, but because blacks have historically found ways “of glorifying him and making him palatable to whites at the same time.”³⁷

Stackolee is one of the most enduring and well-known characters of the badman tradition. He, in particular, fits most closely to the violent, materialistic and sexist male citizen of *The Source's* Hip-Hop Nation. The legend of Stackolee emerged at the turn of the 20th century, and is based upon the life and exploits of a real man (although the legend does not include the facts of his life). There are shifting tales of Stackolee that reflect "the heroic possibilities and psychological needs" of black people throughout the 20th century. Later versions of Stackolee that found prominence during the rise of the blues in the 1920s, 30s and 40s offered a base character with little morality. Like many popular rappers of the 1990s, "[Stackolee] is no longer portrayed as the enemy of the system but emerges as the antagonist of conventional morality. He is consumed by his own desires for self-indulgent pleasures."³⁸ Roberts believes that the Stackolee presented in toasts is different from the Stackolee embodied in ballads, because he reflects a countercultural movement of the mid 20th century that grew out of the unrest of black urbanites who found American political and social systems unresponsive to their needs. Similar to inner-city youth of the late 20th century, black people who loved Stackolee were looking for a culturally expressive outlet for their frustration, anger and despair.

By the 1960s and 1970s, blacks in the United States had begun to violently protest their conditions. Dismayed at the inability of the civil rights gains to radically address their day to day realities, blacks began to riot and to support groups such as The Black Panther Party, who advocated self-defense in response to brutality. American popular culture did not largely reflect these growing sentiments found within particular black communities. However, once Hollywood realized the potential profits of catering to black desires for alternative representations of black people and life, blaxploitation films were born. During the 1970s, with the rise and fall of blaxploitation films, a new black folk hero emerged. Similar to Stackolee, black audiences loved and cheered badmen like Sweetback, who "captured an image of self-defense that gave on-screen legitimation to violent retaliation against racist police brutality."³⁹ Blaxploitation films came to an end in 1975, approximately the same time that hip-hop culture and rap music began to fill the need for a new black folk hero.

Due to the devastating effects of deindustrialization on inner cities, young people of color, in particular blacks and Latinos, were again frustrated at the unresponsive social and political system. In addition, television and movies projected black images that belied the life circumstances of black lower socio-economic classes. Representations of black males in popular culture of this time were drastically removed from the badman tradition. Kristin Hunter-Lattany reflects upon this time in the 1980s stating, "The Black male seems to be the target of a particularly brutal attack by the popular media. Apparently, the threat of his power, sexual or physical, the risk of his hostility and the danger of his dignity are still vividly alive in the white psyche; alive enough to compel white writers and producers

to diminish these traits by producing “safe” images of the Black male that negate them.”⁴⁰

Hunter-Lattany says that this time led to the emergence of “television’s most pervasive stereotype”: the Runt. She discusses how audiences adored the characters of actors such as Gary Coleman in *Diff’rent Strokes*, Emmanuel Lewis in *Webster* and even Sherman Hemsley in *The Jeffersons*, who she calls a “man-child.” These beloved characters seemed far removed from the black men of the streets. However, once hip-hop culture fully penetrated American popular culture, it offered alternative black male representations that resonated with the badman tradition and the black sensibilities at that time. By the 1990s, between rap music and black action films, such as *Boyz N the Hood* and *Juice*, black people once again had violent, mean and materialistic male heroes who challenged the system over and over again.⁴¹

In its creation of a Hip-Hop Nation characterized by such a demeaning image of black men, *The Source* drew upon and operated within the badman tradition. By offering the gangsta rapper as a contemporary folk hero, *The Source* met its readership’s psychological needs; this image emboldened young people, both black and white. By reading *The Source* and endorsing its depiction of black men, subscribers to the magazine could safely rebel against the system. In addition, because the magazine supported badmen who rhetorically battled the system while providing a view of black life that resonated as “real” for many people, *The Source* could claim that it provided a unique and ever important service. It “authentically” represented hip-hop and black people, and challenged the seemingly “soft” and assimilated black representations that fell far short of meeting black psychological needs.

Moreover, as *The Source* profiled the growing number of hip-hop entrepreneurs and rap millionaires, it offered its readers a version of the American Dream that the deindustrialized service economy of global capitalism denied people of color. Although fewer blacks in the 1990s were attending colleges and the factory jobs that had largely created the black middle class were disappearing, hip-hop created an alternative aspiration. *The Source* profiled rappers who had gained fame and financial security, despite the fact that many often held criminal records and had no higher education. Even though these gangsta rappers seemed to hold little morality, they were stars. They represented success and offered hope to young people, who had little else. Consequently, by projecting an image of the black community outside of uninspired, and, at times, racist representations, and by offering its readers hope for a better life, *The Source* met some of its readers’ important needs.

ASSESSING THE SOURCE’S HIP-HOP NATION

From 1989 to 1999, the columns examined within *The Source* depicted the hip-hop community as a nation, bounded by a common appreciation of and

participation in rap music. The magazine presented a specifically racialized and gendered hip-hop community, represented by a poverty-stricken, African American male who resides within the ghettos of the United States. Additionally, because *The Source* endorsed many rappers who recorded violent lyrics and espoused a rampant materialism, the magazine implied that the ideal citizen of the Hip-Hop Nation held such values. *The Source* utilized black nationalist discourse to give coherence and meaning to this nation, providing its depiction of hip-hop culture with a measure of political awareness that was often negated by the magazine's silence regarding divisive identity politics and social issues.

Although *The Source's* representation of the hip-hop community leaves much to be desired, it did have some positive points. *The Source* is significant because it has documented the new areas of development in the production of hip-hop culture, which includes the work of MCs, b-boys/girls, DJs, and graffiti artists. *The Source* has continuously highlighted the proliferation of conferences, educational classes, and careers that have emerged from this urban culture, including the numerous jobs and industries that have grown up, around, and through the foundational elements. Some examples of contemporary jobs in the hip-hop industry are urban wear fashion designers; hip-hop marketing agents; video, movie, and theater directors; producers; independent record label owners; actors; talk show hosts; poets; comedians; periodical and website owners; writers; journalists; and scholars. MC Lyte (rapper) is just as much hip-hop as are Hype Williams (video and movie director), Russell Simmons (entrepreneur), Damon Dash (corporate executive), and dream hampton (journalist). The individuals who engage in these and the many other new areas of production are part of the hip-hop community in ways never imagined in the 1970s. *The Source* has been important in documenting and profiling many of these emerging people and aspects of hip-hop culture.

Another useful aspect of *The Source's* version of hip-hop culture and identity and its focus on rap music is that it highlighted many of the innovations and growth within the rap music industry. Although many of the elements of hip-hop culture have been exploited by capitalistic ventures, rap music has proven to be the most profitable. Its commercial viability has led to the creation of many products that are a reflection of rap music in particular and hip-hop culture in general. With the advent of music television stations, radio stations devoted to hip-hop music, numerous print materials about the culture, digitally enhanced CDs, DVDs, MP3s, and the increasing number of websites and availability of free downloads, rap became highly accessible. Also, ample television shows, movies, soundtracks, documentaries, and books about rap practitioners emerged. *The Source* often contained advertisements for these products and has even created and promoted some of its own. *The Source* has also been important in explaining and promoting technological advances that have driven the unprecedented growth of rap music. From highlighting new DJ equipment, to explaining

the relevance of the Internet to the consumption of rap music, *The Source* has been at the forefront in documenting the shifts within rap music.

On the other hand, the emphasis on the many products that the Hip-Hop Nation can consume, and the ever growing number of advertisements found in the magazine, highlight *The Source's* rampant and increasing materialism. This materialism is important because it is both a product and a reflection of rap music's increasing emphasis on money, platinum jewelry, diamonds, liquor, status, and sexual conquest. Many of the most popular MCs of the time period I covered, such as Snoop Dogg, Jay Z, and Missy Elliott, encouraged incredible amounts of consumption as a necessary component of hip-hop identity. *The Source* mirrored and encouraged this drive to consume, even while its editors and writers articulated a growing concern for the consequences of the commercial exploitation of rap music and hip-hop culture.

In addition, the very real financial dictates of running a magazine must be considered. By selling ad space, *The Source* garnered much of the funds necessary to keep publishing the magazine. As the magazine increased its sales base and reputation, it was able to increase the number of companies willing to buy ads. For a magazine, this is an important part of staying competitive and financially solvent. Therefore, the monetary concerns and needs of the corporation are another important factor in *The Source's* apparently increasing materialism over the years.

These financial constraints raise the issue of authenticity, otherwise known as "keeping it real." Desires to "keep it real" ultimately revolve around the tensions caused by the yearning to preserve a seemingly unadulterated identity while at the same time dealing with capitalistic endeavors that seek to exploit and dilute this identity. For African Americans, "keeping it real" is a multi-faceted dilemma where authenticity seems to reside in distance from whiteness, yet is complicated by the need for monetary gain, coupled with the danger of (mis)appropriation and exploitation. Debates within *The Source* questioned how hip-hop could maintain its "authenticity" when it had to make money or sell(out) to a dominant society. Nevertheless, an even more incisive question is, why is purity so important when culture is neither pure nor static? Why did the Hip-Hop Nation need to keep it real, anyway?

The Source addressed the issues raised by materialism and commercialization of hip-hop through its claims to represent "real rap music," as shown earlier through quotes in various editorials. Additionally, *The Source* distanced itself from the controversy by appealing to a sense of nostalgia for a supposed time when people did hip-hop for the sake of doing it, because they loved it and for the street fame. One editorial implied that hip-hop used to be about making change, but "[t]imes have changed, however; and Rap Music is now recognized more as a business than it is as an artform. Aspiring rappers don't write rhymes for the sake of blowing the next cat's rap out the frame anymore. Instead, they write songs for the purpose of

compiling a tight demo that will get them signed.” This emphasis on a supposedly “purer,” less capitalistic moment in the production of rap music and hip-hop culture was downplayed, however, as the author decided, “[c]an’t knock anyone’s hustle, though. After all, a mu’f***’s gotta eat, right?”⁴² It comes back again to an assertion of hip-hop culture’s seemingly necessary and natural hyperconsumption. This stance makes sense if one considers the question, where would *The Source* be if its readers objected to materialism and no longer purchased the expensive goods that it advertised? Also, it is a common misperception that early hip-hop was motivated by pleasure rather than profit. In reality, “[h]ip hop has always been articulated via commodities and engaged in the revision of meanings attached to them.”⁴³ It is important not to exchange one myth (all of hip-hop is materialistic) with another (early hip-hop operated completely outside of capitalism and was only concerned with political advancement).

CONCLUSION

At the end of this analysis, it is clear that *The Source* offered many positive and many negative representations of the hip-hop community. Identifying with harassed and exploited inner-city black youth, the magazine gave its readership an alternative way to view their lives. The magazine’s black nationalist rhetoric gave readers a sense of pride and defiance against the brutalities of racist ideology, postindustrialism, and gentrification. Those readers who did not face such cruel realities enjoyed being associated with “the cool” and “the marginalized.” Although *The Source* often presented a troubling image of black identity, this identity met the needs of its readers either for inspiration or for titillation. Moreover, this representation of blackness garnered unprecedented revenue and standing in the publishing world for *The Source*. *The Source*’s Hip-Hop Nation ultimately proved to be quite valuable and profitable to many people.

7 The Narrative Disrupted

Reading Letters, Rewriting Identity

“To many readers, *The Source* is considered the music bible. If your magazine is going to take on that responsibility, you’ve got to come correct.”¹

These two sentences, written by Guru, a prominent rapper, and published in the June 1996 issue of *The Source*, captured the unique position of this magazine in hip-hop culture. Having garnered vast amounts of credibility and popularity, *The Source* outranked and outsold all other periodicals that solely reported on hip-hop music and culture during the 1990s. However, readers, artists, and other media sources consistently challenged the magazine to maintain certain standards and “come correct.” Never achieving a hegemonic position, many recognized *The Source* as “an expert,” but felt empowered, through letters, to critique and revise a number of its professed ideas. Consequently, *The Source* was not a vehicle through which the editorial staff imposed its views upon readers. Rather, it was a forum through which numerous actors debated, interpreted, and constructed hip-hop culture, identities, and community.

In the “Letters to the Editor” section, readers provided rich commentary and critique of hip-hop culture and *The Source*’s representation of the hip-hop community. Readers wrote letters addressed to *The Source*, to artists whom they felt had done wonderful or terrible things, and to other readers who had also written comments. In turn, staff writers, editors, readers, and artists who felt the need to “defend their honor,” at times, responded to these letters. In any given issue, one could find a multi-directional dialogue in play that dynamically informed a number of topics. I probe this multi-directional dialogue and explore what it tells us about hip-hop culture and identity. By exploring this process at play within *The Source*, I also show that a particular cultural production is not a finished product. It is a site or matrix where a multiplicity of subjects with various and often-competing identities engage in dialogue. This analysis demonstrates the agency of individuals who voiced their concerns regarding narratives of identity, for which interpellation as a theory fails to account. This work on *The Source* is a concrete example of a cultural production where one can view this process of identity formation, a critical next step in studies of black popular culture.

HIP-HOP CULTURE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Nancy Fraser's concept of a subaltern counterpublic helps one analyze the political nature and influence of both rap music and *The Source's* depiction of hip-hop music and culture. By articulating the exclusions found within Habermas's public sphere, Fraser finds that alternative competing public spheres have always been in existence. These subaltern counterpublics, as she has named them, are "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs."² In this instance, one can view rap music, specifically, as a subaltern counterpublic through which members create alternative discourses in response to dominant ones found in larger society.

Various scholars dismiss the transformative political potential of rap music because of negative elements such as misogyny, violence, materialism, and homophobia found within the lyrics of many of the more commercially popular rappers.³ Although one should not deny the oppressive elements of rap music, what marks and makes a discursive arena a counterpublic is its response to exclusions within dominant publics and the way that it forces standing assumptions to be debated publicly. Catherine Squires's model of public spheres allows a certain measure of flexibility that enables us to historicize, differentiate, compare, and explore multiple black public spheres, including ones with oppressive elements.

Finding that rigid definitions of the public sphere and "the political" obscure one's understanding, Squires advocates that we view public spheres as emerging from different black collectives with diverse responses to various historical circumstances and conditions. Accordingly, rap music is a counterpublic that emerged from repressive conditions and is "composed of people who (a) engage in common discourses and negotiations of what it means to be Black, and (b) pursue particularly defined Black interests."⁴ However, rap music, as a counterpublic, is a notably "weak" one with regard to its political success. Arguably, rap music has "ready access to organized forms of association and publicity, such as independent media production, political action committees, and professional organizations."⁵ Yet, participants in rap music have only periodically used these resources for engaged political action. Moreover, rarely do these multiple sites act in concert within this sphere.

As an institutional site within the rap music counterpublic, *The Source* represents a discursive arena where one can view the internal and external contestation over the images and narratives found within hip-hop music and culture. The magazine is an illustration of Stuart Hall's theory, which holds that black popular culture operates as a "profoundly mythic" space where "we represent and imagine ourselves." Hall also asserts that popular culture is the site of commodification and expropriation, so that the experience it articulates is a representation and not "the truth." As Squires notes, this commodification and expropriation is also a feature of a counterpublic.

Additionally, rap music manifests “internal and cross sphere discourses” that demonstrate the existence of multiple and competing subjects and interests that often result in “gender, class and ideological chasms.”⁶

Letters to the editor reveal how hip-hop culture, in this case *The Source*, can function as viable sites through which members of the hip-hop community negotiate narratives of identity. Letters to the editor purposefully disrupted the narratives of identity found within the magazine. Many readers felt left out of *The Source*’s grand narrative of the Hip-Hop Nation. Whites, Latinos, members of the gay community, women, and individuals from other countries all spoke out against the exclusivity of *The Source*’s articulation of community and identity. These individuals voiced discontent and anger at their exclusion, as well as concern over the implications of such exclusions for hip-hop culture.

CRITIQUING EXCLUSIONS FROM THE HIP-HOP NATION

Letters addressed to the magazine spoke out against the magazine’s insinuation that rap music is only for black people. One fan stated, “non-blacks just identify with rap on a slightly different level” and that “if it wasn’t for us whites that buy it, rap wouldn’t be sh**.”⁷ This person highlighted the largely true point that many of the people who were financially capable of buying the magazine were not inner-city, low income African Americans. Many of *The Source*’s readers refused to allow the magazine to ignore whites and other non-blacks who helped it to maintain its high selling position.

Another reader commented on these exclusions and claimed that *The Source*’s take on rap music racialized the Hip-Hop Nation in very inappropriate ways.

Whenever you talk about race relations, you tend to use the term “Hip-Hop Nation.” I think that is a misleading, incorrect and stereotypical term. Considering that most rap fans are white and live in the suburbs, the average member of the Hip-Hop Nation would not be a Black kid living in the city. You guys take militant stances against America, as if saying the “Hip-Hop Nation” isn’t down with America, which might be true if you were talking about Black teenagers but you’re not. Another thing wrong with that term is that even if you were talking about Black youth, that would be assuming that all Black youth listen to hip-hop. . . . In actuality, Blacks can’t be lumped into the same category because we are all different.⁸

Making these very striking comments, this reader vividly showed that *The Source* left many whites out of the story and made erroneous sweeping generalizations about blacks. Without the academic jargon, he railed against *The Source*’s assertion of an essentialist black subject.

In a later issue, another reader contested this person's call for a more accurate depiction of the hip-hop community. This second reader attempted to recuperate the Hip-Hop Nation for blacks worldwide, by stating, "Don't tell me sh** about my music, because as a Black person from the 'hood I live and breathe it everyday. The Hip-Hop Nation is just a branch of the lost Black Nation . . . hip-hop is a part of Black culture worldwide."⁹ This person's anger and passion spoke to the intensity of his felt need to claim hip-hop culture as the prophetic articulation of black concerns. This reader made room for many different black communities to be part of the hip-hop community (a move not largely evident within the magazine), but he could not concede to the existence of other races in this community. To do so would disrupt the narrative of hip-hop culture that ideologically and culturally restores black dispersed and oppressed people.

The hip-hop community, as consistently depicted in *The Source*, projected an image of a united black race with common goals and ideals expressed through hip-hop culture. Many people found acceptance within this narrative, believing that the magazine's representations resonated with their lived experiences and perceptions of reality. As this reader's comments demonstrated, this was a narrative far too valuable and affirming to be abandoned in the name of universalism.

Other readers spoke up for Latinos, whom *The Source* also left out of the Hip-Hop Nation. Many claimed that *The Source* was complicit with larger society, which forgets or trivializes Latinos and their contributions, and often makes erroneous generalizations about Latino heroes and the lifestyles and cultures of very different groups that are discursively lumped together. One reader wrote, "I also feel that Latinos are stereotyped, trivialized and in general ignored by not only our society but by your magazine as well. Barring the shameful piece on Kid Frost last year, which basically concluded that all Chicanos are vatos locos out to kill each other, I have never seen a feature or interview with a Latino artist."¹⁰ This reader linked his criticism of *The Source* to American media at large, which he believed presented a distorted image of various racial and ethnic groups. The reader would not let the magazine claim ignorance of the vast differences among members of the Latino community, and challenged *The Source's* quiet refusal to acknowledge the existence and contributions of Latinos to hip-hop culture and rap music.

Similarly, hip-hop enthusiasts located outside the United States accused *The Source* of parochialism and of not living up to its talk of hip-hop being universal. More than just benign neglect, Hang Em High in the United Kingdom claimed that this type of narrow thinking was American hip-hop's fatal flaw. In his letter, he declared, "The point I'm making is that in your insular world there's tunnel vision and hip-hop is locked up in the 50 states like a prison. . . . While other countries immerse themselves in the entire culture of hip-hop America exploits, degrades and bastardizes what was once an original artform. . . . You cats are proper fake, morally

bankrupt and whatever other derogatory term springs to mind.”¹¹ In vivid repudiation of the magazine’s representation of hip-hop culture, Hang Em High repositioned the music and the culture as a global phenomenon with more notable participants and expressions occurring internationally. This reader reset the bar for excellence in hip-hop by comparing American practices with international ones. He removed the United States from its presumed central position as the dominant space for the creation and dissemination of hip-hop music and culture, and asserted the importance of other geographical places.

Advocates for the gay community also criticized *The Source*’s representations of the hip-hop community and raised objections to homophobia in both rap music and the magazine. One person pointed out the inherent contradictions, writing, “For a movement that promotes itself as all-embracing and positive, to convey to its fans that it’s okay to hate and/or want to destroy an entire group of people is an ignorant and untimely self-destructive message.”¹² Joining in the larger debate, one gay reader courageously stated that gays will fight back against the homophobia in rap music; while another eloquently explained to Ice Cube, in an open letter to the rapper, the destructive impact his homophobia had on gay fans.¹³ In these letters, readers often criticized homophobic comments made by artists, homophobic lyrics, and the homophobic jokes published in “The Rap Bandit,” a column in *The Source*. They asserted the existence of gay fans and artists, boldly claiming that they would not be invisible. Most important, they pointed to the implicit homophobia of the magazine and explicitly cited the ways in which *The Source*, in their opinion, abused the gay community.¹⁴

SEXISM AND FEMINISM IN HIP-HOP

Women were another group whom *The Source* largely left out of the Hip-Hop Nation. The relatively few moments when women were discussed were marked by ambivalent and, at times, disparaging representations. Kierna Dawsey, along with other women staff writers at *The Source*, including dream hampton, Stephanie Jackson, Sherryl Atkins, and Mary Pattilo, created a defiant exception to the overall neglect of women and their issues within the magazine. They bravely voiced an oppositional stance, enabling us to view women’s agency against sexism within hip-hop culture. They often held the hip-hop community accountable for its treatment and portrayal of women.

During the period explored in this project, Dawsey was a strong voice for women. In the December 1993 editorial, Dawsey heatedly criticized Akinyele for his song “I Luh Huh,” which includes violent lyrics about punching his girlfriend in the stomach and kicking her down a flight of stairs in order to give her a “homemade abortion.” Refusing to accept the abuse of women physically or lyrically, Dawsey declared, “certainly, as a

Black man, you have more to talk about than throwing a pregnant, Black woman (and, of course, she's Black because who else could you hate with this much passion?) down a flight of stairs. And all because you didn't buy condoms? Hell, you can get them free damn near everywhere. And you luh me? Please."¹⁵ She also commented on Akinyele's assumed right to rap about any topic of his choosing, an excuse many individuals have given when attempting to justify sexist or violent lyrics. Dawsey argued, "Yes, you have skills. But, no, skills do not a man make. It wasn't enough that the whole joint is called *Vagina Diner* . . . No, you had to go make a complete joke and half-ass song out of violence against women. . . . You wanna kill Black me and kill my Black baby? Then go on, and find your Blackmanself by your Blackmanself. Real Black men know the time."¹⁶ Dawsey would not condone the mistreatment of women, even from a highly popular rapper to whom the magazine granted coverage. She demanded responsibility for the ways in which this artist characterized his relationship with women.

Dawsey's editorial opened a door for readers to engage this issue, prompting several readers to write letters applauding her challenge. One reader, Jennifer Perry, wrote, "Come on Ak, what kind of example are you setting? What kind of responsibility (or lack of) are you demonstrating? What happened to love and respect?"¹⁷ Another reader, Oscar Curtis, agreed, stating, "I love rap music and my brothers and sisters but when is this madness going to end? . . . If anyone else would like to sign, I will be the first to petition 'I Luh Huh.' We do not need this poison in our 'hoods!"¹⁸ These and many other letters reflected a fervent resistance to such lyrics.

Other readers, however, objected to Dawsey's claims. Akinyele himself wrote in, censuring Dawsey. "Your article condemns me for my thoughts instead of giving credit to having restraint for not acting on my impulses. This leads me to believe that you would rather have a person repress his thoughts and explode through his acts instead of giving him the freedom to express his emotions through music."¹⁹ Others agreed, quickly calling Dawsey to task for her critical statements regarding the sexist lyrics. Reginal Caspers wrote, "I truthfully feel that this is a song that only a man could truly understand. Since you don't have a penis, you'll never get it."²⁰ Dawsey often responded to these letters and refused to back down in the face of difficult opposition. In one reply she stated, "I have had ample time to sit down and think since my editorial ran and, upon second thought, I still feel the exact same way. . . . "Real niggas" want to rhyme about "reality" 'til they're blue in the face or until they get paid, whichever comes first. I just want to know, who has something, anything to say about accountability, or better yet, about creating change in our collective real reality (not the video version), so that, for once, we can stop running in place?"²¹ Holding her ground with this note, Dawsey concluded the debates about her anti-sexism stance.

While Dawsey tended to speak out largely to demand that artists hold some accountability for their lyrical treatment of women, much of

readers' battles against the abuse of women in hip-hop, as represented by *The Source*, centered around the use of the words "hoe" and "bi***." In fact, the use of these terms was the primary issue that motivated readers to demand that the magazine reconsider its portrayal of women. For example, a heated debate began within *The Source* when the magazine interviewed an all-female rap group, H.W.A. (Hoez With Attitude), who attempted to reconstruct "hoe" in a meaningful way. Although readers often did express the belief that "nigga," a historically derogatory term, could be re-appropriated by males, there seemed to be little potential for women to do the same with "hoe."

One person found any efforts at empowerment through a rearticulation of "hoe" useless, viewing the entire discussion as "the epitome of the most ignorant, self-destructive and anti-womanhood dialogue."²² Another person held a similar opinion, writing, "Where do these females get off calling themselves hoes? Everyone knows that the word hoe has been associated with being foul. I am sorry to say that it is females like H.W.A. who give women, especially young Black women, a bad reputation."²³ One reader boldly claimed, "You will lose a long time subscriber if you keep glorifying these dizzy women who insist on using their asses instead of their brains to get ahead."²⁴ These readers demanded accountability from artists, such as H.W.A., and also from *The Source*, who chose to include them in the publication.

Readers were also concerned with the representations of women that revolved around the word "bi***." Some readers criticized the use of "bi***" because they believed it belittled their hard work and devalued their sense of self. One reader noted, "As an intelligent Black woman, I want to tell all men that I am not a bi***, trick or ho. . . . I work three jobs and I'm a full time college student . . . hip-hop is still my favorite music. . . . But I'll be damned if I let any man disrespect me or my sisters."²⁵ For this woman and many others, one's participation in hip-hop culture should not entail disparagement. She asserted that women's contributions and achievements, not derogatory terms, should be the markers of their identity.

Within their letters, readers also reprimanded the magazine for perpetuating the notion that women are "bi***es." One reader wrote, "I will not buy a magazine to read about 'boostin' ghetto bi***es' or to learn the definition of a 'bum bi***'. . . . If that is what they have to contribute, then I cannot support the magazine."²⁶ Similarly, readers did not let artists off the hook, and referenced those rappers who called themselves "bi***es." Reflecting some respect for the artists' right to use the term due to music industry dictates (a sentiment not reproduced in letters concerning *The Source's* promotion of these artists), one reader claimed that Boss, Lady Rage, and Hurricane G (female rappers) are "truly dope MCs," but lamented the fact that the hip-hop community would only accept women portraying themselves as "gangsta bi***es."²⁷ This person suggested that women who wished to make an impact in rap music must often revert to

stereotypical and demeaning characterizations in order to find acceptance. The comment points to a lack of opportunity within hip-hop culture for women to represent themselves in less disparaging ways.

However, considering the popularity of rappers such as Missy Elliott, Foxy Brown, and Lil' Kim who used this term, the appropriation of the title and attitude of a "bi***" was attractive to some women. Letters referencing these artists were unconcerned with their use of "bi***." Rather, the artists' representation of black female sexuality became the dominant focus. A self-identified black female college student stated, "Although I give props to sistas like Queen Latifah, MC Lyte and Salt 'n Pepa, who paved the way, Foxy and Kim should not be condemned because they're expressing their sexuality and womanhood. They wear it well and should be proud of it. From your well written article, they appear intelligent, confident and fly. And when I see these women, I see a bit of myself."²⁸ While another did not quite agree with their images, she stated that she too was "flirtatious" when she was younger, and that these two should be given a chance to find their way.²⁹

Although artists such as Lil' Kim often walked a fine line between empowered and exploited images, these letters indicated that many women found value in their constructions of black womanhood. As slavery and its racist institutional legacy have historically denied black women physical and ideological control over their bodies, these readers prioritized the recuperation of the black female's sexuality and the public presentation of it in a way that profited women. Therefore, these readers chose not to focus on the possible negative connotations and gleaned all that was positive in these assertive sexual representations.

There were numerous other readers, however, who did not care for the representations of Lil' Kim and Foxy Brown. In fact, one person, Chad, objected to their images and denounced the idea of associating these artists with feminism. Chad wrote, "Webster's New Riverside Dictionary defines feminism as "advocacy of the political and socioeconomic equality of men and women." No where in this definition, you'll notice, is any mention of rapping near buck-naked, bragging about masturbation (as if it was a feat difficult to achieve), or cocking your legs on a nationally distributed poster in an attempt to boost record sales. The correlation of Foxy Brown and Lil' Kim's brand of hip-hop with any sort of feminism is a contradiction in terms."³⁰ Another reader even believed that these artists were the victims of exploitation. Sharon Brown commented, "What kind of "loving parents" would allow their young daughter to dress like a ho, rap about her "ill nana" and what niggas have to do for her to give it up, and use such profanity? . . . It seems to me that Foxy Brown's parents and record company love the money she's putting in their pockets more than they love her."³¹ These letters to the editor reveal the diversity of opinions within the hip-hop community. For some readers, Kim and Foxy functioned as inspiration and at times, an assuring familiar. Others, however, found the images degrading to women at large and to the artists themselves.

The analysis of women's voices, in the form of letters, in response to discussions regarding the image and identity of black women in rap music and within *The Source*, demonstrates the complexities and contradictions that Rose highlights when discussing black female rappers. Necessarily understanding these voices as participating in a larger dialogue, one must not view women as primarily feminist or men as necessarily sexist. In addition, Rose cautions that one must understand the alliances between black men and women, alongside black women's frustrations with black men. These comments help us understand various opinions within these letters and appreciate the numerous complex social positions of these women, which undoubtedly influenced their ideas and comments.

Joan Morgan addresses these issues when contemplating what a hip-hop feminism would look like. Her ideal of feminism holds that one should not unconditionally reject the images and lyrics of artists like Lil' Kim. Instead, one should take the entire range of images being offered and search for black female identity that lies "at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where 'truth' is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray."³² The letters critiquing the magazine's treatment of women imply that many readers operated within these multiple spaces and constructed a complex understanding of black female identity as expressed and constructed in rap music.

THE NIGGA AND BLACK MASCULINITY

Hip-hop culture functions as a foundational point for the articulation of black masculinity. Black masculinity is not a static concept, but reflects the ever-shifting needs and political goals of black communities. Functioning in direct contrast to degrading representations of black manhood and dominant black representations, black rappers imaginatively rework and rewrite the historic tropes of black heterosexuality, masculine (hyper)sexuality, insensitivity, detachment, and coldbloodness into new tropes of fascination and fear.³³ Hip-hop culture constructs an image that allows black men a measure of cultural capital that has real social, economic, and cultural implications. *The Source* often called this ideal black male a "nigga."

Within *The Source*, narratives of black identity and notions of black masculinity intersected; in fact, the two were often indistinguishable. Black masculinity was a defining characteristic of citizens within the Hip-Hop Nation. One's life as a "nigga" functioned as the legitimizing and foundational component of black masculinity. Considering the centrality of black masculinity to hip-hop culture in general, and to *The Source* in particular, one must consider the possible ramifications of male identification with "nigga-ness," or what Robin Kelley calls ghetto-centricity.

In his discussion of Los Angeles-based gangsta rap, Kelley points to the emergence of a new identity, "Nigga," that reflects the specific class, race,

and gendered experiences of young males in urban centers in the last decades of the 20th century. Although use of the term is not new (blacks have used it throughout the 19th and 20th centuries), Kelley finds that gangsta rappers have redefined the term to mean more than simply black. On one level, it can be seen as an empowering term that Tupac defined as meaning Never Ignorant Getting Goals Accomplished on *2Pacalypse Now*. It also distinguishes urban working-class males from the black bourgeoisie, highlighting their particular positions in society. Lastly, “Nigga” as an identity is directly linked to the ghetto and not simply to skin color.³⁴

Many of *The Source’s* readers identified with the term on this level. Some, like I-Ra, pointed out that the meaning changes when a white person uses it. Although he admitted that there are other, more appropriate terms, he still insisted that if a black person used “nigga,” it was acceptable:

Let I clarify the issue if I can. The Latin word “negro” literally means “black.” In the mouth of a southern cracker, the word transforms into nigger, nigrah, nigga. I think it must have been some kind of joke by the white man to start the rumor about how nigger means an ignorant person. I have no problem with the Latin word negro, the Greek word Ethiopian, the Kemetic word Kem—which all translate to the English word black—because I don’t have a problem, consciously or subconsciously, with being Black. So if another brother or sister calls I “nigga,” I take it as a term of endearment. If a devil calls I a “nigger,” I will not let him get away with what he thinks the word means—and it’s like that.³⁵

Others simply claimed that when people use “nigga,” the term is meant as a positive one, and should be understood in its proper context. This reader explained, “I’m a brother of many different ethnic backgrounds, and I am just home on release from a penile [*sic*] facility. When I went on the block, all my peeps was like, ‘Oh sh**. What up my nigga?’ It’s not like brothers are using it to disrespect each other. In the ghetto we change the meaning of words and make our own dialect. We just change it to mean like ‘What’s up son?’ ‘What’s up God?’ or ‘What’s up baby paw?’”³⁶ This reader, like Kelley, positioned “nigga” as a term particular to the codes and nuances of ghetto life, which shifted its meaning away from demeaning racist articulations. In this way, many black and white inner-city inhabitants found little problem with calling each other “nigga.”

However, other readers wholeheartedly rejected the term “nigga.” One reader objected to the term because he saw it as a lack of respect to black history and ancestors. He wrote, “Rap is great. It’s the greatest music ever. But as an interracial teenager, I can’t stand it when my favorite rappers say the word “nigger.” I think that Black people calling each other a racial slur for their own race is stupid. When some of my friends say ‘What’s up nigga?’ I tell them to shut the f**k up and they wonder why

I get mad. Our ancestors are looking down asking why we use the word that we were abused with by our white ‘owners.’”³⁷ Another claimed that people should never call each other “niggas” because it only leads to more problems. This reader wrote, “The fabric that holds our people together becomes unglued when we call each other by that ugly word. Achieving our goals as Blacks and Hispanics means disposing of negative factors. In this case, it is the word ‘nigger.’ There are other positive terms we can—and should—address each other with, such as ‘brother.’ Using that inhumane term should invoke in us a sense of injustice—not pride—in embracing the word as our own.”³⁸ Citing the injustice behind the term reflected in the history of racial violence in the United States, and the ongoing violence plaguing blacks and Latinos, readers such as this one found little rationale for its use.

Other readers had a problem with the term because of the hypocrisy of the sexism and violence associated with “niggas.” Collin Barden wrote, “It is extremely hypocritical and dangerous to the ideological validity of your magazine to dis the hoes of rap while you consistently rave about the niggaz of rap. Hoes and niggaz go hand in hand in the Black community. Neither can claim to be better than the other; both contribute to making the Black community a tragedy. If you want your magazine to be a relevant proponent of Black social responsibility, I suggest you stop making that responsibility a one-sided issue. Remember that the next time you rave about a Black criminal-vicious-gangsta-stereotypical-nigga record.”³⁹ Indeed, as Barden clearly noted, “niggas” were at the center of gangsta rap, which became the primary type of music that the magazine featured on its covers throughout the 1990s.

Other readers also criticized the magazine for straying away from what they believed to be the magazine’s true content and identity. One person claimed, “After devoting previous covers (and features) to the activists and positive role models of hip-hop like Chuck D and KRS One, why did you choose to devote an entire section of the magazine to gangsta rap? Most of the brothers you wrote about spit some really foul sh**. They glorify street violence and mistreatment of women. Also, you put Eazy-E on the cover with a gun. Why? The whole theme of your magazine is an intelligent and accurate approach to hip-hop. So why make it easier for the PMRC and other censorship [idiots] to point the finger at us by putting Eazy-E on the cover?”⁴⁰ Another reader agreed, and chastised the magazine for giving violent music coverage. Frank D angrily stated, “I’m curious, why would Black men (and women) make music that enforces and promotes the negative situation that exists for black youth in Amerikka—a music that helps to create a climate of dis-unity in a community that is already separating? . . . TO THE SOURCE: You better start being more objective about hip-hop because you’re starting to look like a marketing tool for the record industry. By being so non-critical in your articles, you do a disservice to the fans and the music.”⁴¹

Most readers, however, left *The Source* out of their comments and focused more on the hip-hop community's acceptance of a music that they found to be divisive and dangerous. For example, one person wrote, "I was born in East New York (a section of Brooklyn, NY) and raised in the consistently hectic streets of Brownsville. I can assure you that gangsta hip-hop music was a significant factor in the murder of that state trooper from the "Lone Star State." From personal experiences, gangsta music has always inspired people to get buck vicious when it was time to take papers."⁴² Although a number of other readers also cited the negative violence of the streets, most refused to blame gangsta rap. Readers such as this person, who signed his name Vexed, blamed inner-city problems, not gangsta rap. Vexed stated, "I'll agree that the lyrics of rap music are not always suitable for all listeners and some do stress explicit and violent activity, but how can they speak about positive aspects of life when they all live in hell? Rap that demonstrates guns, gangs, crimes and violence is not misleading or provoking. If anything, it is exposing the reality of the ghetto and what it means to be Black and poor. The problem should not be with the music, but with the conditions in which Black people are being subjected to live!"⁴³

Assertions that gangsta rap was the problem offended other readers. Two people in particular took Frank D to task for his comments. Leigh Pierce Edgerton wrote, "Frank D's letter [Sept. '93] about hardcore rap was way out of line! I do agree that hardcore rap portrays a lot of violence, but then again, so does some Country and Western music and a lot of heavy metal music. Music doesn't force anyone to commit crimes. People just use music as a scapegoat to keep themselves out of trouble. If anything, the music just gives them a theme song. If music is as influential as some people say, then why isn't the United States Government in the music business?"⁴⁴ Ready Ran from Buffalo agreed; "Frank D made a statement saying that hardcore music is killing our Black people and our Black heritage. I'm here to say that hardcore deals with being real to yourself. Hardcore comes from the heart, not bragging about how hard you are. . . . I think that people like Frank not only are trying to give rap a bad name but are also making bullsh** excuses for the problems facing blacks. Peep this Frank: groups like Onyx will be gone, but the problem will most likely still exist."⁴⁵ While there were many readers who criticized gangsta rap's projections of "nig-gas" and its glorification of violence, there were just as many letters citing the benefits of a music that spoke to and about the realities of life in the ghetto. These benefits often seemed to outweigh all of the costs.

CONCLUSION

The Source's depiction of the Hip-Hop Nation, while troubling in many ways, was never absolute. Letters sent by readers to the editors and replies from the magazine reflect a contestation of the images and narratives of

identity proposed by *The Source*. The letters demonstrate that popular culture is indeed a “site of strategic contestation,” as Hall states, where individuals construct and play with identity. These voices expand the boundaries of hip-hop culture and identity in order to include previously marginalized or excluded groups. Consequently, the letters section functions as a critical space for the articulation and investigation of biases and oppression within hip-hop culture and larger society. These letters resist the efforts of others to impose the terms of the debate. Instead, they expand the conversation regarding identity and dictate which issues are relevant to their community.

As do the other two studies of audience reception that I conducted, this analysis of letters to the editor shows the inability of *The Source*'s negative cultural messages to dominant readers. Rather, these letters show that black culture often functions as a site or matrix where a multiplicity of subjects with various and often-competing identities engage in a continuous process of presentation, interpretation, contestation, revision, and reception. There is a constant insertion of voices attempting to shape the narrative of identity that is being articulated by the cultural production. Class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and a host of other identities all become important and influential to the creation, interpretation, and reception of any cultural product and the identity that it is posing. *The Source* held no absolute claim over the image that it projected regarding hip-hop culture and identity. Alternatively, *The Source* functioned as a site through which individuals defined and redefined hip-hop identity.

8 Conclusion

Reframing Debates and Analyses of Controversial Black Culture

RACIST APPROPRIATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY BLACK CULTURE

Alice Randall, Kara Walker, and the publishers of *The Source: Magazine of Hip Hop Music, Culture and Politics* are three examples of a wave of late 20th century black cultural producers who strategically incorporated anti-black stereotypes into their work. Their cultural products have been highly popular and highly controversial largely due to their insistent representation of entrenched demeaning images and narratives of black identity. In vastly different ways, they each provided their audience with a novel way to engage, reconsider, and, ideally, discard longstanding stereotypical racial notions.

Randall's novel, *The Wind Done Gone*, revised dominant racist ideological constructions of black and white people of the antebellum and post-Reconstruction South as glorified in Margaret Mitchell's classic story *Gone With the Wind*. Believing that Mitchell's representations have enormously harmed black people and, in particular, black women, Randall focused her attention on the mammy and jezebel stereotypes still so prevalent in mainstream depictions of black women. In the *Wind Done Gone*, Randall took her protagonist, Cynara, and the reader on a journey of discovery to gain a more complete picture of the life of the enslaved black woman. Through this process of learning to see the black foremother as more than a stereotype, the reader gained the tools to see how racism has influenced his/her own thinking and identity. These tools empowered the reader to break free from entrenched stereotypes of black female identity.

Kara Walker also reproduced racist black stereotypes in her silhouette images. Her installations included gross characters such as coons and pickaninnies, who willfully acted out many of the worst ideological assumptions inherited from slavery about black people. Many people objected to Walker's work, as seen by critical journal articles, community protests of her work, and the letter-writing campaign to censor her art. Walker, however, insisted that she created her work to interrogate and disempower the racist cultural dramas that forcefully defined her identity and subjectivity. Walker drew stereotypes larger than life and then positioned them in narrative

scenes that magnified their absurdities. Walker's audience uncomfortably confronted these characters' illicit desires and actions, as they considered their own attractions to and repulsions from the images in front of them. By presenting this uncomfortable viewing experience, Walker hoped her audience would rethink previously unexplored racist assumptions and see beyond their limited construction of racial identities.

From 1989 through 1999, *The Source* also depicted a stereotypical representation of the black community. During this time, *The Source* was one of the most dominant magazines for the creation and dissemination of hip-hop culture. Its depiction of a Hip-Hop Nation, composed of inner-city, impoverished black males, who glorified violence, sexism, homophobia, and materialism, became a dominant representation of the black community. *The Source's* writers and editors, however, were not intentionally supporting racist ideology that has historically defined blacks as poor, violent, and uneducated materialistic strivers. Rather, through a black nationalist discourse, the magazine attempted to subvert the negative by finding pride in what society disparaged. As did others in the hip-hop community, *The Source* rationalized and defended its Hip-Hop Nation by positioning hip-hop culture and community as a defense against the destruction of racism, postindustrialisation, unfair laws, and poor life chances. The magazine gave its readers pride and a sense of ownership in their culture. Although many people undoubtedly read their representations as negative, *The Source's* dominance in the print industry points to its success at redefining demeaning assumptions into empowering characteristics that made its readers feel good about themselves.

BLACK CULTURE AS A SITE OF STRATEGIC CONTESTATION

In many cases, the representations found within the cultural products inspired people to participate, openly and spontaneously, in discussions of identity. This is evident by the corporations and scholars who submitted amicus curiae briefs in *The Wind Done Gone* case; the viewers of Kara Walker's work who responded to commentaries already written in comment books, thereby creating an ongoing dialogue within the books; and the readers and artists who wrote letters to *The Source* in response to letters written in earlier issues. Within these commentaries, people accepted some aspects, questioned others, and offered their own interpretations of narratives offered by the cultural products. The producers of these cultural products, thereby, did not control these representations, as they were subject to the ideas and desires of audience members.

The surveys of audience reception revealed the emergence of dialogues at the site of each cultural product. Within these dialogues, audience members engaged each other and the producers of the culture regarding the representations. They critically commented on black identities and politics,

especially in relationship to larger American society. In the case of *The Wind Done Gone*, individuals acknowledged the importance of Randall's reconceptualization of American history through her presentation of an alternative image of enslaved people. Similarly, Walker's audience demonstrated that the revision of American history along the lines of race was important to many different groups of Americans. Viewer commentary showed that Walker's choice of medium, her artistic strategies, and the disconcerting actions of her white and black characters pointed to a new understanding of American racial history. Likewise, within *The Source*, despite the magazine's attempts to restrict hip-hop to the black community, readers forced the magazine to recognize the participation and influence of people other than those of African descent. Their insights led to an important rethinking of the exclusivity of *The Source's* Hip-Hop Nation.

These analyses of audience response also showed that people were engaging in culture in intensely personal ways, regardless of the discourse of critics or of controversies presented by the media. This was evident within the letters to *The Source*, as readers often wrote when *The Source* published commentary that rhetorically denied some readers' place within the hip-hop community. Additionally, readers objected to the magazine's perpetuation of racism, sexism, and homophobia, which disparaged aspects of their lives or identity.

Within the comment books at the Walker exhibitions, the personal nature of critique was manifest in viewers' evaluation of the silhouettes according to preconceived notions regarding the purpose of art, what art should or should not look like, and the impact art should have on the viewer. It appears that viewers were largely ignorant of controversies surrounding the author, for the comments did not reference these controversies. Walker's audience was more concerned with how Walker's work made them feel and how other people might respond to it. Their lives and identities, not Walker's, were at the center of their comments.

Likewise, statements to the court regarding *The Wind Done Gone* demonstrated the power of the personal, as briefs were most influenced by one's employment (professor, literary agent, writer, and so on), relationship to the defendant/plaintiff, and social identities. People wrote in because they had a vested interest in the maintenance of *The Wind Done Gone* or *Gone With the Wind*, either because of a personal love of the story, a belief in the inviolability of copyright law, or an aversion to a believed slight against black people.

These surveys of audience response showed that culture does not simply impose its views upon people. Rather, there is a complex process of mediation and negotiation at the site of culture, where personal identity, beliefs, and social standing influence reception. In these responses, the incompleteness of the power of the culture's message became more visible as audiences generated infinite critiques of the works.

One should view a particular cultural production not as a finished product, but as a site where a multiplicity of subjects, with various and

often-competing identities, engage in a continuous process of presentation, interpretation, contestation, revision, and reception of narratives of identity. Consequently, we should not automatically assume that art that appropriates racist and/or derogatory images will necessarily have a detrimental impact on the viewer. Rather, my work demonstrates that there were varied responses to these cultural products, and that, at times, the engagement of black culture that purposefully appropriated racist stereotypes could lead to a disruption of stereotypes' ideological power. Rather than viewing culture as a stable base that shapes identity, this framework gives important insight into the ways that social identities both influence and are influenced by culture.

THE POLITICS OF CONTEMPORARY BLACK CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Within this study, it is apparent that the cultural producers' creations of competing narratives of black identity were attempts to shift positions of power. These producers believed that entrenched racist stereotypes have had a large impact on the African American community. Criticisms of these cultural producers reveal a racial anxiety that accompanies racial self-representation. There was an understandable desire on the part of some critics to control these images and to push cultural producers to disseminate representations that characterized black communities in ways that black people would find appropriate to their political needs and cultural sensibilities. Because Randall, Walker, and *The Source* did not always meet these expectations, their cultural representations proved highly political and controversial. The critical discourse within the media and the vast commentary from audience members brought to the forefront a number of considerations regarding the creation and reception of these cultural products. A brief examination of these issues, the politics of black cultural production, demonstrates the power struggles at play in cultural production and the complexity involved in the creation of contemporary black popular culture.

The artists explored in this study purposely drew attention to the continued effects of slavery and racism on the African American community and American society as a whole. This was an extremely divisive subject, as manifested in debates over affirmative action and reparations. Some resistance to the cultural works explored in this study came from a desire to move beyond considerations of race. This political agenda advocated a public discourse that was silent regarding the ideological and institutional legacy of slavery. Because Randall, Walker, and *The Source* continually pointed to the vestiges of slavery and its continuing effects by appropriating entrenched stereotypes, their work was often difficult to accept. Those who did appreciate the assertion of the continued problem of racism and

slavery did not necessarily approve of the use of demeaning imagery in the expression of the predicament.

Periods of increased cultural production such as the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and Black Arts Movement of the 1960s-70s pressed debates regarding which images would best represent black people to larger society. The late 20th century reflected these ongoing debates, as evidenced by generational and aesthetic differences regarding the use of demeaning imagery. While each of the artists claimed good intentions for the use of these images, critics remained concerned that they reproduced and confirmed stereotypes.

Additionally, because there were limited opportunities for the representation of the black figure, the black community often felt added apprehension over images of the black subject. With relatively fewer images, there were heightened concerns when any seemingly negative image became prominent. Some cultural critics argued that with a greater diversity of representations, one would not have to be as critical of existing images. Yet, there were a host of other factors that complicated the black community's response to racial representations. Although there was often a desire to depict the diversity of the black community, the depiction of class and sexual orientation differences often highlighted divisions within the African American community and frustrated those who wanted to present a single unified black community. As race emerged as merely one of a host of social identities that demanded consideration, efforts at social and political unity were made more difficult.

Because of the relative dearth of images, the existence of racist images, and the desire to present a unified social and political agenda, critics of these cultural producers questioned Randall, Walker, and *The Source's* right to create black representations. The analyses of audience reception within this study showed that no one person, group or cultural producer ultimately controlled the representation. Thus, critics' fears of the reification of stereotypes were unfounded, because audiences did not simply accept all aspects of any cultural message. In addition, cultural critics, competing cultural producers, and the larger community also generated abundant discourse that challenged the representations included in this study. The cultural producers never had the ultimate control over the reception of their work.

Critics consistently asserted that some cultural producers were more qualified than others to represent the black community, largely because of the perceived content of their work. At the base of these exclusions was a belief that white elite were dictating the creation of cultural products with stereotyped black representations. This was evident by the constant questioning of Walker's patronage and acceptance within art institutions that have historically excluded artists of color. Critics distrusted the high prices white enthusiasts paid for Walker's work. They thought the increasing acceptance gave her little incentive to alter her images. Additionally, much of the censure of Walker reflected a belief that she was not a chosen

or desired representative of the black community. Saar's letter, the censoring of Walker's work by African Americans in Detroit, and the comments within the *International Review of African American Art* declared that because some members of the black community had not accepted Walker or her images, her work should not get such acclaim. This problematically assumed that museums should exhibit only works that all African American artists and cultural critics endorse.

These points raised an underlying concern with the participation of white people in the production of black culture and, by extension, narratives of black identity. As stated, with Walker, many of her critics found her white patronage and acceptance by elite art institutions to be a problem. As white patrons and elite institutions have often supported work that exoticized the black image, critics were concerned that contemporary demands for a debased figure only fed into historical exploitations of the black body.

Such concerns gained justification when one looked at how many people wanted to protect *Gone With the Wind* despite its obvious racist attributes and the pain it caused some members of the African American community. Randall wrote *The Wind Done Gone* believing that she had a right as a black woman to create an alternative image of black people. Many people objected to this image because it cast aside constructions of a utopian Southern space in which white people existed in positions of total power, without considering the implications of the inhumane system that buttressed such a society. In this instance, then, it was clear that one must investigate the uncritical acceptance of racist imagery.

In a slight twist, with *The Source*, we saw a complicated stance regarding the participation of white people in the production and consumption of black culture. Within the survey of selected columns, *The Source* depicted the Hip-Hop Nation as a black community, questioned the participation of white people, profiled primarily African American artists, and was supported by many readers who objected to the involvement of white people in the culture. However, neither the magazine staff nor the readers took a critical stand regarding the racial identities and class position of the magazine's founders, two young white males at Harvard University. No one argued that the magazine depicted a debased image of the hip-hop/black community because of the founders' racial identity. In fact, the founders' positions were never questioned, which showed an interesting paradox regarding white people's creation of black culture. White people can and do participate in the production of black culture in ways that many African Americans sanction. Therefore, protests of the participation of white people should be carefully evaluated.

Another issue in the production of culture was the influence of the market. Much of the artistic work that exists today could not have been created without a market for the work. Critics of Randall raised this point, insisting that the market for the book did not come from its

creative insights, but from the market already created by *Gone With the Wind*. The primary thrust of the lawsuit was the claim that Randall was attempting to usurp potential monetary gains that rightly belonged to the Mitchell estate. Additionally, the lawsuit asserted that whatever market the book held was due solely to the controversy created by the court case. In rebuttal, Randall claimed that her market and inspiration derived from the countless numbers of Americans who had been harmed by the racist imagery of *Gone With the Wind*. The writing of *The Wind Done Gone*, for Randall, was a response to this audience's need for reevaluation and healing, which she believed could only be found in a re-presentation of this particular narrative.

However, market considerations cannot be ignored, as Randall would not have received a book contract had Houghton Mifflin not believed she would garner sales. The same is true of *The Source*, which at its core is a corporate entity whose goal is to make financial profit, and of Walker, who needed financial support to enable her work. However, while each of these cultural producers had to consider the reality of the market, it should not be assumed that the market primarily determined the nature and content of their work. Rather, in each case, a complex gathering of influences guided the production of the cultural products.

Theoretical debates underlie these increasingly practical concerns. For instance, should the sole purpose of black art be to aid in the political endeavors of the African American community? Does art even have to help black communities in some ostensible way? Each of the producers discussed in this study would probably say that they did have altruistic motives and hoped that their work would aid the larger black community. However, critics would quickly point to the many ways that they believed the representations harmed black people. Even if this latter claim is true, is it the artist's responsibility to take on the goals and needs of millions of black people? Should the artist be responsible to the dictates of black communities? Moreover, should artists be responsible for the consequences of the dissemination of their images to a larger audience? These questions bring up the issue of consumption and the socio-cultural impact of these cultural products upon society.

The most obvious outcome of the representations expressed through these cultural products was the large public discourse generated about race and representation. Because of the popular and controversial nature of these products, the discursive arenas that emerged were important spaces for the discussion of key issues of representation for the African American community. Each of these cultural products critically commented upon and opened up understandings of black representations and American history. They offered alternative ways to read the past and asserted that this past had direct bearing on the present by insisting upon the continued impact of the experience of slavery and racism.

These cultural works also played an important role in showing audiences some of the competing concerns, politics, and ideologies in the African American community. Furthermore, the considerations of gender, class and sexuality in these works put forward the significant influence and existence of multiple social identities within black communities. Their representation of social identities other than race for black people pointed to the diversity within the African American community and disputed the idea that African Americans operate as a monolithic whole. These controversial representations engendered important debates by their focus upon the differences within black people.

Those facts should not undermine the point that some of these cultural products, in particular *The Source*, could be sexist and homophobic. While black popular culture is an important platform for the assertion of various social identities, it did not necessarily always do so in these examples. Representations could be oppressive and exclusive, as seen by *The Source*'s attempts to exclude certain groups from participation. Therefore, representations of the black community, as expressed through black popular culture, are not inherently positive or appropriate and should be evaluated according to each representation's insistence upon and sensitivity to difference and inclusion.

Additionally, the assertion that these cultural products represented a diverse black community, demonstrative of the various ethnic groups within the African Diaspora, is arguable. Black popular culture in the United States and the examples of this project often presumed that all black bodies were African American. This was a silent and unquestioned assumption. This often-unchallenged assumption enabled black popular cultural producers to claim that they spoke for all blacks and that they were working toward a collective black good. However, these cultural representations often obscured the ethnic diversity within black communities. They often ignored the problems and concerns of other black ethnicities and left out considerations of these ethnicities' important contributions to black culture within the United States and internationally.

While one may criticize some of the content of these representations, the resulting public debates reached communities traditionally unconcerned with these genres of culture or the issues they raised. Many scholars have begun to study Walker's silhouettes, although visual art has not been a traditional component of their field of study. Additionally, numerous institutions have exhibited her work, greatly expanding the base of people who will see art dealing with such issues. The same is true of *The Wind Done Gone*, as major corporations and individuals in the publishing world became invested in a text that may otherwise have held no attraction for them. In addition, the large amount of press given to the court case made the book a must-read for many individuals who might not have otherwise even heard of it. This all brought to light the concerns with the racism of

Gone With the Wind, as people debated the merits of a revision of Mitchell's world. Lastly, in the 1990s *The Source* had unmatched success in its sale and distribution. Its success was a small representation of the growth of hip-hop nationally and internationally. It was a global force that had far-reaching influence, economically and culturally.

These cultural products, in particular, Walker's silhouettes and *The Source*, also demonstrated the vast capital-generating potential of black popular culture. This financial characteristic enabled the reach and appeal of many of these representations. The marketability of these products launched them internationally, presenting these images and concerns to a much larger audience. While this was positive for the broaching of dialogues regarding race and representation, it also created problems, because the popular nature of these products often led to their positioning within a historical and cultural vacuum. These cultural producers did not emphasize the ways in which their works operated within African American and other American traditions, making misreadings more likely as audiences lacked important context. The disconnection from these cultural, historical, and scholarly underpinnings made these cultural products more vulnerable to appropriation, as the divorcing of black popular culture from its historical base enables capitalistic endeavors that often do not benefit the producers of the culture of the black community.

Additionally, the insights of these cultural commentaries often seemed specious, in that they often denied the positive interactions and connections between black and white people. While Randall did posit that black and white women in the antebellum South were mutually dependent, her text largely presented relationships between whites and blacks as tenuous. Additionally, Walker and *The Source* denied much of the potential for positive interactions between blacks and whites. Moreover, each of these cultural products assumed that the racial landscape of the United States was constituted by black and white identities only. They left out considerations of the role of ethnicity and the participation of other racial groups within society. Their representations of American society and racial conflicts as solely the property of black and white people obscured the actual cultural interactions of the many diverse groups in the United States.

Despite their limitations, these cultural products have had a vast influence on African American and American culture. In particular, they are important to studies of identity formation as influenced by cultural narratives. They show how audiences engage culture, and participate in an interactive process in which they contest, accept, and revise ideologies found within the cultural products. Audience reception of these works shows that identity formation is a dynamic process that contemporary theory must further acknowledge and document. The exploration of contemporary black popular culture is indeed a rich field that has only just begun to open up analyses applicable to African American, American, and Cultural Studies.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Many of the late 20th century black cultural products that incorporated racist images and narratives of black identity offered meaningful contributions to ongoing considerations of race and racism in contemporary society. Automatic critiques based upon a concern that these products reify stereotypes assume that audiences are incapable of critically exploring cultural messages. Future research should further explore the agency and meaning making involved in the reception of these controversial cultural products. Moreover, assessments of these artists and their art must continue to probe artistic intentions, strategies, and embedded traditions in order to analyze them effectively. In addition, due to concerns regarding the vestiges of slavery, black people's relatively small control of their representations, white patronage, and the financial gains from the possible exploitation of the black body, studies of controversial black cultural products must consider the politics involved in the creation and consumption of this work. These artists created their work in a society that is ideologically charged. This greatly affected the production and reception of their work. These politics provide integral factors for cultural analyses about both artist and audience, which should be explored.

Notes

NOTES TO CHAPTER 1

1. Although *The Source* maintained dominance in terms of circulation and ad pages throughout the 1990s, in several incidences people directly challenged the magazine's editorial integrity. These include the 1994 walkout of *The Source* editorial board (including Shecter) because David Mays secretly inserted an unauthorized review of The Almighty RSO; artistic protests of the magazine's "Record Reviews" by groups such as Public Enemy and Cypress Hill; letters by artists to the magazine questioning the objectivity of its reviews; questions regarding the role of editors and writers who at times were paid promoters for various artists; a questionable publisher's credo; published statements by former writers and editors detailing unethical editorial practices; reported incidents of violence against editors and writers in order to influence coverage of artists; and the increasing controversies regarding Benzino (Raymond Scott), who has recently been named a co-founder and visionary of *The Source*, despite the fact that the first issues make no mention of him.
2. Keith Byerman, *Remembering the Past in African American Fiction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
3. Ron Eyerman, *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2.
4. Black popular culture is a massive social, economic, and cultural force within the world. In its universality and ability to speak to people of many different cultures and social identities, it represents a powerful influence upon contemporary society. The unprecedented reach of black popular culture is enabled by an increasingly interconnected global market and media technology. These products generate vast amounts of capital, evidencing the profitable economy of the black body and its narrative and visual representative identities. Its scope and influence make black popular culture an attractive space for the representation of identity. Accordingly, it is a fundamental part of American lives, politics, social organizations, and everyday existence. In particular, black popular culture plays a central role in the expression of black communities' ideals and concerns. It is a primary space where people of all backgrounds explore existing narratives of black identity and subjectivity, as well as where they construct and articulate competing narratives of identity.
5. Although these sources do not represent the full variety of possible public responses, these anecdotal studies offer meaningful evidence that audiences maintain agency in meaning making, and that cultural products that appropriate anti-black stereotypes are not necessarily detrimental. I encourage

future empirical studies that help us better understand how audiences construct meaning out of culture and how they respond to culture with appropriated racist, negative, or demeaning imagery.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. Alice Randall, "Alice Randall Declaration," 2–3.
2. Thomas F. Haddox, "Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* and the Ludic in African American Historical Fiction," *Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2007).
3. Houghton Mifflin, "The Wind Done Gone: Questions and Answers about this Dispute" 4 April 2001, http://www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com/features/randall_url/qandas.shtml (4 January 2005).
4. Stanley Crouch, "The Problem with Art is Artists," *Daily News*, April 5, 2001.
5. Henry Louis Gates, *Looses Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
6. For more note Hazel Carby, "Ideologies of Black Folk: The Historical Novel of Slavery," in Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
7. William Andrews shows that antebellum narratives of slavery were part of a romantic movement that emphasized heroic slaves, their actions to achieve freedom, and their humanity. Post-bellum narratives of slavery moved toward a pragmatic realism. These attempted to show that slavery did not corrupt or debilitate, but rather was a force that enslaved persons endured and conquered. Andrews asserts that these narratives have in common the point that they were a primary way in which blacks built a usable past that could aid in their quest to achieve full citizenship. William Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865–1920," in Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad, eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989).
8. Deborah E. McDowell, "Negotiating between Tenses: Witnessing Slavery after Freedom—Dessa Rose," in Deborah E. McDowell and Arnold Rampersad eds., *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 146.
9. For a greater discussion of the role of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* in relationship to contemporary novels by black women refer to Angelyn Mitchell, *The Freedom to Remember: Narrative, Slavery, and Gender in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
10. Claudia Tate, *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine's Text at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
11. Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987).
12. Harriet A. Jacobs and Lydia Maria Francis Child, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Boston: Pub. For the author, 1861); reprint, San Diego: Harcourt Brace Javanovich, Publishers, 1973), 55.
13. Jacobs, 56.
14. Spillers, 68.
15. Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 43. The page numbers of all subsequent quotes from *The Wind Done Gone* will be noted in-text.

16. This section in *The Wind Done Gone* draws on the storyline in *Gone With the Wind* that Ellen O'Hara gave birth to three baby boys, all of whom died as infants. ". . . three little boys, each of whom died before he had learned to walk—three little boys who now lay under the twisted cedars in the burying ground a hundred yards from the house, beneath three stones, each bearing the name of "Gerald O'Hara, Jr." For this reason, the O'Haras had no sons and Scarlett found herself later within the story having to do the work for which a male heir would have taken responsibility. Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936); reprint, (New York: Warner Books, 1973), 59.
17. Mitchell, 63.
18. Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
19. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, *Black Women Writers and the American Neo-Slave Narrative: Femininity Unfettered* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999).
20. For an explanation of Walker's lengthy research and writing process note Margaret Walker, "How I Wrote *Jubilee*" in Margaret Walker and Maryemma Graham, *How I Wrote Jubilee and Other Essays on Life and Literature* (New York: Feminist Press at The City University of New York, 1990).
21. Charles Rowell, "Poetry, History, and Humanism: An Interview with Margaret Walker," and Kay Bonetti, "An Interview with Margaret Walker Alexander," in Margaret Walker and Maryemma Graham, *Conversations with Margaret Walker* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002).
22. Such as that found in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave, Written By Himself* (1845), where Douglass gains his manhood through a violent, physical confrontation with his master, Mr. Covey. For more on the difference between the heroic male slave and the narrative of the enslaved black woman refer to Joanne Braxton, "Harriet Jacobs' Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: The Redefinition of the Slave Narrative Genre," *Massachusetts Review* 27 (1986).

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

1. *Amicus curiae* is the Latin term for "friend of the court." It designates the briefs/arguments of people who are interested in an issue filed in court, but are not one of the litigants. For example, the Sierra Club may file an amicus curiae brief in an environmental action of which they have no legal involvement. ALM, *LAW.COM Dictionary*, December 31, 2002, <<http://dictionary.law.com>> (4 January 2005).
2. Summons and Complaint, "Document 1," March 16, 2001, 16–17.
3. "Houghton Mifflin's Response in Opposition to Temporary Restraining Order and Preliminary Injunction," 2–3.
4. A prior restraint is an order that bans speech before it occurs. Prior restraints should be issued only in extraordinary circumstances, such as when the communication will produce violence and possibly overthrow an orderly government. Before a prior restraint can be issued the court must ensure that the communication that would be suppressed is not protected by the First Amendment. If the communication is protected, the issuance of a prior restraint is unconstitutional. "Amici Curiae Brief of the New York Times," May 14, 2001.
5. Louis Rubin, "Louis Rubin Declaration," 4.
6. Joel Conarro, "Joel Conarro Declaration," 3.

7. John Sitter, "Supplemental Declaration of John Sitter," 1.
8. Pat Conroy, "Pat Conroy Declaration," 3; "Georgia First Amendment Foundation Amicus Curiae Brief," 6.
9. Barbara McCaskill, "Declaration of Barbara McCaskill," 15.
10. "Amici Curiae Brief of The New York Times Company, Dow Jones & Company, Inc., The Tribune Company, Media General, Inc., Cable News Network LP, LLLP, and Cox Enterprises," 19–20.
11. Toni Morrison, "Declaration of Toni Morrison," 3.
12. "Georgia First Amendment Foundation Amicus Curiae Brief," 2.
13. Joel Conarro, "Joel Conarro Declaration," 3; Louis Rubin, "Louis Rubin Declaration," 3; Alan Lelcuk, "Alan Lelcuk Declaration," 2.
14. Gabriel Motola, "Gabriel Motola Declaration," 3–4.
15. Alan Lelcuk, "Alan Lelcuk Declaration," 3.
16. Gabriel Motola, "Gabriel Motola Declaration," 3.
17. Hope Dellon, "Hope Dellon Declaration," 3.
18. Alex Holtz, "Alex Holtz Declaration," 3.
19. Kevin Anderson, "Kevin Anderson Declaration," 5.
20. John Sitter, "John Sitter Declaration," 2 and 7.
21. Microsoft, "Amicus Curiae Brief of the Microsoft Corporation," 15.
22. Frank Price, "Frank Price Declaration," 4.
23. Jane Chelius, "Jane Chelius Declaration," 3.
24. Alice Randall, *The Wind Done Gone*, 161.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. Anne Doran, "Kara Walker," *Grand Street Disguises* 58, no. 3 (1996); Hamza Walker, "Kara Walker: Cut it Out," *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no. 11–12 (2000), 110; Juliet Bowles, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," *International Review of African American Art*, 14, no. 3 (1997), 7.
2. Michele Wallace, "Why Are There No Great Black Artists?: The Problem of Visuality in African-American Culture" in Michele Wallace and Gina Dent, *Black Popular Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992).
3. Kara Walker in Tommy Lott, "Kara Walker Speaks: A Public Conversation on Racism, Art and Politics," *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire* 3, no. 1 (2000), 75.
4. Kara Walker, Museum of Modern Art, "Museum of Modern Art Online Projects: Conversations with Contemporary Artists, Kara Walker Interview," <http://www.moma.org/onlineprojects/conversations/kw_f.html> (4 January 2005).
5. Kara Walker, "Kara Walker Interviewed by Liz Armstrong," *No Place (Like Home)* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997), 104.
6. Kara Walker, "An Interview With Kara Walker," *Upon My Many Masters* (1997), unpaginated exhibition brochure.
7. Kara Walker, "Kara Walker Interviewed by Liz Armstrong," 104.
8. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 26.
9. Jerry Saltz, "Kara Walker: Ill Will and Desire," *Flash Art* 29, no. 191 (1996), 82.
10. For more on this topic refer to Robert Reid-Pharr, "Black Girl Lost" in Kara Elizabeth Walker, *Kara Walker: Pictures From Another Time* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002).
11. Saltz, 82.

12. Kara Walker, "The Debate Continues: Kara Walker's Response," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 2 (1998), 48.
13. Kara Walker, "An Interview with Liz Armstrong," 106.
14. Saltz, 84.
15. Ali Subotnick, "Kara Walker," *Make* (2002), 25.
16. Tommy Lott, "Kara Walker Speaks."
17. Kara Walker, "An Interview with Liz Armstrong," 106.
18. Victor I. Stoichita, *A Short History of the Shadow* (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), 154.
19. Stoichita, 167.
20. This animal could also be a swan, a prevalent image in Walker's early works.
21. Darby English, "This Is Not About the Past: Silhouettes in the Work of Kara Walker" in Kara Walker, Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, Mark Reinhardt eds., *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003), 143.
22. For more see Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).
23. Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).
24. Juliette Bowles, "Editor's Response," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 2 (1998), 51. Jerry Springer is the host of a highly popular daytime talk show. The show is infamous for its routine production of episodes that include graphic violence as jilted participants vigorously strive to attack each other. The "Jerry Springer Show" is also known largely for its staged violence, sensationalism, and obscenity.
25. Anne Wagner, "Kara Walker: "The Black-White Relation" in Kara Walker, Ian Berry, Darby English, Vivian Patterson, Mark Reinhardt, eds., *Kara Walker: Narratives of a Negress* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2003).
26. English, 142, 145.
27. Arlene Keizer, "Gone Astray in the Flesh: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers and African American Postmemory," *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008).
28. Andre Delbanco, "The Political Incorrectness of Zora Neale Hurston," *Journal of Black in Higher Education*, no. 18 (1997-1998).
29. An example of this pressure is evident within the notion of the talented tenth. The talented tenth is a concept W.E.B. Du Bois developed in reference to an elite group of African Americans whom he believed should be the leaders of the masses. W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth" in Booker T. Washington, ed., *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative Negroes of Today* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1903).
30. Kalefah Sanneh, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke: A Harvard University Conference on Racist Imagery," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 2 (1998); Pamela Newkirk, "Controversial Silhouette," *Art News* 98 no. 8 (1999).
31. Thanks to Paula Birnbaum and her class, Art and Society (Fall 2004), for many of these responses to Saar's work.
32. Jane H. Carpenter and Betye Saar, *Betye Saar* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2003), 50.
33. For example, the trajectory of the slave narrative represents an attempt to rework the history of slavery. William Andrews shows that antebellum narratives of slavery were part of a romantic movement that emphasized heroic slaves, their actions to achieve freedom, and their humanity. Post-bellum narratives of slavery, however, moved toward a pragmatic realism. These attempted to show that slavery did not corrupt or debilitate, but rather was a force that enslaved persons endured and conquered. Both

antebellum and post-bellum narratives of slavery were primary ways in which blacks built a usable past that could aid in their quest to achieve full citizenship. William Andrews, "The Representation of Slavery and the Rise of Afro-American Literary Realism, 1865–1920" in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination*.

34. Kara Walker, "The Debate Continues," 49.
35. W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art" in Winston Napier, ed., *African American Literary Theory: A Reader* (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 22.
36. Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" in Simon During ed., *The Cultural Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 211.
37. Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 240.
38. Shaw, 121.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 5

1. Many of these comments often had nothing at all to do with the museum or exhibit. Some viewers effectively ignored the work and instead chose to write about themselves and their identities. There were numerous statements such as "John wuz hea," references to the writer's school, people he or she was dating, and their nationality. Many people also chose to draw pictures in the comment books in order to display their own artistic talent. These comments and drawings demonstrate the diversity of response to Walker's work. Moreover, while Walker has created a stir among artists and intellectuals, these comments and drawings show that there were many viewers who did not engage her work. They saw their own lives and abilities as far more interesting and worthy of documentation than Walker's.
2. This is not to imply that these issues were not present in the commentary, for there were comments that attested to racial concerns. These issues, however, were not the primary concern for viewers or the driving force behind comments.
3. The comment books do not include the names or social identities of the viewers. However, these commentaries should be considered in relationship to the demographics of the university campus and city in which each museum is located.
4. James Christen Steward, "Foreword," in *Kara Walker: Pictures From Another Time* ed. Annette Dixon (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002), 6. Understanding that Walker constructs her images for the particular space of each museum exhibiting her silhouettes, the Michigan Museum of Art firmly believed that its Apse would help create a unique viewing experience that would well suit the artistic goals of Walker. As its name states, the Apse is a semicircular structure with large columns lining the semicircle opposite the wall. These columns are highly reminiscent of the columns of the most well known images of the "big house" in the antebellum slave-holding South. This space physically re-creates this period of American history. It thrusts the viewer into a structural representation of the South, not coincidentally the very setting Walker utilizes in the narratives her silhouettes depict. Through its use of this physical space, the museum echoes the silhouettes' chaotic depictions.
5. Kara Walker, *Kara Walker: Upon My Many Masters*.
6. Kara Walker, "An Interview with Liz Armstrong," 107.
7. Dan Cameron, "Kara Walker: Rubbing History the Wrong Way," *On Paper: The Journal of Prints, Drawings and Photography* 2, no. 1 (1997), 14.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 21.
2. Maximillian Potter, "Getting to the Source," *GQ*, December 2001.
3. Kathryn Drury, "Entrepreneurs Find New Source of Inspiration," *Advertising Age*, October 27 1997.
4. Cary Peyton Rick, "They Don't Teach This at Harvard," *Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management*, May 1 1991.
5. Steve Wilson, "The Source Plays on Despite Editorial Scratches," *Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management*, May 1 1995.
6. Jeff Gremillion, "Two Veterans Take Flight," *Mediaweek*, September 15 1997.
7. "Excelsior Radio Networks and Source Magazine launch The Source Radio Network," *Business Wire*, May 30, 2002. The Radio Network provides content to top hip-hop radio stations across country with an interview program called "The Source Street Beat" and a hip-hop prep service called "The Daily Dose" (special event coverage, hip-hop radio satellite tours, features, interviews, and reports).
8. Brett Sokol, "He Ain't Guilty, He's My Partner," *Miami New Times*, September 6 2001.
9. Potter, "Getting to the Source."
10. J The Sultan (Jonathan Shecter), "Message From the Editor," *The Source*, June 1989, 5.
11. There are important conceptual differences between rap music and hip-hop culture. Rap music is a component of hip-hop culture—it does not characterize hip-hop in totality, as evident by the other three original elements (DJing, b-boying/b-girling, graffiti) and the numerous other components that have arisen. An understanding of the relationship of the elements to each other is a critical part of one's knowledge of hip-hop. Early graffiti writers were often also b-boys/b-girls, while many b-boys/b-girls could also grace the microphone. Historically, one participated in several elements of the culture, marking the centrality of each of the elements to hip-hop culture. This knowledge and multiple sites of participation are often markers of authenticity in a culture that revolves around questions of legitimacy.
12. Anonymous, "Rap Music's Identity Crisis," *The Source*, June 1991, 4; Upski with Reginald Jolley, "Rap Music's Identity Crisis, Part 2," *The Source*, October 1994, 8.
13. James Bernard, "Free at Last: A Declaration of Independence for the Hip-Hop Nation," *The Source*, July 1991, 38.
14. Editorial Staff, "State of the (Hip-Hop) Union," *The Source*, June 1992, 6.
15. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 1991), 36.
16. Selwyn Sefyu Hinds, "The Source 100," *The Source*, January 1998, 23.
17. Wahneema Lubiano, "Standing in for the State: Black Nationalism and 'Writing' the Black Subject" in Eddie S. Glaude Jr. ed., *Is It Nation Time: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 160.
18. Lubiano, 163.
19. Brian Lassiter, "Soul Power: The Formative Years of Hip-Hop Music and Culture: 1968–1974," *The Source*, April 1993, 24.
20. For instance, urban deindustrialization in the 1970s, the post-industrial landscape of the 1980s, and larger American social and political forces of the time shaped the development of hip-hop culture. Equally important, Murray Forman makes an intervention in the scholarship by detailing the

ways in which the music industry and hip-hop culture dynamically interact and simultaneously influence each other. Highlighting important subjects such as the role of independent labels, the development of music technology, the expansion of music media, and the globalization of the industry in general, Forman largely expands our understanding of the influences of hip-hop music and culture. *The Source* also leaves out a critical examination of how its goal as a corporate entity to earn profits influences its depiction of hip-hop culture and the Hip-Hop Nation. While it continuously emphasizes its role as a sort of guide to authentic hip-hop and a fundamental component of the culture, the ways in which its monetary objectivities inform its articulation of nationalism should remain as part of the discussion.

21. There were two articles that did not fit into the above categories. These were an article on the Miss African American Collegiate Pageant and the Million Woman March. Also, it should be noted that features, which included more positive aspects regarding women—including interviews of prominent women artists and profiles of women in hip-hop—were not considered in this analysis. My research focused on columns, as they were stable, regularly occurring components of the magazine, written by staff writers, and, thereby, a reflection of the tone and agenda of the magazine as a whole. Features, alternatively, could and often did include the work of outside contributors who reflected values and rhetoric that the magazine did not always maintain.
22. Adario Strange, “B*tch Betta . . .,” Editorial, *The Source*, February 1996, 10.
23. Raquel Z. Rivera, *New York Ricans From the Hip Hop Zone* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
24. The magazine claimed that its function was to protect the hip-hop/black community from racism and oppression.
25. Forman, xvii.
26. Forman, 62. While white artists with ghetto associations and black artists (and perhaps black consumers) by default are included within this community, this theory does not account for non-black consumers located outside the ghetto, who also identify with the hip-hop community.
27. Forman defines space as a social product or a political and cultural construct that serves as a tool of thought and action (4). Whereas place “defines the immediate locale of human interaction in the particular” and “is defined by its closeness and proximity to individuals and groups and by its localized character” (25).
28. J The Sultan, “Message From the Editor,” *The Source*, October 1990, 6.
29. Tupac Shakur was a rapper who emerged from California in the early 1990s. He is most known for his brand of West Coast gangsta rap, which entailed creative yet violent lyrics and was associated with Death Row Records. Biggie Smalls was an East Coast rapper emerging out of Brooklyn during the same period. He was signed to Puff Daddy’s (Sean Combs) Bad Boy Records and branded a dynamic and glamorous style of gangsta rap that glorified a rampant materialism and violence. The two artists were seen as rivals, and both were murdered in the 1990s. No one has been arrested or convicted for the killings.
30. Frank Williams, “The Living End,” *The Source*, November 1996, 108.
31. Williams, 110.
32. Selwyn Seyfu Hinds, “Tupac Shakur: His Life, Death & the Demons that Haunt the Hip-Hop Generation,” *The Source*, November 1996, 101.
33. Selwyn Seyfu Hinds with Frank Williams and Carlito Rodriguez, “The Assassination of Christopher Wallace,” *The Source*, May 1997, 77.
34. Hinds, 82.

35. John W. Roberts, "Stackolee and the Development of a Black Heroic Idea," *Western Folklore* 42, no. 3 (July 1983), 189.
36. Robert G. O'Meally, "'Game to the Heart': Sterling Brown and the Badman," *Callaloo*, no. 14/15 (Feb-May 1982), 44.
37. John W. Roberts, "'Railroad Bill' and the American Outlaw Tradition," *Western Folklore*, 40, no. 4 (October 1981), 326.
38. Roberts, "Stackolee," 187.
39. Tommy Lott, "A No-Theory of Contemporary Black Cinema," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25, no. 2 (Summer, 1991), 225.
40. Kristin Hunter-Lattany, "Why Buckwheat Was Shot," *MELUS* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1984), 80.
41. For more on black action films refer to Kenneth Chan, "The Construction of Black Male Identity in Black Action Films of the Nineties," *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 2 (Winter 1998).
42. Carlito Rodriguez, "Reason for Rhyme," *The Source*, April 1997, 12.
43. Rose, 41.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 7

1. Guru, Letters, *The Source*, June 1996, 12.
2. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Bruce Robbins ed., *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 14.
3. For example, Michael Dawson holds that a black counterpublic did not exist in the 1990s, if we define this counterpublic as "a set of institutions, communication networks and practices which facilitate debate of causes and remedies to the current combination of political setbacks and economic devastation . . . and which facilitates the creation of oppositional formations and sites." Dawson desires to recuperate a "progressive" black public sphere as Houston Baker does through his interpretation of the Civil Rights Movement and the role of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Stressing the lack of humanity and dignity for others found in much of the music and the absence of any critical activism on the part of more positive artists, rap operates as a potential, but currently nonviable, contemporary black counterpublic for Dawson. For more, refer to Michael C. Dawson, "A Black Counterpublic?: Economic Earthquakes, Racial Agenda(s), and Black Politics," in Black Public Sphere Collective eds., *The Black Public Sphere* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 201.
4. Catherine Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory*, 12 no. 4 (2002), 454.
5. Squires, 457.
6. Squires, 456.
7. Kevin Sawyer, Letters, *The Source*, Summer 1990, 9. For other letters that express similar sentiments, note Hunter Brumfield, Letters, *The Source*, January 1992, 9-10, and He B White, Letters, *The Source*, May 1991, 10.
8. Mike, Letters, *The Source*, February 1993, 11.
9. B.K., Letters, *The Source*, May 1993, 12.
10. Pequena, Letters, *The Source*, August 1993, 16. For further examples note Fureeus aka James Media, Letters, *The Source*, January 1994, 12 and Matorador of Metaphor 2 Mex, Letters, *The Source*, November 1992, 11.
11. Hang Em High, Letters, *The Source* March 1997, 20. For a further example, note Patrick D, Letters, *The Source*, July 1997, 18.

12. Fred Vaughn, Letters, *The Source*, January 1991, 11.
13. For other examples of anti-homophobia letters note Michael Tully, Letters, *The Source*, May 1993, 11; Del, Letters, *The Source*, November 1993, 12; Michael Mahern, Letters, *The Source*, December 1991, 12; J Chris Ormsby, Letters, *The Source*, April 1992, 11.
14. During the 1990s, *The Source* was largely silent about homosexuality in the hip-hop community. There was only one issue in the period of this study that explicitly addressed this concern. In the December 1997 issue, *The Source* included one article about clubs catering to homosexuals within the hip-hop community and another about Wendy Williams, a New York City radio personality, who frequently “outs” supposedly gay hip-hop artists. Additionally, there was an open letter from James Earl Hardy, an African American novelist, who openly supported the gay hip-hop community. These articles never discussed the magazine’s historical omission of articles about homosexuality in hip-hop culture. After this issue, *The Source* again fell silent about homosexuality.
15. Kierna Dawsey, Editorial, “Dear Ak,” *The Source*, December 1993, 8.
16. Dawsey, 8.
17. Jennifer Perry, Letters, *The Source*, February 1994, 12.
18. Oscar Curtis, Letters, *The Source*, February 1994, 12.
19. Akinyele, Letters, *The Source*, February 1994, 12.
20. Reginald Capers, Letters, *The Source*, March 1994, 14.
21. Kierna Dawsey, Letters, *The Source*, March 1994, 14.
22. Queen J Love, Letters, *The Source*, August 1994, 14.
23. Alicia Williams, Letters, *The Source*, July 1994, 17.
24. Lorrie Irby, Letters, *The Source*, July 1994, 17.
25. Keenah B, Letters, *The Source*, November 1993, 12.
26. Laini Lee, Letters, *The Source*, October 1995, 18.
27. Big T, Letters, *The Source*, May 1993, 11.
28. Melinda K. Anderson, Letters, *The Source*, April 1997, 16.
29. Jamila Cooper, Letters, *The Source*, April 1997, 16.
30. Chad “Luv” Handley, Letters, *The Source*, April 1997, 16.
31. Sharon Brown, Letters, *The Source*, April 1997, 16.
32. Joan Morgan, *When Chicken Heads Come Home to Roost: My Life as A Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1999), 62.
33. Herman Gray, “Black Masculinity and Visual Culture,” *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (1995), 403.
34. Robin D. G. Kelley, “Kickin’ Reality, Kickin’ Ballistics: Gangsta Rap and Postindustrial Los Angeles” in William Eric Perkins ed., *Droppin’ Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).
35. I-Ra, Letters, *The Source*, July 1994, 13.
36. A Half Caucasian Convict, Letters, *The Source*, August 1994, 14.
37. Dave Root, Letters, *The Source*, March 1993, 11.
38. Rico “Barbwire” Best, Letters, *The Source*, July 1994, 13.
39. Collin Barden, Letters, *The Source*, May 1991, 12.
40. DJ Sean, Letters, *The Source*, May 1991, 12.
41. Frank D, Letters, *The Source*, September 1993, 14.
42. Naught 40, Letters, *The Source*, March 1993, 11.
43. Vexed, Boston, Letters, *The Source*, August 1994, 14.
44. Leigh Pierce Edgerton, Letters, *The Source*, December 1993, 12.
45. Ready Ran, Letters, *The Source*, December 1993, 12.

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