

## **Kara Walker and the Visual Discourse of the Other in the Contemporary American arts: Walls, Borders, Transgressions**

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*The present paper situates its concerns at the crossroads of cultural studies, gender studies and visual arts in an effort to illustrate how identity production is achieved at the intersection of difference and sameness, of Self and the Other, as an ongoing negotiation and transgression of borders and boundaries. This study focuses on the work of the contemporary American visual artist Kara Walker in order to offer an illustration of how the exploration of the continuous interplay between difference and sameness generates an artistic act whose originality reaches beyond ideological categories, hierarchies, dichotomies. Moreover, this paper explores how contemporary art rewrites traditional master narratives such as history or patriarchy relying on the reinterpretation of their clichés and stereotypes.*

*Key-words: visual arts, the politics of difference, gender discourse, race, difference, cultural identity, stereotype.*

### **1. Introduction**

In today's world and experience, it has become nearly impossible to define identity, if anything for that matter, as definitions presuppose a static frame, whereas, as a process, identity is essentially dynamic and under continuous transformation. Contemporary theories have therefore displaced their focus from defining identity to investigating the complex mechanisms of identity formation. And since these mechanisms are practically inexhaustible, identity has gained a central locus amongst the preoccupations of the contemporary episteme. Various fields of study have intensively and extensively dedicated their recent developments to the study of identity as a process, focusing on the various factors that determine identity

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formation. Thus, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, biologists have all turned their attention to what they have identified as the key-components of the fluid entity that is identity. As Krishan Kumar observes in *From Post-Industrial to Post-Modern Society*,

post-modernism proclaims multi-cultural and multiethnic societies. It promotes the 'politics of difference'. Identity is not unitary or essential, it is fluid and shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms (there is no such thing as 'woman' or 'black') (Kumar 123).

Issues of sex, gender, race, social status and historical background have started to gain primacy in the contemporary discourse, giving birth to new fields of research. The role of difference as that relational component that is intrinsic to identification has shifted from the semantic field of opposition to that of diversity. Thus, the role of the Other as the necessary but uncomfortable mirror in the formation of one's identity has also moved away from the standardized representation of the generic enemy perfectly epitomized by the Wolf in traditional fairy-tales to the more productive sphere of cultural diversity.

The contemporary discourse glorifies diversity. Multiculturalism, cultural pluralism, globalization, all dwell upon an understanding of difference and of the Other as factors of progress and development. The entire Western world seems to be in perfect agreement as to the productive role of difference and of the Other in the production of identity. Reality, however, often contradicts this overarching theoretical consensus. Relying on a traditional, binary vision of the world that they have grown up with, the majority of people still indulge into primitive practices and discourses such as racism, discrimination, xenophobia, homophobia.

On a practical level, this paper focuses on the particular case of the contemporary American visual artist Kara Walker, an artist twice marginal as an Afro-American and as a woman, and the way in which her art subverts the concept of the Other and the fear of the Other using type-images. Thus, this paper looks at the ways in which Kara Walker demythologizes the stereotypical representations of the Other, by re-writing a history of slavery, abuse and exploitation in visual discourse.

On a theoretical level, this study situates its concerns the crossroads of contemporary cultural studies, gender studies, theories of identity and visual culture in an attempt to show how contemporary artistic vision rewrites the encounters with the Other while being the Other.

## 2. Difference and identity: a shift of paradigm

In an essay dealing with the construction of subjectivity, Sally Robinson argues that

categorization works through processes of inclusion and exclusion, and "membership" in any category is secured through the exclusion of "outsiders." In this sense, any "identity" must necessarily exclude differences: the One is not, nor can it be, the Other. Yet, in another sense, identity is dependent on difference: the One is only the One in opposition to the Other (Robinson 5).

I believe that this statement perfectly explains the source of people's fear of differences and of the Other. A sense of belonging can only be legitimized through the exclusion of otherness. However, identity cannot be achieved as a process without the incorporation of the Other. This ambivalent attitude towards difference and the Other has generated many ambiguous attitudes towards otherness in the history of human thought. The Other emerges as evil but necessary, as the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood whose existence in the story secures the little girl's becoming. I believe this metaphor of the Other that traditional fairy-tales have so well incorporated and delivered over the centuries contains the two major features of difference/otherness that have circulated within the Western culture: fear and fascination. Traditional Western thought has locked away the Other in consecrated forms of monstrosity: the werewolf, the ogar, the vampire, in order to narratively exacerbate and warn against the perils that encounters with the Other might bring on. In the public consciousness, images of the Other have therefore remained in the semantic sphere of the evil, fear, danger, the Fall.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gilles Deleuze's philosophical inquiry into the nature of difference and repetition where he vigorously claims that 'difference is the object of affirmation or affirmation itself' (Deleuze 63) together with Derrida's famous *differance* have theoretically recuperated the positive and productive aspect of the concept of difference. In this line of thought, difference emerges as an undeniably constructive force.

Thus, the evolution of Western thought exposes difference as a paradox: on the one hand it denies and opposes therefore destroying, on the other it relates and bridges, eventually defining and therefore creating. As a major vector in the process of identity formation, the role of difference and of the Other emerges as ambivalent: on the one hand it divides, on the other it unifies. Only through difference can identity emerge as a stable entity. If in establishing generic

identity, the role that difference plays is perhaps not so much exposed to observation, in tracing any type of specific identity such as racial, sexual or gender identity, difference exits the backstage and assumes the leading role.

### 3. Identity as body

When asked, most people will admit that the first thing they identify with (and sometimes the only) is their bodies. Irrespective of our cultural background, our level of education or our abilities to understand the world around us, we first identify with our bodies simply because there are the only visible entities that we can inscribe meaning on and can make sense of. As Foucault argues,

to man's experience a body has been given, a body which is his body - a fragment of ambiguous space, whose peculiar and irreducible spatiality is nevertheless articulated upon the space of things; to this same experience, desire is given as a primordial appetite on the basis of which all things assume value, and relative value; to this same experience, a language is given in the thread of which all the discourses of all times, all successions and all simultaneities may be given. This is to say that each of these positive forms in which man can learn that he is finite is given to him only against the background of its own finitude. (Foucault *The Order of Things* 314)

Our bodies transcend mere corporeality. They become vehicles of culture. From the clothes we wear to the messages we unconsciously carve on them through dieting, working out, tattoos, piercings, hairdos, getting too fat or too thin, we constantly assign meaning to our bodies. But there are also meanings it is hard to change, meanings that have been culturally attributed to our bodies by cultural master narratives such as religion or history. Meanings such as one's gender or race which become sources for discrimination or for cultural hegemony, depending on where we stand. Because contemporary society glorifies the body at the expense of any other identity constituents, the body has turned into a locus where discourses of power are negotiated. Bearing visible markers of difference on one's body often equates with the premises for instant rejection. From physical disability/deformity as the extreme form of bodily difference to different racial or gender features, being different instantly triggers our ancestral fear of the Other and an instant response of rejection. For this reason, bodily representations of the Other in traditional Western art have often appropriated the trope of the freak or the

monster. The freak obscenely exaggerates the excessive difference of the Other, it locks it away in comfortable visual metaphors that are meant to contain the fear: the vampire, the succubus, the Medusa are only a few examples that people can contemplate from a distance in some sort of artistic catharsis which is meant to purge them of their horror of encountering the Other in real life.

Contemporary art, by way of contrast, brings back monstrosity but in a powerfully subversive gesture which is meant to reverse old patterns. Monstrosity becomes central, unavoidable, the norm.

#### **4. Identity as history**

On another level, people will also identify with their histories, personal or collective. Traditionally, history has always been considered the objective account of real events, allowing people direct access to the past. Also, it has been thought to provide a plausible explanation for the present, one which remains beyond debate. In the turmoil of the 20<sup>th</sup> century cultural revolution, history has found itself exposed as an illegitimate narrative about uncertain events. The main argument of contemporary theories is that history, as a corpus of texts written by various people, is equally submitted to the laws of subjectivity and unreliability. No one is granted direct access to the actual events in the past. Moreover, recollecting past events requires the use of a human faculty defined by its unreliability: memory. Thus, the legitimacy of history is destabilized. History emerges as a master narrative, one that has served to regulate Western culture and provide epistemological categories and hierarchies, but whose degree of authenticity does not exceed that of other similar grand narratives: religion or literary tradition.

Foucault himself questions the legitimacy of history as the only true account of past events. To this purpose, he emphasizes the umbilical dependence of history to other stories, documents, texts, whose degree of authenticity remains obscure:

[...] it is obvious enough that ever since a discipline such as history has existed, documents have been used, questioned, and have given rise to questions; scholars have asked not only what these documents meant, but also whether they were telling the truth, and by what right they could claim to be doing so, whether they were sincere or deliberately misleading, well informed or ignorant, authentic or tampered with.' (Foucault *The Archaeology of Knowledge* 6)

Foucault's approach to history inaugurates a line of thought interested in recuperating those fragments of the past, previously unknown and incomprehensible, and turning them into coherent narratives. In this sense, his theories initiate a new approach to history. History, as the single, authoritative and legitimate discourse, loses its allegedly firm grip on the past and becomes exposed as a fiction. This exposure has two important consequences. On the one hand, it results in a marked distrust of similar metanarratives with claims to authority and centrality. On the other hand, it stirs a productive interest for narrating the histories of the minorities, the excluded. As traditionally hidden from official history, women are thus presented with an incredible opportunity.

The discussion of women's relationship to history proves to be delicate. It is generally accepted that history as a narrative has been exclusively male-produced. This is the argument which female theoreticians and writers have used in order to discard history altogether, as exclusive of women and their discourses. In this respect, Mark Currie points out history's inescapable exclusionary character: "a narrative history is a structure of exclusion in the sense that it bears the traces of other stories, stories that are not told, stories that are excluded, stories of the excluded" (Currie 85).

History as narrative is central to the understanding of how contemporary women artists fictionalize the past. As producers of meaning, they find themselves in the position of creating their own authoritative accounts of the past. Moreover, they can explore those black holes of official history and can trope them as feminine. And this is exactly what American visual artist Kara Walker does through her work: explore stories of black women whose exclusion from official history was twice justified by the patriarchal Western discourse: on the one hand because they were women, on the other because they were black.

## **5. Kara Walker: Representing the body and the history of the Other**

In an essay entitled *Who Needs Identity?*, Stuart Hall, the founder of Cultural Studies as a field of research claims that

because identities are constructed within, not outside discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices...they emerge as the product of the marking of difference and exclusion (Hall in *Identities: A Reader* ed. Paul du Gay, Jessica Evans, Peter Redman 17).

Following the same line of thought, Sally Robinson argues that subjectivity, like gender, is a "doing," rather than a being. Subjects are constituted, differentially, across complex and mobile discursive practices in historically specific ways that involve relations of subjectivity to sociality, to power and to knowledge (Robinson 11). These two statements emphasize the importance of context in discussing notions such as identity, Self or Other.

Context is utterly important in discussing the work of the contemporary visual artist Kara Walker, as her African American descent and her being a woman represent the two major lines of artistic exploration in her career. Born in 1969 to a family of artists, Walker completed her formal art education at Atlanta State University and has since become a renowned art professor at Columbia University. Perhaps the best word to describe her work is innovation. She is a painter, drawer, installation creator and silhouette-maker, best known for her paper-cut room-size silhouettes which almost narratively recreate pieces of black history. For her room-size scenes, Walker exclusively uses black and white silhouettes which she then glues to the walls of the opposite colour of museum galleries. The wall becomes a metaphor to Walker, a place where boundaries are erased and redefined, a locus where power relations are renegotiated. Although they tell the story of African American slavery in general and of black women's ruthless sexual exploitation in particular, Walker's silhouettes are first an enquiry into the limits of identity. Mere bodies, they have no discernable faces, yet they are easily recognizable as white or black due to some consecrated clichés Walker attaches to them: big, curvy lips, curly hair, ethnic earrings and headbands, traditional large skirts for black women, top hats, canes, Western clothing for white masters. The body becomes a locus of power. Faces are erased, but identity is constructed through difference and cliché. Walker plays with black and white, which she swaps occasionally as if to periodically challenge traditional centers of power. As a spectator, one finds himself in the position of constructing a narrative sequence, as Walker's silhouettes are glued to one another from left to right, in moving positions. Looking at them requires thus an operation similar to reading, a left to right movement of the eye and a concomitant decoding of the images.

The narrative structure that Walker proposes is a direct attack towards official history, whose narrative discourse is usually taken for granted by the general public. Nothing should be taken for granted in Walker's visual installations, from the colors and the stereotypical cultural associations that people make related to black and white to the discourse of official American history which misrepresented slavery as a necessary evil. Walker's silhouettes shout. They confront their spectators with shocking instances of fierce exploitation primarily

performed onto the bodies of the Other: rape, child abuse, beatings, murder. The fear of the Other is brutally conquered through violent domination. Graphic violence becomes the trope Walker uses to rewrite the history of slavery in black and white nightmarish tableaux. Sexism and racism overlap as two identity markers of Otherness and as sources for violent oppression. The cinematic feel of her friezes entails a narrative structure which the spectator perceives as a story of how stereotype was created, of how generic identity gets to matter more than personal identity, of how otherness becomes a source of horror.

A similar exploration of gender and racial stereotypes was put together by Kara Walker in 2014, in an ephemeral, yet powerful artistic gesture entitled *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant*. Entirely made of sugar, the Sugar Baby was a giant sphynx-like statue representing a black woman's massive body in a knee-bending position. Powerfully reminiscent of classical representations of freak bodies, the Sugar Baby is a huge metaphor. Exhibited in a former sugar factory, it launched a discussion of many ideological aspects of gender and racial stereotypes. First, the choice of sugar as the raw material drew the attention to the whole process of sugar manufacturing and to the history of sugar exploitation. On a subtler level, it drew attention to the fact that most people associated sugar with the white, final, refined product, oblivious of the fact that unrefined sugar is dark brown, that molasses, a by-product of sugar, is black, that sugar passes through a series of processes and shades to eventually become white.

On another level, it made people wonder what a subtlety was and helped them learn that it was a sugar statue designed for the members of the royal families to consume over various official events. It also made people learn more about the history of sugar and discover that it was primarily African American slaves, especially children, who would crop and process sugar cane. As Walker confessed in an interview, "sugar crystallizes something in our American soul. It is emblematic of all industrial processes. And of the idea of becoming white. White being equated with pure and 'true'." (Walker [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/kara\\_walker\\_714165](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/kara_walker_714165))

Walker chose to surround her giant Sugar Baby with small statues representing black slave children made out of molasses. Subversive of racial stereotypes by the choice of the raw material, Walker's sugar statues also subverted the general conception about art as being immortal. Her 2014 installation melted in a matter of weeks. Also, the female sphynx was powerfully



subversive of gender stereotypes. Otherness was represented in the form of a giant monstrosity which both generated horror and fascinated the audience. Her position, although reminiscent of classical sexual domination was also dominating through the immense size, her face inscrutable, no trace of emotion, only detachment. The female body was turned into a locus where meaning was rewritten, where difference turned from a cause of exploitation into a source of power. The Sugar Baby was a giant statement about otherness, power and the nature of art.

## 6. Conclusion

Moving from text to metatext, from artworks to the statements they make, it becomes evident that Kara Walker's visual installations challenge the nature of stereotypes and the power they have to regulate culture. The fear of the Other is visually represented by Walker is a series of clichéd images meant to subvert the very power of these clichés through the metaphor of the shadow that surfaces in all her silhouette tableaux. What is interesting and comforting at the same time is that Walker does not try to put anything instead. She simply tries to take old idols off their pedestals, to expose norms and hierarchies as inadequate, to embrace difference as productive and to encourage people to be less concerned with their gender and race and more with their humanity. As she herself confessed in an interview, "I don't think that my work is very moralistic - at least, I try to avoid that. I grew up with that sermonising tendency, and I don't think visual art operates like that. (Walker [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/kara\\_walker\\_714161](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/kara_walker_714161))

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