

“Kara Walker’s White Shadows in Blackface.” In *For the Benefit of All the Races of Mankind (Mos’ Specially the Master One, Boss), An Exhibition of Artifacts, Remnants and Effluvia EXCAVATED from the Black Heart of a Negress*. Hannover, Germany: Hannover Kunstverein, 2002; pp. 74-75.

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ter artists even though differences between them far outweigh the ostensible formal similarities. In his cutouts, Matisse focused on the aesthetics of presence by exploring what was then deemed the inherent qualities of his chosen medium (papier collé) and technique (paint and scissors) to create an original, pared-down direction for synthetic Cubist collages. Walker, by contrast, has looked to the power of absence and removal by creating bacchanals of shadows that bawdily parody mainstream racist stereotypes of blacks and whites. Her figurative art moves from a straightforward representational register to an ideological one. In doing so, it lampoons societal-based travesties and at the same time concentrates attention on the rigid and coercive boundaries of negative pictorial codes that are pornographic in the word's original sense of describing harlots and in the rhetorical sense of conveying negative stereotypes' ability to prostitute humanity.

Walker's work takes Harlem-Renaissance writer Langston Hughes' social critique of partially disguised white dominance in 1930s' Haiti – his *WHITE SHADOWS* – substantially further by emphasizing the shady ideological effects created by these phantoms.^{1/} Her early narrative cycles depicted shadows of slave mistresses, Southern belles, mammies, pickaninies, young bucks, and white masters as denizens of fantastic antebellum Southern plantations, which in effect are dimly lit sets for minstrel shows. Although these shadowy renderings of both blacks and whites in blackface are farcical variations of known types, they bespeak the artist's often-stated recognition of the ways that mass-market romance novels regularly transform and impoverish reality. As Walker told New York critic Jerry Saltz: "I think that the historical myths [in my work] are kind of deceiving. I mentioned something about harlequin romances. I didn't read that many of them, but I worked in a bookstore long enough to see what kind of an impact they have and who's buying them. It's love. It's desire, all of those things cloaked in a hoop skirt. The only thing that makes it a historical romance is the setting..."^{2/} In this and other discussions of popular-culture romance literature, Walker has singled out the "Harlequin" series, which are the product of an Ontario-based publishing company that began operations in 1949 as a reprint business and moved exclusively into the romance literature market in 1957 which provides it with an international market capable of supporting the sale of several hundred million books each year. Forty-five years after the company's inception, Walker first impressed the New York art world with her 50-foot-long pastiche of Margaret Mitchell's antebellum novel *GONE WITH THE WIND* – a prototype for many Harlequin romances – that she called *GONE: AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE OF A CIVIL WAR AS IT OCCURRED BETWEEN THE DUSKY THIGHS*

1/ Langston Hughes, *WHITE SHADOWS IN A BLACK LAND, THE CRISIS*, 41 (May 1932), p. 57. rpt. Edward J. Mullen, *LANGSTON HUGHES IN THE HISPANIC WORLD AND HAITI*. (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977), pp. 90-92.

2/ Jerry Saltz, *KARA WALKER: ILL-WILL AND DESIRE, FLASH ART*. No. 191, November/December 1996, p. 84.

OF ONE YOUNG NEGRESS AND HER HEART. This mural, made only months after receiving an M.F.A. degree at the Rhode Island School of Design, was the first of over twenty major panoramic cycles that Walker has created in the past eight years. Although the titles of some works are short and elliptical such as *AFRICAN'T* (1996), *INSURRECTION!*, and *WORLD'S EXPOSITION* (1997), others are longer and more suggestive such as *THE BATTLE OF ATLANTA, BEING THE NARRATIVE OF A NEGRESS IN THE FLAMES OF DESIRE* (1995), and *THE END OF UNCLE TOM AND THE GRAND ALLEGORICAL TABLEAU OF EVA IN HEAVEN* (1995). Still others assume a period formality and largesse as they approach the size of small paragraphs: *PRESENTING NEGRO SCENES DRAWN UPON MY PASSAGE THROUGH THE SOUTH AND RECONFIGURED FOR THE BENEFIT OF ENLIGHTENED AUDIENCES WHEREVER SUCH MAY BE FOUND, BY MYSELF, MISSUS K.E.B. WALKER, COLORED* (1997). Such grandiose titles testify to the artist's playful absorption of antiquated and stilted literary genres; they also underscore the overall importance for her art of literature that dramatizes the ideological power of slave narratives, turn-of-the-twentieth-century pieces of racist fiction, and Harlequin romances.



GONE: A 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/13 x 50 in./33 x 127 cm/detail

Kara Walker's curiosity about Harlequins in particular and the image of the Old South they construct and perpetuate might not have risen to the level of cultural critique if her family had stayed in their relatively liberal neighborhood in Stockton, California, located 83 miles east of the San Francisco Bay area and 40 miles south of Sacramento. However, in 1983 they moved to the South so that her father Larry Walker, a noted artist, could accept a teaching job at Georgia State University. The Walkers then joined other resolute and upscale African-Americans who were colonizing the largely redneck town of Stone Mountain, Georgia, which was reputed to be one of the most reactionary and racist places in the United States. Located about sixteen miles from Atlanta, this town is infamous for being the location of the Ku Klux Klan's 1915 announcement of its twentieth-century rebirth. No doubt these revivalists were caught up in the popularity of D.W. Griffith's film *BIRTH OF THE NATION* released that same year, and its glorification of the Klan's activities. At some point in its history the group began celebrating at Stone Mountain its solidarity in annual rallies calculated to appeal to a national membership. These gatherings, usually incorpo-