In memory of my mother, Ida Wright Sharpe (d. 1998)
intersperse these scenes), as well as, perhaps, for the Conservator (figure 15). Again the Attendant sings, "When I am laid in earth / May my wrongs create / No trouble / No trouble / In thy breast." In a moment of recognition, though not of shared looking, the Attendant seems to acknowledge the Conservator's burden as they both look toward the stage, where the Angel appears. But the cut to the Angel resolves to a shot of the Visitor stroking his black leather gloved hands in another gesture of remembrance and then, as he acknowledges the Attendant, gesturing as if to wipe away a tear. The Attendant acknowledges the Conservator and her instrumentality in maintaining in the black-and-white spaces of everyday life the illusion of his normative heterosexuality. This time the Conservator stands and claps in the almost empty opera hall, and in her applause one hears the echo of the earlier crack of the whip. The Conservator's claps on the downbeat recall the images of loss and longing that repeatedly punctuate The Attendant. Largely unexplored in this film (but explored in Three: The Conservator’s Dream and Vagabondia), the Conservator's position too seems infused with loss, longing, and a failure of fulfillment of desire, if not a failure of its recognition.

Julien characterizes the Conservator's desire as abject; her clapping that echoes the whip cracking is an indication of her resentment at being used as an alibi for her husband. He also portrays the Conservator as a dominatrix in this scene. I want to let her remain in the space of ambivalence in order to allow her pleasure at being a dominatrix, at being an aural witness to the Attendant's desires, pleasure in desires that conserve and resist, that withhold and are withheld. Pleasure at her own ambivalent instrumentality in facilitating his desires, and her pleasure in facilitating the subversion and perversion of the space of the museum that she also conserves.40 The Conservator is anxiety producing and has proved difficult to attend to in this space, in The Attendant. (The black woman who "conserves" as "the conservator" is figured as abject, as a marker for the site of trauma. I turn to this figure in the following chapter on Kara Walker.) I began with Brand and the space of the door and I return to it here in order to leave us positioned in that space of (im)possibility and all of its attendant dangers and pleasures. Julien's The Attendant offers a vital space of regeneration and resistance to total incorporation, a map to creating and theorizing within and against sociopolitical and disciplinary regimes, a possible space for retheorizing consent, desire, and transmission.

FOUR
Kara Walker's Monstrous Intimacies

What I discovered was that possessing a black body through which history and fiction coexist was the stuff performances are made of, and I performed a number of parts in a series of vignettes too sordid to relate here to you, my dear audience. They are scenes better viewed from a great distance.

Suffice to say, I ran. Via a modified underground railroad up from Georgia to a far northern state to pursue a graduate degree in the fine art of painting. ... The question was, how could I turn this feeling that I had become a blank space into which people projected their fantasies into something concrete? What about the possibility that I might reflect those fantasies back into the project's unsuspecting eyes, and cause them to want to face the shame of (our) collective psyche? ...

For every panoramic view I have "taken a likeness of, in silhouette form," there are new questions that arise.

No narrative is ever finished, and very few have proper beginnings.

Am I forever locked into cyclorama-scenes of perpetual battles won—battles lost?

Chained to you at the ankle as a new representative of Negro Emancipation?

Will I be Caged together with every pickaninny bucknigrum mammmy prissy scarlet Tom Eva, massa, Simon Legree breer rabbit ole missus Huck Finn kunta kinte Hottentot newreel lynchmob free issue scalawag ever created and ever exhumed to the thrill and horror of audiences all—black and white!? ...

I think my work ... mimics the past, but it's all about the present.—KARA WALKER, "Kara Walker Speaks: A Public Conversation on Racism, Art, and Politics with Tommy Lott."
Look and See

To see the black silhouettes of the African American visual artist Kara Walker in a gallery installation is to be caught up in the scenes and therefore in the actions of the figures that populate them. Walker’s scenes of profound, excessive sexual(ized) violence incorporate all of her viewers and produce a number of anxious, often hysterical responses from some of her critics, both those who applaud her work and those for whom it is regressive, minstrelsy. Each of her (primarily white) critics that I read reading Walker has specific blind spots that appear to me symptomatic of the ways that American post-slavery subjectivity is constituted, conferred, and (not) acknowledged. While each viewer/critic proceeds from the awareness that the subjects depicted in the images are both black and white—given the titles of the work (for example, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995), the subject of the work (slavery), and Walker’s own accompanying explanations—the black black figures in her silhouetted work nonetheless tend to become the sole site on which the signifying power of slavery in the past and the present is put to work.

In other words, the majority of critics, readers, and reviewers, regardless of their diegetic reading of the work, locate its signifying effect almost exclusively on black people. Such myopia is unsurprising given that the history of slavery (and race) in the United States tends to be regarded as an issue of and for black people about black people and involves a persistent erasure of whiteness. I suspect that it was in order to work against that persistent perceptual repression of the whiteness of the diegetically white black figures from her work and therefore remove them beyond the scope of slavery that Walker added to recent installations white figures and gray backgrounds and used light and overhead projection in some of her later silhouette work, additions that make the viewer’s, any viewer’s, every viewer’s, interpellation by the scene much more difficult to disavow. To enter the gallery space is to enter into the exhibit, to step in front of the projector, to always be included, to appear as one of the shadows on the wall; the scene that now includes the viewer is transformed into a three-dimensional tableau vivant. In *The Attendant* the tableaux come to life in color out of the narrative of the film, which is in black and white; Walker’s silhouetted tableaux come to life through their abstraction to a pure black-and-white form.

Walker turns to the silhouette, a domestic art, a prephotographic form that is distant from yet appears familiar to contemporary viewers, in order to pose and then attempt to answer her own questions: “Was it possible for me to make the art that should have been made by a woman like me before the turn of the last century? Using just the methods available to her coupled with a ‘lofty ambition’ and ‘checkered past?’” (Saltz 1996, 82). The silhouette is a form of remembering that is a blank form “with its own deep origins in bodily absence and sentimental memory” (Wagner 2003, 94), a popular art form that reached its height in the mid-nineteenth century, at a time coincident with the final years of the institution of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, but also with the rise of the photographic image and discourses of scientific racism. The silhouette allows Walker to produce the admittedly historically impossible and yet theoretically necessary imaginative work of placing herself and the viewer into the material conditions of the past that is not yet past “using just the methods available to her” in order to better understand the past’s omnipresence in the present. We see in her silhouetted slavery tableaux a brutal past that has not been captured fully in language or that has been captured but that we cannot hold; the beating of Aunt H./Esther by Captain Anthony as well as its specific effects on Douglass are two instances of this: the blood-stained gate that on his subsequent rewritings of the narrative Douglass expunges while keeping and invigorating his graphic descriptions of the ritualized beating. Another is our refusal still to really look at Aunt H./Esther. We see in Walker’s work, among other things, a visual representation of the slave narratives and neo-slave narratives and their long reach into the present.

These formalized reductions, these would-be stereotypes seem to point away from those enslaved persons who wrote or narrated their own stories of slavery and escape and instead to point to those enslaved people who appear as so many black forms in the background of those narratives as well as in other anti- and pro-slavery texts. In other words, one can read the black black figures that populate Walker’s work as the black background against which difference (from self and from others) can be erased and constituted. In anti- and pro-slavery narratives these black black fig-
ures are often the background, the black difference, against which a black individual emerges to write herself or himself as, or to be written as, extraordinary.

One can read Walker's black black figures that appear to be devouring themselves and each other, who fuck, fight, stab, shit, suck, puncture, beat, and survive and are also fucked, fought, stabbed, shit upon, sucked, punctured, beaten, and nonetheless survive, as those transfigured enslaved people (the black black background) who were able to survive the violence and brutality in the disfiguring institution of slavery. I read Walker’s cutouts as representing a violent past that is not yet past in such seductive forms that black and white viewers alike find themselves, as if against their will, looking and looking again. For white viewers this act of looking at Walker’s allegories of slavery often entails a seduction by or complicity with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype that resolves in disavowal and projection. For black viewers this looking can mean encountering shame and violence and sometimes refusing this representation or sometimes being seduced into and complicit with violent acts of reading, seeing, naming, and fixing into stereotype; it means engaging with the disfigurations of black survival that we would prefer to look away from. Walker says that she arrives at her technique by way of acknowledging her “particular upbringing, and by necessity the history which fostered a creature like [her] in the American suburbs”: “I thought, here I am, the product of an ambitious black family, pretty well-assimilated—which is code word for ‘knows a lot of white people’—and trained in their way of seeing... which includes absorbing their racist visions (about me) large and small. There’s a certain amount of shame in admitting to this life of mine, and it was shame—the opposite of the pride, black pride in particular—that began to interest me. I thought, for visual resources I should look really in those places where embarrassment lay” (Boerma 2002, 166). This brings me back to the shame (and complicity) involved in looking at, and the dangers involved in circulating, Douglass’s description of the violation of Aunt H/Esther. I return to Douglass and H/Esther in this chapter in order to underscore the necessity in my grappling with Walker’s work, of really looking at those enslaved black people (like Aunt H/Esther)—who are extraordinary mostly because they survived a brutality that still cannot be grasped, that is not over, that we may be said to still be surviving (in and dying from)—and of attempting to look at shame itself, in order to try to account for its eruption into the present. Put another way, what Walker’s work reveals about shame, inasmuch as it is not an individual shame, necessitates also looking at “those places where embarrassment lay,” at the shame that “black pride in particular” disavows. At stake are the results of a continued looking away.

Walker’s black paper cutouts (figures and forms cut out and then affixed to a white wall) that allegorize the antebellum United States also take the plantation romance of Margaret Mitchell and then David O. Selznick’s Gone With the Wind at their word, for example, in Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart (1994; figure 16). Walker’s work reveals what is everywhere present in the plantation romance, what is in plain sight and denied, and what in its denial functions even still in its remainders. Taken as complicated responses to the conception of and investment in the plantation romance’s rewriting of slavery’s profound and varied violence as
seduction, affection, intimacy, and mutual benefit—or as perfectly natural relationships—Walker’s flat black-and-white glyphic forms reveal what the melodrama conceals.

Such highly charged psychosexual violence is everywhere present in the work of Kara Walker. In my discussion of Walker’s silhouettes I again want to emphasize the formation of the post-slavery subject that has been the connecting theme of the previous three chapters. While my focus here is on Euro-American and African American post-slavery subjectivity, the post-slavery subject is, of course, not limited to these subject positions. As Toni Morrison reminds us, “The overweening, defining event of the modern world is the mass movement of raced populations, beginning with the largest forced transfer of people in the history of the world: slavery. The consequences of which transfer have determined all the wars following it as well as the current ones being waged on every continent” (1997, 10).

The link that Walker insists on between past and present, seen in the traumatic registers of post-slavery subjectivity (and, for her, specifically a Georgia desegregating with “all deliberate speed”), does not mean that she attempts a naïve collapse of their spatiotemporal distance in her work. Rather her works are allegories for the present; as Walker says, she goes back to this form, this history, “to critique it and to question why it’s reoccurring” (Saltz 1996, 82), much the same way that Toni Morrison’s Beloved can be said to tell about freedoms claimed, granted, assumed, and withheld post-emancipation as well as about desegregation after Brown v. Board of Education. The initial “driving force” for Walker’s exploration of the past in the present that takes the particular form of the black “burden of representation” was a decision to “investigate interracial desire”: “I think it maybe started from that. And the ways in which it seemed, in my life, to challenge set stereotype notions about blackness and whiteness and how they’re operating in Georgia, where I was.” A personal encounter left her with what she identifies as a desire to understand ”the feeling of being thrust into history for walking down the street with a white man by some outside force—say a Ku Klux Klan or a guy who leaves a flyer on [one’s] car after spotting this illicit liaison. . . . The feeling of walking and talking and having to be historical somehow, bearer of some truth of history” (1999).

Considering Walker’s articulations of self in relation to history, her “walking and talking and having to be historical” and bear “some truth of

history,” I focus a large part of my reading of her work on her construction of the mammy (as the “embodiment of history”), and I argue that that figure is one through which Walker links our antebellum past to our post-slavery, postintegration present. Walker’s shadow plays draw our attention to the ways that the act of entering into those other bodies, “playing the slave” (or the master, entering into the ever present traces of the plantation romance), continues to be constitutive of subjectivity for all of those who I am calling post-slavery subjects.

Walker’s early self-presentation as “the Negress” and “Missus K. E. B. Walker, a Free Negress of Noteworthy Talent” and her focus on violence, power, and desire in her work and in her statements about her work have been unsettling to many of her viewers, readers, and critics. This is manifest in the extent of her critical reception: she has been praised lavishly and criticized for her historically informed and deformed, complex and ambivalent representations of self and slavery. As Thelma Golden says, “Kara’s work takes from fact but also fantasy and throws on its head any notion we might have of good and bad, right and wrong, black and white. There are no clear dichotomies” (Sheets 2002, 26). Walker’s silhouettes depict the centrality of what passes as the underbelly of and vestibular to the plantation romance; she exposes the relationships that construct us all.

Who’s(e) Mammy? Whose History?

The horror of slavery was its absolute domesticity that configured the “peculiar institution” into the architeconics of the southern household.

—HORTENSE SPILLERS, “Changing the Letter”

Once you get a clear grasp on the fundamentals of history; who’s writing it, what emotions are involved in reshaping it, what kinds of people are subjected to it—well, like being the guinea-pig . . . European style enlightenment: “Thems that are most doomed to repeat it are thems that believe in it”—taking history like a faith, a new religion of time and events and more time and more events.—KAIA WALKER, Flash Art

Hortense Spillers begins her essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” with a series of meaningful and constitutive displacements, projections, misnamings, and blindnesses that locate the gaze. The one doing the looking insists on the ability to see, to name, and to fix into stereotype black women. “Let’s face it,” she writes, “I am a marked
woman, but not everybody knows my name. ‘Peaches’ and ‘Brown Sugar’, ‘Sapphire’ and ‘Earth Mother,’ ‘Auntie,’ ‘Granny,’ ‘God’s Holy Fool,’ a ‘Miss Ebony First,’ or ‘Black Woman at the Podium’: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me and if I were not here, I would have to be invented” (2003c, 203). Her list of names describes a social identity effect that includes but far exceeds any particular impact on individual and collective black women.

To Spillers’s list of “confounded identities” and nominative properties I add the encompassing figure of the mammy, who “from her beginnings in southern plantation reality and literature . . . was a sexual and racial symbol that was used by men and women, North and South, white and black, to explain proper gender relationships, justify or condemn racial oppression, and establish class identities (for both whites and blacks)” (Manning 1998, 9). The figure of the mammy is a quintessential example of the national and rhetorical wealth that Spillers articulates. The mammy spans more than a century; pictured on pancake boxes as Aunt Jemima, embodied in salt and pepper shakers, door stoppers, string holders, and memo peg boards—products intimately connected to the U. S. domestic scene—her figure is strangely omnipresent in popular and high culture, advertising, literature, film, and music. There is an uncanny pleasure located in U. S. culture in the Aunt Jemima or mammy figure and her many appearances.

But despite the proliferation of images and objects, who is this mammy? Do we recognize her by her bulk, her headscarf, her mixing bowl and apron, her domestic busyness, simple moral correctness, or simply by her blackness? “It is indisputable,” writes M. M. Manning, “that there were slave women called ‘mammy,’ that these women supervised other house slaves, cooked, and watched children. It is also indisputable that even children and housewives of postbellum America fondly remember a woman called mammy, who played much the same role. But even those who are absolutely certain that they know the person called mammy have trouble explaining everything they think she did” (1998, 19). A house slave and then a domestic, but not fully domesticated, for the viewer she is an (other) indicator of desire and its absence, a placeholder, a cipher. With so much projected into and onto her figure, no wonder the mammy becomes large, superabundant, splits into more of herself. Impossible to contain her in one body, impossible not to see her, she circulates widely but remains invisible nonetheless. Having, as Walker says, no place in the memory of her creators as a creation she becomes a realized figment of collective imagination, an avatar of the collective unconscious. A phantasmatic figure, she is everywhere, in every place.

The mammy is, in Walker’s words (specifically in the text of “The Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South Is the Embodiment of History”), “history as a critical muttering thing, suckling your young, and ignored by her creators . . . To all who have fed on the often sour breast milk of the wandering Mammy-as-History it comes as no surprise that history has been declared dead . . . Mammys in popular consciousness cease to exist, She has no place . . . The big black mammy is the object of Oedipal longing within the plantation family romance . . . sucked and fucked she is the ultimate ‘earth-mother’ wholly submissive yet defiant . . . she is pairs in opposition she is incomplete and unknown and inconsistent and repressed . . .” (1997; emphasis mine). While the figure of the mammy appears in various forms in much of Walker’s work, in this section I focus in particular on an image from the larger work The End of Unde Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven. I emphasize that this is an image of at least four figures to allow for the way that Walker’s silhouettes, like the blot of figure against ground in Rorschach tests, also bring into focus the white space/figure in the midst of the figure(s) of black suckling women/girls.9 What is this image, the art critic Jerry Saltz asks Walker, “in the left side of one of the panels . . . this incredible image of four women—girls and women—suckling each other[?] What was this meant as a metaphor for?” (1996, 185; figure 17). Walker responds, “History. My constant need or, in general, a constant need to suckle from history, as though history could be seen as a seemingly endless supply of mother’s milk represented by the big black mammy of old. For myself, I have this constant battle—this fear of weaning. It’s really a battle that I apply to the black community as well, because all of our progress is predicated on having a very tactile link to a brutal past” (85).10

We must keep in mind the visual impact of the large-scale cutout image of the condensed black form of three women suckling each other and the baby attempting to suckle one of the three, and that there is nothing that specifically identifies the women individually or collectively as the stereotypical “big black mammy of old.” There is an immediate disjunction, a
Writing about the image of the suckling women, Copjec cautions, “We must not lose sight of what is most extraordinary about the portrait; its analogization of history and the maternal breast. For if we insist on distinguishing the mother from the breast, as I have argued we must, then the analogy becomes both more profound and a more enlightening clue to Walker’s artistic project. What does it mean to think of history not as a mother, that is, not as a container that holds subjects as part of its contents, but as an internal object that lives the subject as the double of another?” (2002, 104; emphasis mine). But in addition to distinguishing the mother from the breast, we must also differentiate between the mammy’s breast and the mother’s (maternal) breast, and then again between the breast of the mother substitute and the milk. I do not mean to say that the maternal breast is the same as the mother’s breast; I wish instead to turn our focus to the distinction between the mammy (black), who may in deed, if not in law, be a mother (who also might mother white children) on the one hand, and a mother (presumed to be white) on the other hand; a distinction between the wet nurse’s (black) breast and the maternal (white) breast. In calling the breast of the enslaved woman a maternal breast, we must remember that she is denied the rights and privileges of both womanhood and motherhood. Such naming would grant her a legal status as well as “a ‘feminization’ that enslavement kept at bay” (Spillers 2003c, 215). Nonetheless the mammy performs a—often the—maternal function in the white household.12 Connecting this back to Walker’s statement, in her description of the vignette, history is not the (maternal) breast; it is the “seemingly endless supply” of “mother’s milk represented by the big black mammy of old.” Indeed what is most extraordinary about Walker’s reading of the portrait (which is not, I think, specifically about the portrait itself) is that what she analogizes is the mammy-as-history-as-mother’s-milk. I imagine Walker imagining “the fantasmatic scene of black white suckling, . . . disguised in the generic costume of mammy . . . in which] the construction of whiteness comes at a cost—the installation of envy of what is posited as blackness in those who take themselves to be white” (St. John 2001, 151).

Likewise when Walker speaks of a “constant battle—this fear of weaning. It’s really a battle that I apply to the black community as well, because all of our progress is predicated on having a very tactile link to a brutal past” (quoted in Copjec 2002, 98), I take this to be an articulation of the
of reach of the white/black infant. We are accustomed to the mammy’s inability to feed the black child, trapped as she is in the white household, suckling their young instead of her own, but what of an inability, a refusal to feed the white one? How would we recognize that? How would history account for that possibility? Repeated images that produce the mammy as a comforting presence and comic relief in the white household (as St. John notes, her body a cookie jar, her breast caught in a washing machine wringer, her mouth an ashtray, her behind exposed as she leans over) are matched in number by the images of the mammy’s own unsupervised children in all kinds of danger (swallowed up by watermelons, devoured by alligators, left to fend for themselves).14 And this difference, which is self-difference as well as a blank space that is not a blank space into which difference from an other is projected, is indeed “both more profound and a more enlightening clue to Walker’s artistic project” (2002, 104).

Recall that Copjec points out that Walker’s response to Saltz’s question about the image (that it is “as though history could be seen as a seemingly endless supply of mother’s milk represented by the big black mammy of old”) is unsatisfying not least of all because the image in question is, of course, not of one black woman but of three women and an infant, none of whom is distinctly recognizable, without Walker’s explanation, as the “big black mammy of old.”15 Involved here is also and always a question of the gaze. For some viewers every black woman regardless of age, size, and position may be read as a mammy or as one of the mammy’s other incarnations: “God’s Holy Fool,” “Black Woman at the Podium,” “Earth-Mother” (Spillers 2003c, 103). As Copjec notes, Walker’s answer “appears merely to restate a popular cliche in which the mother is viewed as a superabundant source from which future generations draw and to which all lines of filiation lead back” (2002, 98). But such a restating would confuse mammy and mother; more important, it would obscure the ways that lines of filiation and xinship ran for the enslaved, for mammy, not for mother, in which neither blood nor milk ensured familiarity.16 In relation to the “big black mammy of old” the parental function is repeatedly displaced as the fate of the black child is legally bound to the condition of the enslaved mother, as the ability to mother that child is denied her, or can always be denied her, and as the woman legally denied the rights and functions of mother is made to do the mothering of the white children. What Walker states then seems to be something entirely different from the
“popular cliche” of mother as superabundant source; she seems to be saying that all lines of descent, all lines of transmission, lead back to the mammy. In Walker’s image we might see enacted the introduction of the figure of the mammy.

In this vignette we might see as well the relationship among the four generations of the Corregidora women in Gayl Jones’s Corregidora, in which the women are held together by their emphasis on reproduction, on passing on evidence, on making the horrors of slavery as “visible as the blood,” and in reproducing for and reproducing the desires of the slave owner whom her old man Corregidora. Between them, among them, keeping them attached to each other, ingesting and reproducing this sexually violent history, and suckling the “sour breast milk” is a relationship once legislated and ever present. We see in this image the connection between old man Corregidora and the generations of Corregidora women; we see the defining white ground; we see an image of a sustaining, brutal history that the women transmit from generation to generation, ending with Ursa.17

Once Ckopjec has made this connection between the image and Walker’s own explanation of it, an explanation that at first seems to refuse exegesis and in fact occasions more questions, she links this plural, otherwise unidentifiable image of the “big black mammy of the antebellum South” to Freud’s Egyptian Moses. For Ckopjec, when Walker invokes the “big black mammy of the antebellum South [who] is the embodiment of history” and Freud invokes the Egyptian Moses, who, according to Freud’s own argument, has no basis in recorded history but nonetheless seems theoretically necessary to him to account for the evolution of the myth of Moses into the form that was written down, each participates in “equally scandalous gestures.” Each “eschew[s] identification with the traits of empirical [and, one hopes, noble] ancestors as the basis of racial identity, and both begin their inquiry by wondering how the differences separating them from others of their race fail to disqualify them automatically from membership in it” (91–92).

Freud’s nonempirical Moses is irreducible (that is, he persists even after characteristics that would take him away from the Jews are pared away); in positing him Freud both “den[jes] a people the man whom it praises as the greatest of its sons” (Freud 1939, 9) and insists on the “historical truth” of his admittedly hypothetical and undocumentable story of the martyred and resurrected Egyptian Moses and contrast[s] it explicitly with the “material truth” of objective historians” (Ckopjec 2002, 91). Ckopjec’s alignment of this Moses with the divided black mammy who is the embodiment of (U.S.) history speaks to the historical and phantasmatic truth of the mammy as an abject and theoretically necessary but impossible figure.

What are the stories of the women whose only remaining trace is the mammy? While there are instances of a historical figure known as Mammy that Walker bases her work on, the parallel that Ckopjec draws to Freud’s Egyptian Moses is instructive both for what it makes visible in Walker’s work and for how it exposes one of the blindnesses of Ckopjec’s reading of Walker’s work. Although there are mythic and religious accounts of the Egyptian Moses, what most of us know is something more like a Moses-effect, the result of condensations and displacements and resolutions of multiple and conflicting oral traditions laden with thousands of years of elaboration. Likewise, along with the histories of the black women who lived as mammys what we know is something like a mammy-effect, the leftover trace of these historical mammys that continues to circulate phantasmatically and that is continually reproduced as an object that continues to “live the subject as the double of another” (Ckopjec 2002, 104). In other words, the mammy, however historically based she may be, stands for or in the place of, is laden with what is accepted as history and its effects; the mammy naturalizes blackness in the United States. She is animated according to the work that she is being asked to do: to refute or shore up particular readings of inter- and intraracial violence and affection in slavery, to abet consumption, to internalize and articulate intraracial tensions.18 Effectively a mythical character, the mammy does not exist, yet she is based on the misseen bodies and labor of real black women. Manthia Diawara writes:

As a stereotype, the Mammy is the most powerful symbol of the South because she is the only one that is necessary and indispensable to the representation of the entire mythology of the South. To borrow an insight from Roland Barthes, in Mythologies (1957), “the Mammy is to the South what the African soldier carrying the French flag on the cover of Paris-Match was to the French empire: she forms the identity of the South on the one hand and universalizes the Southern way of life on the other. Dressed in her long dress, apron, head kerchief, and big smile, she becomes as natural as cotton.” (1999, 10)
Extending Diawara’s insights, the mammy is the mythic figure who forms the identity not only of the South; she comes to be a founding figure of the entire United States.

Resuscitating the mammy in her work and writing as a phantasmatic figure rather than simply as a historical one, Walker would seem to cast off a set of positive features “that ought to have been the tell-tale source” of identity (what was Jewishness for Freud and is blackness for Walker). This casting off, this animation of shame (“as the opposite of pride, black pride in particular”) is profoundly distressing to any number of Walker’s black critics; it is for them Walker’s setting back into territory that has already been traversed. It is, though, as Walker herself notes, the exploration of shame that is of particular interest to her (Boerma 2002, 166). This casting off is both the erasure of positive attributes of blackness and it is blackness’s signing. In other words, the mammy, her blackness, is analogous to Moses the Egyptian, “a fuliginous [sic] stain that not only Freud but history and death itself proved incapable of rubbing out” (Copjec 2002, 92). The “fuliginous stain” is residual blackness, blackness that won’t be erased, blackness that allows whiteness to (almost) erase itself, and blackness that illuminates what is otherwise unreadable, unseeable. This fuliginous stain, this blackness, works the way that a black light works: it makes white things show up even more brightly. It is also like the ten drops of black liquid that the unnamed protagonist in Invisible Man adds to the white paint, the substance that makes “Liberty Paints Optic White” the “right white.”

What Walker’s work reveals, what it is so adept at revealing, is that there is something in excess of what historical narrative gives us. I suggest that one thing that the figure of the mammy is called up to conceal appears in the chapter “TV Guide” in Phyllis Rose’s memoir, The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time (1997):

The colored person who came to live with us when I was eight was Lily McAllistar. Lily came from Starr, South Carolina, where her husband, Taft, was a farmer. They had three children, but Lily had to leave them in South Carolina to be raised by her mother and Taft’s, while she raised me in the North. She sent home the money my parents paid her, along with long letters written on ruled paper in a hand as rounded and hearty as Lily and a style as cheerful. . . . I had Lily to mother me and only me for several happy years. Then she told my mother she was quitting, she was too lonely, and my mother, both in her kindness and in her concern for the good functioning of her household, offered to hire Taft.

So Taft came to live with us, too, and to work as our “chauffeur,” although he did not know how to drive and by the time he came to us my brother was away at college and my sister had her own driver’s license. . . . It was bad enough to be driven around by a chauffeur, which was “different” at a time when difference was not admired. . . . It was also clear to me, although I had never seen a chauffeur except in the movies, that Taft was not a real chauffeur. A chauffeur was above all competent and intrepid, whereas Taft was timid and tentative in everything he did. My mother gave him a chauffeur’s hat to wear, but I knew this was a charade being carried on for the benefit of Taft and Lily for which my father was footing the bill but I was paying the worst price, humiliation.

In retrospect I envy the well-run household over which my mother presided. Every morning as I got dressed I could hear the sound of Lily or Taft vacuuming the living room carpet. There was fresh squeezed orange juice for breakfast. Laundry was done on a regular basis. When I got home from school in the afternoon, Lily would pour me a glass of milk and give me some cookies, or cake, or chocolate pudding. She was a fine cook, but my mother orchestrated the meals, and under her baton chopped liver might precede spaghetti with meatballs and Vita herring, Southern fried chicken. Mother and Lily did better on Jewish holidays when the menu was traditional and gefilte fish followed matzoh ball soup and was followed in turn by pot roast or turkey.

Here are Rose’s reflections from the analyst’s couch, what the analyst helps her realize:

What was unique about me was that no one had hurt me. . . . I never understood my childhood because I never understood what a happy childhood it was. I had my parents’ love and attention. There was no story to tell except a happy one, and I had been led by whatever theories or literary models to think that only unhappy childhoods counted. (1997, 56–57; emphasis mine)

The diegetic subject here is a child, Rose, looking back on a childhood that she can now, in the present and with the help of her therapist, recognize and understand to be a happy one. The narrator’s reinstallation of innocence, the recovered innocence of the “subject-preserved-to-be-white,” is predicated on and structured by the myth of the benevolent patriarchy, the monstrous intimacies of the plantation romance, where the mammy's
labor must be accompanied by the affects of cheer and gratitude and not read as labor. Round, hearty, cheerful Lily’s subjectivity and labor are erased as she comes to embody a number of contradictions. She is a mother of three away from her children and a disavowed worker (“There was freshly squeezed orange juice for breakfast. Laundry was done on a regular basis: note the use of the passive voice), who mothers a child who is not her own; he: body is put in the space of the hyphen that would otherwise mark the site of the interpellation of the subject as white. As Maria St. John writes, “Mammy’s cheerful width covers over the fact that people who identify as white have no essential claim to the privilege we enjoy by assuming that identity. When mammy appears to broadcast her natural blackness, she functions to shore up the category ‘white’” (2001, 137-38).

We learn from reading Rose how this mythologizing and shoring up happen and how they are maintained; we see black people and black labor elided in Rose’s romance just as white people are elided from many readings of Walker’s slavery silhouettes. As part of Rose’s construction of her family romance she displaces onto Lily and Taft the weight of shame and of class, race, gender difference, and this displacement in turn is part of what allows her in the present to remember and understand her childhood as a happy one. The erasure of Lily’s work and of her loneliness is part of the “architectonics of the southern [and northern] household” (Spillers 2003a, 178) that the dismantling of the institution of slavery does not do away with. That Lily takes care of the narrator, “and only her for three years,” means that Lily’s children have a profoundly different experience of mothering, a childhood marked by the absence of their mother. Indeed the mammy’s presence often indicates the mother’s absence—the white mother from the white home or the tasks of mothering, the black mother from the black home—and the transfiguration of the black mother into the mammy in the home of the white woman. Disguised as or hidden behind good management, intimacy, affection, and even love, a monstrous intimacy is at the center of the production of white subjectivity vis-à-vis the introjection of the figure of the mammy. The mammy becomes an object that circulates, with effects. Rose’s story has in it the innocence of those millions of people who consume the comforting and familiar phantasmatic aura of Aunt Jemima.

According to Rose’s narrator, the “worst price” of Lily’s and Taft’s labor is not their absence from their own home, not Lily’s cheerful caretaking of her in the face of loneliness, but the narrator’s own humiliation at the “charade being carried on” for the “benefit of Taft and Lily.” Again the gaze is crucial to observe here. What makes being chauffeured to school the worst price for the narrator is that driven to school by Taft, she is suddenly in the position of seeing others seeing her dropped off at school by him. Not only is Taft an unwanted chauffeur, but the “timid and tentative” Taft is not even a real chauffeur. In the narrator’s seeing and being seen lies the recognition of Lily’s and Taft’s labor, of class, race, power, and gender that must be concealed, kept at home in order to produce a narrative of a happy (innocent) childhood. It is this that Rose (and the therapist) need to cover over, and that Walker attempts to make visible.

For a white subject to be seen (to see oneself) as a white subject in the Walker vignette on which this chapter focuses would fracture the fantasy that constructs the mammy as (like) part of the family. This is a fracturing that simply cannot be allowed. Whatever humiliation the narrator feels from being seen having servants must be buried under the force of nostalgia encouraged by her therapist. The pursuit of happiness with which Rose’s tale ends does not extend to the unremarked-upon childhoods of Lily’s and Taft’s children. The cruelty of Rose’s reflection (the monstrous intimacy) is that in remembering she seeks to erase what she experienced as a child being driven to school by Taft when her anxiety emerged for the reasons she details and as a symptom of that experience. Her recognition of Lily and Taft remains disavowed.

There is thus an “exorbitant pleasure” (Copjec’s term) in Rose’s looking back and in her innocence here that repeats the erasure of the mammy, which in fact confirms Walker’s rendition of the mammy in that particular vignette, as circulating, introjected. There is a similar pleasure to be found on the part of those (white) (re)viewers of Walker’s work who absent themselves from her dialectical practice while rehearsing a whole catalogue of names and acts for the black characters in the silhouettes. Both positions involve a retrospective assumption of nostalgic innocence that allows Rose to understand her childhood as a happy one by the covering over of black characters to save her innocence and also allows (white) viewers and critics of Walker’s work to insist that her images are “about” black people, thereby covering over the white characters to preserve “white innocence.” There is, however, no plantation romance or plantation slavery.
without white people, and Walker’s silhouettes contain many diegetically white characters in the black cutouts as well as in the white ground.

This brings me back to Copjec’s reading of Freud’s Egyptian Moses and Mammy and to her erasure of white figures, white people, from Walker’s work. Again, I suspect that this persistent erasure is why some of Walker’s later work includes overhead projectors and light so that the gallery visitors cast shadows. It is a didactic tool, Walker notes, that reinforces each viewer’s participation in the scene unfolding before him or her. There are other, not so happy stories to tell here; one of them might be about how the U.S./American “subject-presumed-to-be-white” becomes white and the presumptive U.S./American subject stays white. The post-slavery subject—black, white, male, female—stems from the mammy in the mode of the ancient Hebrews stemming from Moses; both are a reconciliation of competing and contradictory historical characters and historical perspectives into a consolidated myth.

Reading White from Black

How can a would-be white subject consciously entertain and thus work through envy of the black female figure when the cultural “fact” of her worthlessness is reinforced at every discursive and institutional turn? In what image can he recognize his love of her when her reproduction is synonymous with her debasement? How can he speak of her inestimable value to him when her devaluation constitutes the very basis on which the economy he was born into perpetuates itself?

—MARIA ST. JOHN, “’It Ain’t Fittin’: Cinematic and Fantasticine Contours of Mammy in Gone with the Wind and Beyond”

When Jerry Saltz asks Walker how the silhouette functions in her work, she replies, “It’s a blank space, but it’s not at all a blank space, it’s both there and not there” (Saltz 1996, 82). The silhouette is projection; it is what remains after something has been cut away, and it is the thing that has been cut away. The silhouette is also like the stereotype, “blank in [its] generality, and yet powerfully present in [its] introduction by the stereotyped subjects and their racial others” (Joselit 2000, 31). For Walker the silhouette is also about “indirection,” an “avoidance of the subject.”

In her descriptions of Walker’s most well-known and recognizable work, Copjec writes, “Composed of black paper, all the human figures are, technically, black, though we are able to distinguish the diegetically white ‘folk’ from the diegetically black on the basis of their stereotypical profiles, postures, and clothing. Glued to the walls the figures become part of their flat surface rather than standing out in front of them as they would had they been mounted on canvas” (2002, 83). In comparing Mammy to Freud’s Moses, Copjec in one way explicates what Rose’s therapist allowed Rose to avoid. And while she is aware that some of the characters in the cutouts are white, nevertheless Copjec repeats what is standard in white critics’ readings of Walker: the (white) viewer ascribes race to the black figures that adhere to the wall through a calculation of features (hair texture and style, profile, clothing, etc.) into a racial equation of, in Copjec’s words, “Hottentot harlots, sambos, mandingos, Uncle Toms, churls and scallywags of every sort [who] engage nonchalantly in violent and licentious acts of parturition, sodomy, cannibalism, and coprofany, as well as in other acts we have no idea how to name” (2002, 93).

Race, like slavery, is read as entirely about black people, and everyday reading practices become reified in these descriptions. In other words, we are taken away from the fact that race is read through “a calculation of features” all of the time. Mark Reinhardt writes, “With a knowing inversion of the one-drop rule that labels even the palest skin ‘black,’ Walker first brings before the viewer the usually unnamed and unseen codes of racializing vision” (2003, 113). Aware of the existence of the diegetically white black figures, Copjec’s reading is caught up by Walker’s cutouts in a way that she herself would call symptomatic. Copjec knows that these characters represent black and white people of various classes, slave and free, but she proceeds to list only diegetically black characters and to discuss the actions of the cutouts as if they were only black performances:

The “plantation family romances,” as Walker calls her vignettes, have not been warmly received by everyone. In the black community, particularly, they remain controversial, with many blacks fiercely agitating against the work and even mounting letter-writing campaigns to protest her exhibitions. The problem for these protestors is that rather than narratives confirming the dignity of the race or reflecting the actual achievements and steady integrity of a downtrodden but spirited people, rather than positive and uplifting images of defiant or self-sacrificing and virtuous blacks, Walker’s nursery-rhyme raunchy vignettes offer a fulguration of uncouth “sex pickaninnies.” Hottentot harlots, sambos, mandingos, Uncle Toms, churls and scallywags of every sort engage
nonchalantly in violent and licentious acts of parturition, sodomy, cannibalism, and coprophagy, as well as in other acts we have no idea how to name. The charge made against Walker is both that her representations are sexually and racially derogatory and that they have no basis in fact but simply recycle stereotypes found in that racist memorabilia or Americana that Walker, like many other blacks, admits to collecting. What she calls her “inner plantation,”24 this criticism implies, has been implanted in her by white racists; she owes it to herself, and her race, not to recreate these fictions, but to exercise them through a recovery of her actual, truthful and by the way, glorious origins. (2003, 84–91; emphasis mine)

We might ask why it is important that these acts (which Copjec has “no idea how to name”) have a name, and what it might mean that Walker represents acts for which we, or at least Copjec, who names with such deliberateness, have descriptions but no names. Naming is, I suspect, a way to refuse an act or a position, much like Copjec’s description of Walker’s black critics fixes into stereotype varied objections and interventions under the label of “protestors.”

The black artist and art historian Howardena Pindell is one person who has been critical of Walker’s work and its circulation. About the controversy over Walker’s work Pindell reflects on two groups and their responses: black people in the art world and black people from “more conservative sectors.” She writes:

Recently there has been a swift negative response from a number of African-American artists, art historians, and museum curators to the rapid embrace of Kara Walker. . . . There has been, however, a muffled, restrained, fearful response from more conservative sectors of the African-American community, perhaps fearful because of the ostracism and trivialization of those who object, by those behind the trend. . . .

I feel that artists who use racial stereotypes without critique become complicit. They are reinforcing the old stereotype as if to say the fabricated image is their true experience. Thus, in the visual industries’ uneven playing field these artists entertain, titillate, mesmerize and amuse their European/European-American admirers. (2003)

Pindell, Bettye Saar, and other black artists, curators, and academics who have spoken and written critically (sometimes negatively and sometimes personally) about stereotypes in Walker’s work and the presentation and reception of Walker, her work, her writing, and statements about her work, have all too often been lumped together and summarily dismissed. Should we ignore the set of power relations on display here and in Pindell’s and others’ critiques, that an often uncritical embrace and dissemination of Walker’s work seeks to place her, the work, and the art establishment itself outside of a particular history of art world inclusion and exclusion and a broader history of institutionalized racism and white supremacy?25

This too is the ground of Walker’s work. What Walker finds in the form of the silhouette is, she says, “a near perfect solution to a complex project that [she] set for [herself] to try and uncover the often subtle and uncomfortable ways racism, and racist and sexist stereotypes influence and script our everyday lives” (quoted in Obrist 1998–99).26 I suggest that while Walker looks to familiar figures, her work is not simply the recycling of stereotypes. The forms are identifiable as stereotypical through naming, through association (Topsy, Uncle Tom, Mammy, Eva, plantation master and mistress, overseer, etc.), through scene and scenery, but that the figures engage in actions that one can describe and not name (as Copjec says) and that sometimes one can barely describe seems to me a step away from the readily assignable roles and postures of the stereotype and a step toward throwing them into relief against what they conceal.

Walker’s work seems to revel in (and this reveling is painful to witness) this kind of disfiguration of blackness and whiteness, in what one reviewer terms “finely cut nastiness” (Steffen 2002, 98). This reveling is coupled with a refusal to disavow the monstrous pleasures—pleasures that (depending on the position from which one sees the thing) one sees as well in antislavery writings and visual arts—that Walker depicts in her work, a monstrousity that black and white viewers alike find themselves, perhaps in different ways, participants in. This unwilling interpellation into the scenes of slavery (past and present) is, I think, what has drawn the ire of a number of (art) critics and academics: their confrontation with their participation in the scene, through recognition, denial, identification, and through collapsing horror and pleasure, humor and pain.

Once Copjec describes Walker’s black and white figures, as she begins to read the violent scenes that Walker stages among them, her description shifts, like that of many critics, to one in which all of the human characters are, for all intents and purposes, diegetically or otherwise black.27 Black
and white viewers alike erase the white black figures. But if we accept, as I think we must, that part of what Walker’s work takes on is the transmission and effects of profound interracial (sexual) violence (as well as intraracial violence) in, for example, The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven, from which the vignette of the four women/girls is drawn, how are we to read these scenes as scenes of slavery (and its traumatic return) without those white characters who are its primary agents (master, mistress, young master, young mistress) and their agents (driver, overseer)? The very ways that we see, and following from the visual cues the critical conversations that we have about Walker’s shadows and their acts, at first inclusive of actors who are white and black, are projected onto and then become internal to those black black figures who thereafter appear to be fucking, fighting, shitting, eating, and otherwise violating and sometimes pleasuring each other and themselves all to themselves. To erase the white characters is to repress and then to repeat the profound national, visual, and rhetorical violence that Walker’s allegories of slavery attempt to make visible. The subject (black and white) doing the erasing (of self and other) is unable to see that erasure as the site of slavery’s traumatic insistence. Without the white characters we see non-chalance and not horror in these black performances; without the white characters and with no memory of the conditions under which such acts are compelled, the excessive sex and violence that we see might well be described as that phenomenon called “black-on-black crime.”

When Copjec, Robert Hobbs, and others write about the “racist memorabilia or Americana that Walker, like many other blacks, admits to collecting,” the focus on black collecting appears to me to be another instance in which Euro-American post-slavery subjects erase the scene of their own production through profound violence. That is, (white) critics who, on the one hand, locate the emergence of Walker’s images as coincident with the increased numbers of black people (what Hobbs calls “upscale African Americans”) collecting racist memorabilia, on the other hand do not mention the fact that the majority of such objects not only circulate among and are owned by, but are produced by, nonblacks, principally whites, of all classes. 28

But what is it in Walker’s work and its circulation that produces such visceral responses, such passionate refusals, from some black viewers who may or may not collect racist memorabilia? 29 Might this discomfort point to their awareness of the conditions of “freedom within unfreedom” in which we live now, present conditions that are coincident with and structured by the past that is not yet past? Walker’s work, along with the work of Michael Ray Charles, Beverly McIver, Fred Wilson, Robert Colecott, Carrie Mae Weems, and Josephine Tarry (in conjunction with Bradley McCallum), among others, is another instance of the return of an African American repressed in the form of an exploration of black blackface minstrelsy. Is it a discomfort related to the very unspokenability of the conditions that are still compelling such black performances? While I do not explore this here, it’s worth repeating Michele Wallace’s caution: “The case of extensive black participation in blackface minstrelsy needs to be accepted and interrogated since it means, it seems to me, that there are crucial aspects to the form that have somehow been overlooked in the haste to condemn it as hopelessly racist, and to erase all memory of it” (2000, 145).

I return to Copjec, who slips too easily into stereotype, dismissal, and disavowal (her language of a “downtrodden but spirited people,” “self-sacrificing and virtuous blacks,” etc). This easy slippage, this spatiotemporal erasure of whites from the scene of slavery, its excesses, and the persistence of its traces in the present may be part of what makes those whom Copjec identifies simply as Kara Walker’s black “protesters” so upset with the art establishment’s embrace of Walker and her narrative cutouts. Copjec’s look at the black critics’ reading of Walker’s work repeats the gesture of erasure, like the one that erases whites from the scene of producing slavery and from producing and collecting racist memorabilia. It erases the ways that Walker’s work circulates among, adorns the walls of, and is in conversation most often with the (largely white and largely nonblack) art establishment (buyers, curators, gallery owners, collectors, art historians). Given the general agreement that Walker’s images are allegories of profound violence in slavery and in the present, there is significantly less attention given to the ways these images traffic in different spaces and produce a variety of responses (not to mention subjects) precisely as an effect of the blankness of the silhouette form. Walker’s cutouts and the narrative pieces that sometimes accompany them appear for a number of her critics to be too loose, too unframed, and too close to minstrelsy. 30 That in her work and in her statements about her work Walker quite openly references ante- and postbellum images, image making, and viewing practices does not mitigate this view. For example, in
Walker’s frequent focus on the conjunction of horror and pleasure I see traces of François-Auguste Biard’s antislavery painting *Slaves on the West Coast of Africa* (1833). One of the scenes from *Slaves* that was frequently reproduced by abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates alike depicts a black woman being branded by a French sailor. We see in this image, its reproduction, and circulation the meeting of liberal philanthropic and sadistic investments. While Walker acknowledges her indebtedness to the long and very problematic traditions of minstrelsy and the Tom show, her cutouts are, I would argue, not simply or merely her “cutting-up.” They are not, or at least not simply, Walker being an art world opportunist or the product of art world hype. Connected as they are to minstrelsy these silhouetted vignettes should, indeed must tell us something about the inter- and intraracial relations that minstrel shows, their antecedents, and progeny reflect and produce. So while Walker’s disturbing allegories of the antebellum United States seem to some critics to be minstrel show capering and to others a “cakewalk,” I suggest that they are an uncanny sideways look (her black-eyed squint, what she calls an unreliable look) at slavery that ruptures history.31

It is just such attention to the look and what it reveals that brings me to “Kara Walker’s Cakewalk,” the art historian Donald Kuspit’s vitriolic review of Kara Walker: Excavated from the Black Heart of a Negress (2003). Kuspit writes:

*Kara Walker’s wall works are a kind of cakewalk—“a musical promenade of black American origin with the prize of a cake awarded to couples who demonstrated the most intricate or imaginative dance figures and steps,” according to the dictionary. They certainly take the cake for imaginative brilliance and strutting wit, but what’s the ideological point, beyond the fancy art footwork, for doing a cakewalk these days? The civil rights surge of the 1960s has passed into history. Prejudice remains—against Asians, Jews, women and gays as well as blacks—and, these days, perhaps most of all against heterosexual white males, but there’s no special pleading on their behalf.

Kuspit asks, “What is the ideological point, beyond the fancy art footwork, for doing a cakewalk these days?” The cakewalk being his own trope for Walker’s work, Kuspit posits the black American origin of the trope, then relies for an answer on a definition of the cakewalk that rhetorically erases the conditions of this black American art form’s production and the different audiences for whom this performance is staged. He attempts to completely erase Walker’s point as he turns this history into a cakewalk that posits white heterosexual males as its final and actual victims, victims for whom there is no appeal. During slavery cakewalks were dances that were encouraged, supported, or compelled by the master; they were also sites of recuperation, sites where enslaved people could access some pleasure that enabled survival within slavery, sites from where the enslaved could stage some resistance, and also sites from where the master could sustain the “consent” of the enslaved to their lot.32

[The] Cakewalk developed as a pastiche of the dance slaves witnessed their white masters and mistresses performing in the Big House. Certain meanings were encoded and although apparent to those in the know (the slaves), were read differently by white people who had the slaves perform this dance for them. For these spectators, the Cakewalk was an amusing attempt at sophistication on the parts of their slaves, rather than a mockery of their lifestyle. . . . "They [the enslaved people] did a take-off on the high manners of the white folks in the 'big house,' but their masters who gathered around to watch the fun, missed the point." (George-Graves 2000, 60)

Calling Walker’s work a cakewalk thus turns our attention to the gaze to highlight Kuspit’s, and a larger audience’s, desire to see a particular “black performance” rendered transparent.34 Missing the point, or perhaps getting it and erasing the evidence of that understanding, Kuspit continues: “The installation as a whole is a kind of pastiche spectacle—a theater of the absurd, in which the spectator, standing in the center, is assaulted by a buckshot of texts and overwhelmed by the big screen-size image. The change in scale, medium and import is disorienting, adding to the sense of victimization: *one is forced to identify with blacks—forced into their position*” (2003; emphasis mine). Kuspit’s entirely symptomatic (mis)reading of Walker’s work seems to arise from this crucially accurate reading of a forced identification with blackness (this blackness and these blacks) that this spectator (any spectator) may experience as profound, disorienting violence (“assaulted by a buckshot of texts,” “overwhelmed by the big-screen image”). Kuspit’s complaint stems from the fact that Walker’s work works all too well. On the one hand he is correct: one is in a position of reading “white through black” and thus in the position of an identification of sorts with blackness, if not with black people. On the other hand the
diegetically black characters do not provide the only point of entry into the scene. Forced to identify with these blacks, forced into “their position,” what Kuspit experiences, and I suspect an audience of both black and white viewers may experience, is a too close association with a “fulgurous” blackness that must immediately be met with a violent disavowal. There are, of course, other disavowals here as well: Kuspit’s admitted horror at being forced to identify with the black characters in the vignettes serves to protect him from acknowledging his forced identification with the white ones, and, for some black as well as white spectators, an unwilling identification with disfigured blackness.

For Kuspit this work is an “ideological failure” because in spite of being assaulted by blackness he “experienced no pity and terror—no catharsis despite the stressful drama—nor did [he] feel particularly enlightened with new insights into the situation or mentality of black America, if there is any single situation or frame of mind that defines it (doubtful)” (Kuspit 2003). But Kuspit does feel the terror of identification, and the anxiety that arises in his work is all about the power of signification. Certainly the work is successful at revealing Kuspit’s ideology: “Prejudice remains . . . perhaps most of all against heterosexual white males, but there’s no special pleading on their behalf” (2003). His response to his unsettling interpellation into the scene of slavery and its incarnations in the present seems to me not indicative of the ideological failure of Walker’s work but of its ideological and artistic success. He continues:

Walker’s work is certainly high drama, weirdly tragicomic, with a deft narrative twist, but it has less to do with social reality than black rage, resentment and bitterness. The mural suggests a futile attempt—or is it a deliberate refusal—to come to terms with past history, suggesting that there is a regressive dimension to the sense of being a victim. Walker seems obsessed with the past, as though to preclude a vision of the future, perhaps because it is a generalized American future rather than a specifically black one. Is she holding on to black difference in defiant fear of American sameness (which is more of a myth than reality)?

Kuspit, it seems, reads this backwards, for there is no myth of “American sameness” without black difference. Once again we have black-on-black crime, this time a drive-by shooting. This rhetorical move repeats what I identify as the white critics’ anxiety when confronted by Walker’s cutouts: it exposes a desire to put black and white back in their “proper” places.

Kuspit then proceeds to buttress his argument by inserting a quotation from Adorno on jazz, without mentioning that it is a notoriously problematic (mis)reading. Despite possessing some technical brilliance, for Kuspit Walker’s work, “however artistically eloquent, remains haunted by T. W. Adorno’s dialectical view of the jazz performer”:

It is well known that jazz is characterized by its syncopated rhythm, thus by a displacement which inserts apparent beats within the regular measures, comparable to the intentionally clumsy stumbling of the eccentric clown familiar enough from the American film comedies. A helpless, powerless subject is presented, one that is ridiculous in his expressive impulses. Now the formula of jazz is this, that precisely by virtue of his weakness and helplessness this subject represented by the irregular rhythms adapts himself to the regularity of the total process, and because he, so to speak, confesses his own impotence, he is accepted into the collective and rewarded by it. Jazz projects the schema of identification: in return for the individual erasing himself and acknowledging his own nullity, he can vicariously take part in the power and the glory of the collective to which he is bound by this spell. (Adorno, “Sociology of Art and Music,” quoted in Kuspit, 2003)

Kuspit allows himself to maintain his blindness by projecting it onto Walker and her work and by repeating without qualification Adorno’s reading of jazz, which is structured by a similar blindness. Indeed might we not read in Walker’s vignette of the four suckling figures, her “big black mammy” as “the embodiment of history,” precisely the means by which the (white) individual erases himself or herself so that he or she can take part in “the power and the glory of the collective” (Kuspit 2003)?

Perhaps part of the cause of Kuspit’s discomfort (his argument is representative in its symptoms) lies in Walker’s explanation about her choice of the silhouette form that spoke to her “in the same way that the minstrel show does—its middle class white people rendering themselves black, making themselves somewhat invisible, or taking on an alternate identity because of the anonymity. . . . You can play out different roles when you’re rendered black, or halfway invisible” (1999). Not black people’s self-erasure or white people “blacking up,” but white people making themselves white through a rewriting of the one-drop rule (in which a little blackness makes you whiter).

Of course in Walker’s work there is an intraracial conversation going on
as well as an interracial one, but many critics would have us believe that it is wholly intraracial, that what Walker depicts is all and only about black, or constrictively black, people, as if race, slavery, and racist memorabilia are of relevance predominantly, if not exclusively, to the African American post-slavery subject as the one who wears the shadow of the “blood-stained gate.” Let’s review Copjec’s list of characters in Walker’s work: “pickaninies,” “Hottentot harlots, sambos, mandingos, Uncle Toms, churls and scallywags,” black folk all of them, with the exception of the scallywag, a white figure outside of whiteness, a “nigger-lover,” a white person who is seen by white people through a lens of derision to be counted with black people, blackened, an example of unassimilated whiteness. Each term signals a slippage that on the one hand acknowledges and on the other hand repudiates Kara Walker’s “ironic and giddy, half-vulgar attempt . . . to suggest that everything is akin to blackness” (Hobbs 2001, 81). Put another way, Copjec’s slip indicates that she uncannily misses Walker’s point of rendering everything black, and yet her elision makes both her own point and Walker’s point all too well: that black bodies are “bodies occupied, emptied and occupied” (Brand 2001, 38) and that too close association with blackness produces uncanny effects; on the one hand it makes whiteness unreadable, and on the other hand it makes whiteness more readable. It is not that “blackness” is only visible in and against the ‘whiteness’ of its containing ground” (Wagner 2003, 96). Rather, reversing the title of Robert Hobbs’s and Michael Corris’s discussion of Walker’s work (“Reading Black from White”), is it possible to read white from black? Is it possible, given the history of the United States, to read whiteness any other way?

Indeed, Walker’s furious cuts refuse to disavow that everything (everyone) is kin, family to blackness, not reducible to the black black figures on the wall except through eliding the “diegetically white folk” with the white wall against which it is only blackness that becomes visible. Conflating the white black figures with the black black figures is part of the process of reading Walker’s work, and the collapse of one into the other is, I think, an indication of the interior limit of post-slavery Euro-American subjectivity. For the white post-slavery subject the black figure, and in this instance the “big black mammy of the antebellum south,” that bearer of abject subjectivity, is always seen to be on the outside, constitutive of difference, not internal to subjectivity, always the not me.

Copjec writes in “Moses the Egyptian and the Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South: Freud (with Kara Walker) on Race and History,” “Freud removed his notion of race from this problematic of identification; he stripped it of ideality. In the process he uncovered an anonymous root of racial identity, in a useless, exorbitant pleasure” (2002, 106–7). Walker’s work connects this jouissance, this inaccessible kernel, to the more manifest version that Françoise Vergès articulates in relation to slavery. For Vergès slavery tells us something about the master’s exorbitant pleasure: “The forms of domination instituted by slavery constituted new ways of being whose exploration might open up interesting perspectives upon the jouissance of power and violence” (1999a, 3). I would argue, however, in extending Copjec’s link to Walker and to the mammy as the embodiment of U.S. history, that the exorbitant pleasure that one locates in relation to the mammy is not entirely exorbitant and certainly is not useless. The mammy (as the embodiment of U.S. history) is often recuperated fully within the scope of the law, called up to perform a multitude of functions. The pleasure identified with her is still useful, like the pleasure Copjec identifies in relation to the construction of the Aryan ideological “machine-body,” and it is, I think, an example of assufructus.

The mammy in all of her incarnations is useful. On the level of direct signification she stands for domestic usefulness. We might see as well the uses to which she has been and is put in countless commercial applications, from the extracted labor of black women in white households to the (melodramatic ideological appeal of the loving mammy in slavery that covers over legal and other violence, to the versatile marketing appeal of Aunt Jemima on a box of pancake mix. Mammy is so pervasive because she is useful in so many ways in maintaining, justifying, and euphemizing social subjugation. Copjec, in focusing on an exorbitant, nonrecuperable pleasure (jouissance) that pertains in these relations, overlooks the material and social pleasures of use and profit. Nonetheless her point about jouissance is valid, for there are “no limits, no borders to the kind of pleasure, of jouissance, that [the enslaved persons] owners were seeking. It went beyond a desire for economic benefit, beyond a desire to be served. The unnecessary excesses of violence testified to the obscene quality of enjoyment experienced by the masters. . . . [This was] a world in which beating, violence, was addictive, in which terror was the order of things. Yet it would be wrong to think that it was exceptional behaviour” (Vergès 1999a, 5). There is an unmetabolized terror and pleasure (though not
necessarily for the same subjects) in Walker’s silhouettes that haunts and constitutes the post-slavery subject; its excesses circulate still.

What is so effective about Walker’s work is that she opens up those monstrous excesses. Isn’t it this effectiveness that drives Kusmit’s excessive denial? The more Kusmit denies, the more it becomes apparent that his humiliation is the same humiliation that at once stimulates Rose’s symptom and also “requires” that she repress it.

Copjec concludes with the following about Walker’s work:

Allowing her work to be haunted by the traumatic event of the antebellum past, that is, by an event that neither she nor any other black American ever lived but that is repeatedly encountered in the uncanny moment, she opens the possibility of conceiving racial identity as repeated self-difference. What she shares with all the other members of her race is not simply a number of common experiences but this impossible-to-experience event that keeps tearing them apart from themselves, a historical rupture that cannot be “metabolized,” but keeps depositing itself in those little piles of shit that turn up everywhere in the Walker silhouettes. (2002, 107; figure 18; emphasis mine)

Here Copjec succeeds in completely erasing the white black figures in Walker’s cutouts, making it all, once again, about black people. If Walker’s work is, like Freud’s Moses, “stripped of identification” it is for Copjec only so for black people. This erasure, this inability to see herself in the mammy, allows Copjec to miss her own point: that this figure is the “anonymous root” of “racial subjectivity.” That is, it is not just Walker and “the other members of her race” who share in this “impossible-to-experience event,” but also the white viewers who white themselves out of the scenes, out of any relationship to a common past. There is an excess in Walker’s work to which critics and viewers react variously: Saar and Pindell see the work as succumbing to the past, as playing in slavery (playing the slave) for the white art world and not as a performance for some other end; Copjec, in the end, erases whites from the scenes and symptoms of
to miss her own point in reading Walker’s “Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South.” Nonetheless Walker’s work succeeds in catching up all of her critics. If old man Corregidora is positioned as the father of them all, in Walker’s work the figure of the mammy is the “anonymous root” of “racial subjectivity.” And just as Freud insisted on the universality of psychoanalysis (it was not, he maintained, a Jewish science), so do I read Walker’s positioning of her big black mammy, her “anonymous root,” as the mother, the “mythic source” of all U.S./American post-slavery subjects.

(post) slavery; Kuspit both denies any implication in the scene and re-emphasizes all the other repressions; and the (white) art patron, as we will read, cleans up all the shit.

The insistence that race equals black and that black, and not white, equals slavery means that one New York art patron can, “for her children’s sake,” censor “the scatological content of Kara Walker’s mural Worlds Exposition” (Vogue 2003, 481) (figure 19). Without the little piles of shit, points of entry into Walker’s “nursery rhyme raunchy” vignettes that a child might indeed latch onto, what remains are any number of disturbing scenes: a black woman painting a tree from which she is hanging by her tail as she defecates (shit excised but mouth still open to receive) into the open mouth of a black child impaled on a white man/statue; a black child about to penetrate with a stick a white/black woman whose legs are hooked over the tree branch that she hangs upside down from as she drops bananas to a black man down on one knee below her; a white/black child sucking on the breast of a topless black woman who wears what looks like a grass skirt. The art patron’s erasure of the shit, for the sake of her children, seems to be the same kind of erasure that, again, allows Copjec