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"A Text for Living and For Dying": Theorizing Hortense Spillers' and Kara Walker's Call and Response

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Artist Kara Walker's emergence within international and national art show circuits approximately twenty years ago precipitated an effective crisis in contemporary African-American art. Indeed, the implications of the crises in representational possibility, of reclamation and of historical memory, incited by Walker's jarring cut-paper silhouettes, watercolors, and collages remain complex and far-reaching today. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw's 2004 *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, the single book-length study of the artist's oeuvre, productively ushers precisely such complexities to the fore. For instance, *Seeing the Unspeakable* foregrounds readings of Walker's art with and through discourses of haunting, gothic repression, and trauma. Juxtaposing the theories of Cathy Caruth and W. J. T. Mitchell, Dubois Shaw interrogates the psychical impact of Walker's public pedagogy, one which pivots upon exposure and laying bare pain which exceeds language itself. "The discourse of the unspeakable," Dubois Shaw maintains, "is a discourse made up of the horrific accounts of physical, mental, and sexual abuse that were left unspoken by former slaves as they related their narratives, the nasty and unfathomable bits of detritus that have been left out of familiar histories of American race relations" (7). For Dubois Shaw, Walker enacts a radical mode of inquiry into black slave/white female/white male pleasure, desire, and eroticism in the context of interracial sexual exploitation, bestiality, suicide, and pedophilia: her art lingers, almost revels in absurd and violent pastoral scenes, boldly staging moments of communal grieving and "rememory" as crucial means by which to attend to the afterlife of enslavement.

Despite the significance of DuBois Shaw's insights, my larger project endeavors to apply pressure to her work in order to identify potential resonances between Walker's images and 1987's "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers' now classic manifesto on the ungendering of blackness in the American Grammar following the

Atlantic Slave Trade, and the specific representational possibilities this primal scene, or historic disavowal of black will, desire, and gendered identity, ultimately enables. Penned in a palpable rage over a persistent metaphorization and elision of the history of both pre-contact Africa and the Middle Passage within psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory, Spillers' essay emerges in a historical moment in which the pathologization of black families, and black women in particular, as dysfunctional had been ardently revitalized in public discourse. Hence, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe" articulates not the impossibility of black pleasure, of maternal and paternal rights, or of family, but their thorough disarticulation within the American Grammar, only to be perpetually invoked and reconstituted as sites of demonizing rhetorical and physical subjection. For Spillers, without authorized kinship systems or a legitimate capacity to mother or father one's offspring, captive bodies are relegated to a space between cultural vestibularity and culture, that of the flesh. Ungendered flesh, then, becomes an archive of memory, a manuscript in itself which is passed down across generational lines. Ultimately, Spillers observes, "[...] female flesh 'ungendered'—offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying" (68).

Not before noting that "we might interpret the whole career of African-Americans...in light of the *intervening, intruding* tale, or the tale—like Brent's 'garret' space—'between the lines,' which are already inscribed, as a metaphor of social and cultural management," Spillers concludes with a call to disrupt the American Grammar, to race and re-gender the Symbolic by making visible the narrative of the flesh (79). By appropriating the space of the "mother and mother-dispossessed," of *partus sequitur ventrum* (the condition of the slave mother), of a "female with a potential to 'name'," Spillers declares, African-Americans can leverage dominant modalities of pathologization in order to secure a distinct, empowering social subjectivity (80). Thus, when museum curator Philippe Vergne asserts that "Walker embraces the body—its uses,

abuses, indulgences, tolerances, constraints, and exultations—to lay bare the truth that the spectacle of *bodies* in pain, of *bodies* in ecstasy, constitutes history,” he alludes, I would argue, to the flesh as Spillers conceives it. My governing question, then, is this: How might one theorize Walker’s silhouetted, nude black female bodies, in particular, as ungendered flesh, as a representational praxis instigated by Spillers on the terrain of the discursive?

To my mind, Walker’s internationally showcased silhouettes enact precisely the aforementioned process of garreting—an “intruding between the lines” of the scripted Symbolic Order. For Walker, a failed interrogation of eroticism within the context of enslavement is symptomatic of an American Grammar which at will participates in processes of ungendering customary during the Middle Passage. In a disruptive de-centering of institutionally-sanctioned indexicality as a source of meaning, Walker imbues the trace of an antebellum black culture in which will, desire, but also complicity and collusion are continually absented, with a vibrant symbolism, offering ungendered flesh as praxis and an important site of potentially affirming, rather than negating representational possibility. Walker’s 1995 *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, a 15 x 35 foot black and white cut paper silhouette installation, in particular, compellingly demonstrates Walker’s realization of Spillers’ charge. Familiar, reductive iconography, the cultural trafficking of which boomed after the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s text and which persists within racialized visual lexicons today—the self-immolating Christian martyr, Uncle Tom, and the innocent-child-too-good-for-this-world, Eva, for instance—emerges not within palatable, liberal humanist terms of sentimentality in this instance. In contrast to the intimacy which conventionally frames Uncle Tom and Eva’s relationship, *The End of Uncle Tom* mobilizes the trace of such images, portraying a life-sized Eva wielding an ax as a smaller “pickaninny” figure approaches the underside of Eva’s hoopskirt

with a sharp, potentially penetrating stick, and a partially nude Uncle Tom fervently extends a heavenly entreaty as a fetus attached to an umbilical cord is expelled from his anus.

The first panel detail of *The End of Uncle Tom* features four silhouette profiles, three young slave women and an infant, collectively suckling one's another's breasts. Visually, the outlines of bare feet, tied handkerchiefs atop heads, dresses removed to the waist, and a sizable load perched on the juttied-out rear end of one of the figures trope stereotypical representations of slave women. Significantly, the silhouettes simulate motion as each of the three women strategically angle, or incline their bodies inward to facilitate nourishment, but also the enhanced sexual pleasure of her partners; the uppermost figure appears almost astride the back of the woman below her. Apparently excluded from the sensual trialectic is the newborn balanced on the lap of the lowest crouching woman. Despite the infant's desperate, hungry attempt to grasp a breast, the protruding nipple of the slave woman's breast is just beyond reach. Privileging their own physical needs, the three women disregard the child in their midst. According to Spillers' paradigm, black domesticity is illegible and illegitimate within the American Grammar, despite attempts by Daniel P. Moynihan and others to conveniently import it on demand. Black families do not exist within the dominant order because the category of "woman" does not circulate as an available gendered construct to cargo within the Atlantic Slave Trade. Gender ceases to hold meaning because the Middle Passage marks a "theft of the body." Thus, in a literalization of Spillers' notion of "the slave vessel as a counternarrative to the domestic" (72), Walker engages a uniquely domestic medium in order to offer witness to the possibility of communal eroticism between black slave women.

The nudity of the women in *The End of Uncle Tom*, then, makes visible the historic disavowal of slave motherhood in a moment of its avowed relinquishment. Deploying the

silhouette, disembodied and planar, Walker problematizes conventional conditions and ways of seeing blackness. The image proffers an alternative grammar of sexual gratification and fulfillment, a terrain traditionally enlisted to demonize black women. It radically troubles at once the erasure of an institutionalized exploitation of black women's flesh, especially their breasts, and situates black women as valid sites of communal exchange.

Another detailed panel within *The End of Uncle Tom* features a young nude black slave girl, identifiable by the outline of her "nappy" tresses, engaged in sexual intercourse with an adult white master, identifiable by the contours of an aristocratic sartorial bearing and a saber. Slave child and master balance themselves by each holding fast with one arm to a corn stalk and sword, respectively, while their entwined bodies seemingly merge in the center of the frame. The slave girl's legs, presumably wrapped around the master's wide girth, are subsumed within the blackness of the silhouette profile. The master's large, extended gut and a peg leg remain visibly defined, and it is clear that he cannot abide his position without the slave girl's support. A second, nude black slave child, an infant, lies on the ground, legs thrashing about the air. In an effectively dual penetration, the master's sword pierces the chest cavity of the writhing infant, granting the head of the plantation the leverage to more efficiently mete out his sexual proclivities upon his property.

The two unclothed children in the panel detail represent a displacement of sanitized discourses of black female sexuality and of rape—privileged, indexical meaning archived in slave narratives—but also a manipulation of trace images from Stowe's novel. The acute tension which Walker depicts between the penetrated slave youth, and scenes more straightforwardly reminiscent of the impish Topsy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, marks the very category of "child" itself as unstable in the context of enslavement. Indeed, following Spillers, black "daughters," "sons,"

and arguably “children” of any kind, could not exist within an antebellum culture mediated by a racialized, dominant Symbolic Order. Further, “Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic,” Spillers writes, “which, in turn situates those persons it ‘covers’ in a particular place” (72). Black flesh remains perpetually uncovered in this sense, excess in relationship to the patriarchal order. Emanating a palpable anti-reproductive aura, the immediate juxtaposition of a feminized Uncle Tom discharging a still-born baby from his anus with the image of an indifferent master extinguishing the life of a newborn slave with his sword, powerfully conveys the complete and utter refusal of a black patronymic.

Ultimately, the sexualized images of black female slaves detailed above constitute possible configurations of the empowering social subjectivity which Spillers imagines. Making visible the infantilization at the heart of enslavement and implicitly critiquing liberal humanist appeals for child protection, Walker simultaneously offers a quite literal dwarfing of a mythologized black female hypersexuality. And yet, in a productively manipulative interplay of indexicality and trace first initiated in the eighteenth century, Walker divulges a narrative of the flesh in which institutionalized misuse might be indexed, but not at the expense of exhibiting traces of submission, complicity, and desire. In the end, in suturing viewers into a provocative staging of a black female “child” as sexual participant, Walker is concerned little with waging an ontological inquiry into the verity of antebellum black culpability or consent. Rather, extending Spillers’ intervention, she is attuned to problematizing a broader political and visual culture which, following the “theft of the body,” of black pleasure, and gender, either reinscribes such categories in overdetermined, pathologizing terms or denies the representational and psychical potentialities of a self-aware, sexual, and desiring black female all together.