Spring 2016

Art and Race: It's Not Just Black and White

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Introduction

Aaron Douglas and Kara Walker use color powerfully to enrich the conversations provoked by their works, conversations that center on African American history, and especially on slavery. Both artists center their work on the use of silhouettes. While Douglas’s career peaked during the 1930s, Kara Walker’s artwork appeared on the scene in the mid-nineties. Their similarities and differences ultimately balance the two in conversation. Douglas uses color to create distinction and shape to create uniformity, whereas Walker uses color to create uniformity and shape to create distinction. Through their individual and thoughtful use of color, as well as the absence of color, their works contribute to and help sustain the ongoing conversation about race in America and the role slavery plays in the conversation.

Douglas’s Use of Color

Douglas’s works emerged during the Harlem Renaissance. At that time, the attitude towards African Americans and their art were beginning to change. Douglas’s artwork caused many African American people to view themselves differently.1 He focused on the “Negro” to first explore his own African heritage and later to reinforce pride in his black audiences.1 His signature silhouette reflected the "spiritual identity of black people as a kind of ‘soul of self’ that united all black people in Africa and the New World.”2 Throughout his career, Douglas was vocal about the symbolism in his work. He had said that his paintings were meant to convey messages about the place of the “Negro” in history and society.4 Because his artwork served to tell the narrative of African American history, Douglas’s paintings focused on ideas of revolution, equality, and remarkable turning points in African American culture. In particular, Douglas’s mural series, Aspects of Negro Life (1934), epitomize his style of painting as well as the purpose he sought to achieve within the legacy of his work. Aspects of Negro Life is composed of four panels: Song of the Towers, From Slavery Through Reconstruction, An Idyll of the Deep South, and The Negro in an African Setting, each meant to depict a pivotal event or period in African American history. One specific panel, titled From Slavery Through Reconstruction (Fig. 1), demonstrates how Douglas’s use of a silhouette creates sameness, and simultaneously how his variety of color creates distinction amongst his figures. Douglas’s Use of Color

In From Slavery Through Reconstruction, Douglas’s precise use of color distinguishes one person from the next, however his technique of grouping certain colors can be interpreted as a display of unity. The mural depicts doubt and uncertainty transformed into exultation at the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation.6 Concentric circles draw the viewer’s eye to a central figure holding the Emancipation Proclamation. Douglas paints these radiating circles in lighter shades, thus bringing attention to specific areas of the composition — this central figure chief among them. The figure stands on a box, addressing a crowd, announcing freedom. The speaker points to the horizon, where a silhouette of the Capitol is pictured. Douglas uses color to show importance, suggesting that this central figure is a leader. He also uses color to distinguish one group from the next. True to Douglas’s graphic style, all figures are painted as silhouettes and with no distinguishable features. The “leader figure” is painted as a flat form in
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Aaron Douglas

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Douglas was not a proletarian painter, but he paints what the proletariat feels. He paints the common man, the common experience, and the average worker. From Slavery Through Reconstruction emphasizes the common experience. A group of average workers, indistinguishable African American men, turn and rise listening to the central figure. While the transition itself from slavery to freedom is by no means an average event, the moment that Douglas chooses to depict in From Slavery Through Reconstruction does intend to touch upon every average African American man and woman. By painting his figures as silhouettes, Douglas creates an artwork that isn’t an event exclusive to only the figures within his painting, but rather an artwork that is inclusive to all African American people. Douglas was originally commissioned by the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library to create the Aspects of Negro Life mural series. He sought to unfold diversity of diasporic culture while unifying differences. This specific commission reiterates that Douglas’s variations of footwear to unfold diversity of diasporic culture while unifying differences.

The kneeling figures wear tethered pants and appear to be barefoot. Only the “leader figure” of this group appears to be wearing shoes. Each group wears a different style of footwear, and much can be said about a figure by the type of shoes that he or she wears: his or her wealth, personal style, values, and occupation, among other traits. Consequently, Douglas’s variations of footwear provide insight about whom each group is meant to serve as. One of the reasons the characters are rendered as a silhouette, without a lot of individual identifiers or distinctions, is to make it easier for any viewer to connect with or relate to the figures, but the footwear is a subtle identifier that counterbalances the generic nature of the silhouette itself. The “burgundy–rose” group is meant to represent African Americans. By grouping African Americans as a whole, Douglas is able to achieve a shared feeling among African Americans. By grouping African Americans as a whole, Douglas is able to achieve a shared feeling among his African American viewers, and specifically to working-class African Americans.

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As Douglas's interpretive colors undermine attempts to use skin tone as a weapon of racism. His choice of colors paired with his quasi–cubist style, have led scholars to describe his artwork as dream–like in its stylistic aspects. Cubist art uses angular forms to abstrace the object it depicts. Discombobulating people’s normal framework for understanding race is a masterful artistic choice that pulls the rug out from normal paradigms and can reflect the vibrancy of life in ancient Africa.

Douglas’s dreamy style of painting pairs appropriately with the content of enslaved African Americans achieving their dream of freedom and equality. The color burgundy is composed of both red and purple. According to “Emotional Reactions to Color,” an article by a friend, he paints what the proletariat feels. He paints the common man, the common experience, and the average worker. From Slavery Through Reconstruction emphasizes the common experience. A group of average workers, indistinguishable African American men, turn and rise listening to the central figure. While the transition itself from slavery to freedom is by no means an average event, the moment that Douglas chooses to depict in From Slavery Through Reconstruction does intend to touch upon every average African American man and woman. By painting his figures as silhouettes, Douglas creates an artwork that isn’t an event exclusive to only the figures within his painting, but rather an artwork that is inclusive to all African American people. Douglas was originally commissioned by the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library to create the Aspects of Negro Life mural series. He sought to unfold diversity of diasporic culture while unifying differences. This specific commission reiterates that Douglas’s variations of footwear to unfold diversity of diasporic culture while unifying differences.

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Douglas’s use of color in connection with the KKK is nuanced. During the 1930s “the perception of orange is that it presented itself as cheap and low budget.” Perhaps since orange was once seen as cheap and low budget, Douglas chose orange to “cheapen” the values and morals of the KKK. In this sense, we start to view their morals as lesser worth. This also played into his choice of using a “copper/rusted orange” rather than a bright and vibrant one. Rust is seen as something decaying, and Douglas paints the idea that the beliefs of the KKK are coming to an end. Also, blue and orange are complimentary colors. Douglas plays off of their opposing placement in color theory and assigns them to people who have opposing purposes within his painting. While the Union soldiers are included in Douglas’s work to maintain order and peace, the Ku Klux Klan enters the scene prepared for tirade.

In contrast to Douglas, who uses a variety of colors, Walker works within a strictly black and white palette. Walker embraces negative stereotypes in order to speak about the history and cruelty of slavery. Her work merges the past and present to address conflict, racism, and nationalist narratives. However, much debate has risen from her artwork’s disturbing content. Her focus on the negative images of slavery can shock viewers with scenes that are pornographic and violent. Walker’s satirical silhouettes draw on the perverse side of human behavior as her characters “display power struggles of all kinds: physical, emotional, personal, racial, sexual, and historical.” Walker further explains her use of the silhouette:

“I was really searching for a format to sort of encapsulate, to simplify complicated things...and some of it spoke to me as: it’s a medium...historically, it’s a craft...and it’s very middle-class.” It spoke to me in the same way that the minstrel show does...it’s middle class white people rendering themselves black, making themselves somewhat invisible, or taking on an alternate identity because of the anonymity...and because the shadow also speaks about so much of our psyche. You can play out different roles when you're rendered black, or halfway invisible.

Paired with her extreme use of black and white, Walker’s shocking imagery forces her viewers to confront the cruel history of African American slavery. Her grotesque imagery reminds her audience that the topic of African American slavery cannot be easily repressed into the shadows of one’s mind; to the contrary, the turmoil of slavery continues to affect people even today. Walker presents the shadows — the sinister imagery of slavery — to her audience in the form of a silhouette. In this sense, Walker uses black pigment to make the silhouette one of her most vital and iconic artistic tools. Of course, a shadow is not a person, but rather the sign of a person blocking light. Walker takes the negative light that is a shadow and brings it to the forefront of her artwork. This draws in question the worth of the person being portrayed. Is this person not worthy to be shown in their full form?

Through her artwork, Walker acknowledges that during the time of slavery, African Americans would not have been deemed “worthy” of depiction in art. However, Walker upends this concept of superiority by placing African American history in the center of her epic-sized museum pieces. The silhouette form has also been
circles, as well as the presence of the color yellow, suggests hopefulness as the mentalities of the people in the scene shifts towards a new way of seeing.

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Douglas’s selective use of color powerfully connects with his audience. He relies on his precise selection of colors to evoke specific emotions and feelings with his viewers; and so, his symbolic use of color adds greater meaning to his artwork. Rather than selecting colors randomly, he is very conscious of how his audience will perceive certain colors, and moreover why it matters that the specific colors within his artwork are paired with those colors. Douglas effectively connects his use of color with his decision to place African American people in the center of his work. All colors of pigment mix to form the color black. While Douglas’s variety of colors creates a robust image, the combination of the colors within his artwork is rooted in an oneness of blackness.

Kara Walker

Like Aaron Douglas, Kara Walker’s artwork intends to create a sense of oneness among her African American viewers, specifically through her use of black pigment. In contrast to Douglas, who uses a variety of colors, Walker works within a strictly black and white palette. His sophisticated use of black and white has grown to be Walker’s most vital and iconic artistic tool. Of course, a shadow is not a person, but rather the sign of a person blocking light. Walker takes the negative light that is a shadow and brings it to the forefront of her artwork. This draws into question the worth of the person being portrayed. Is this person not worthy to be shown in their full form?

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Rather than insist one race’s dominance over another, the incorporates both African American figures as well as European American figures in her artwork. By using either black or white to form her silhouettes, Walker eradicates the defining details of each individual within her work; thus she neither heightens nor diminishes the importance of each figure. In contrast to Douglas, Walker uses an oneness of color to equalize all of the people depicted in her artwork. Though she uses a singular color to equalize the value of each human being, she works similarly to Douglas in the sense that she allows each character’s actions to define who they are as a person. This figure allows the viewer to decide for his or herself who should be considered worthy of depiction in art. Walker’s use of silhouetting wrestles with the question: who should be honored in art, and who should be omitted?

The storytelling quality of Walker’s work may first captivate the viewer, but a closer look always reveals a much more haunting tale. This welcoming, yet startling quality is most evident in her first large-scale work, “Gone, An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negroess and Her Heart” (1994) (Fig. 4). Her lengthy titles have grown to be more of an announcement rather than an actual title. The announcing quality of her titles adds to the strong presence of her work. Both the title and content of "Gone" are riffs on “Gone with the Wind.” The novel’s controversial portrayal of slavery caught Walker’s interest to further explore the book’s plot, themes, and representations of race in her own artwork. The viewer enters the “romantic” (the first glance) and tragic (the actual) tale of what begins as a caricatured “white” woman falling in love with a “white” man.

The story begins with the stereotypical form of what appears to be a Southern belle, complete with curled hair, tight waist, petry breasts, and a voluminous skirt. The "lady" delicately holds hands with her lover. They both lean charmingly toward each other, about to kiss. Under the woman’s skirt, however, is a disturbing, extra set of legs. The viewer is meant to question to whom these legs belong, and what their owner is doing. The sexuality of these legs sets the stage for Walker’s narrative, turning this romantic scene into something much more unsettling. A child stands off to the side of the woman and her lover; the child holds a dead duck from its neck and offers it to a woman, who enters the scene adrift a boat. This woman who drifts along the boat are embodied as one as they are greeted by this scene. She is not touching this boy in any way that would indicate that this is an act of affection. This is an insight into her own flightless life.

The next vignette depicts a young black girl engaging in oral sex with a white boy. Walker’s exaggerated physical features signify the race of these characters. The girl’s “thick nose” and “kinky hair” are considered to be stereotypical “black” features; whereas, the boy’s “thin nose” and “tame hair” are caricatured white features. Fellatio “is a sex act that, unlike intercourse, is difficult to complete without some cooperation from the fallator.” The young girl sits on her knees with her hands extended behind her back holding on to her ankles. The positioning of her hands indicates that she is receiving no pleasure from this. She is not touching this boy in any way that would indicate that this is an act of affection. This is an involuntary act of slavery. By incorporating uncensored scenes of sex and violence, Walker’s work creates a “visual language for the affective legacy of extended relationships of sexual domination.”

Walker’s hypersexualized context intends to impact contemporary black women. While Douglas explores the story of African American men gaining freedom, Walker discusses the specific story of a “young African American Negroess;” in doing so, she creates a sexual bond among African American women. “For some black female viewers, the dangers and ambiguous pleasures of spectatorship at a Walker show dramatize what it feels like to be a subject constantly confronted with her own objectification and constantly trying to understand and renegotiate the terms of that objectification.” For example, black women are stereotypically associated with big lips. Around the early 2000s, the slang term, “DSL,” otherwise known as “Dick sucking-lips,” emerged. The term was typically used to degrade women with large lips. The fact that Walker uses caricatured “black” features, such as big lips, to help distinguish some of her figures as African Americans, plays into her exact point that racism is still very much in existence. Furthermore, since she brings further attention to this particular “Negress” lips, Walker emphasizes black women as constantly confronted with objectification.

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associated with eighteenth-century bourgeois portraiture (Fig. 2 & 3). Walker acknowledges that African American history has been underrepresented in art; as a way to fight against that, she grounds her work in a scale and style associated with high-art. Walker creates art that sidles up to ensconced white power and patriarchal forms. She addresses second-class citizens as a way of critiquing the institution of Western painting. She creates a second-class art experience through a second-class art form—cutout paper. In an online article by Christina Pazzanese, a Harvard staff writer, Walker explains, “the silhouettes have nothing to do with the grand trajectory of fine art’s history.”

Rather than insist one race’s dominance over another, the incorporates both African American figures as well as European American figures in her artwork. By using either black or white to form her silhouettes, Walker eradicates the defining details of each individual within her work; thus she neither heightens nor diminishes the importance of each figure. In contrast to Douglas, Walker uses an oneness of color to equalize all of the people depicted in her artwork. Though she uses a singular color to equalize the value of each human being, she works similarly to Douglas in the sense that she allows each character’s actions to define who they are as a person. This quality allows the viewer to decide for his or herself who should be considered worthy of depiction in art. Walker’s use of silhouetting wrestles with the question: who should be honored in art, and who should be omitted?

The storytelling quality of Walker’s work may first captivate the viewer, but a closer look always reveals a much more haunting tale. This welcoming, yet startling quality is most evident in her first large-scale work, “Gone, An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart” (1994) (Fig. 4). Her lengthy titles have grown to be more of an announcement rather than an actual title. The announcing quality of her titles adds to the strong presence of her work. Both the title and content of “Gone” are riffs on “Gone with the Wind.” The novel’s controversial portrayal of slavery caught Walker’s interest to further explore the book’s plot, themes, and representations of race in her own artwork.

The viewer enters the “romantic” (the first glance) and tragic (the actual tale) of what begins as a caricatured “white” woman falling in love with a “white” man.

The story begins with the stereotypical form of what appears to be a Southern belle, complete with curled hair, tight waist, perky breasts, and a voluminous skirt. The “lady” delicately holds hands with her lover. They both lean charmingly toward each another, about to kiss. Under the woman’s skirt, however, is a disturbing, extra set of legs. The viewer is meant to question to whom these legs belong, and what their owner is doing. The sexuality of these legs sets the stage for Walker’s narrative, turning this romantic scene into something much more unsettling. A child stands off to the side of the woman and her lover: the child holds a dead duck from its neck and offers it to a woman, who enters the scene adrift a boat. This woman who drifts along the water has caricatured “black” features. Chickens typically serve as a reminder that slaves were given the scraps to eat; swans are an “absurdist representation of a black female being assaulted by Western tradition.”

Walker’s use of silhouetting wrestles with the question: who should be honored in art, and who should be omitted?

For example, black women are constantly confronted with objectification. For some black female viewers, the dangers and ambiguous pleasures of spectatorship at a Walker show dramatize what it feels like to be a subject constantly confronted with her own objectification and constantly trying to understand and renegotiate the terms of that objectification. For black women are stereotypically associated with big lips. Around the early 2000s, the slang term, “DSL,” otherwise known as “Dick-sucking-lips,” emerged. The term was typically used to degrade women with large lips. The fact that Walker uses caricatured “black” features, such as big lips, to help distinguish some of her figures as African Americans, plays into her exact point that racism is still very much in existence. Furthermore, since she brings further attention to this particular “Negress” lips, Walker emphasizes black women as constantly confronted with objectification.

Walker’s hypersexualized context intends to impact contemporary black women. While Douglas explores the story of African American men gaining freedom, Walker discusses the specific story of a “young African American Negress;” in doing so, she creates a sexual bond among African American women. "For some black female viewers, the dangers and ambiguous pleasures of spectatorship at a Walker show dramatize what it feels like to be a subject constantly confronted with her own objectification and constantly trying to understand and renegotiate the terms of that objectification. For example, black women are stereotypically associated with big lips. Around the early 2000s, the slang term, “DSL,” otherwise known as "Dick-sucking-lips," emerged. The term was typically used to degrade women with large lips. The fact that Walker uses caricatured “black” features, such as big lips, to help distinguish some of her figures as African Americans, plays into her exact point that racism is still very much in existence. Furthermore, since she brings further attention to this particular “Negress” lips, Walker emphasizes black women as constantly confronted with objectification."
The "Negress" does not take pleasure in this act; however, the man whom she nellates does. He extends his arms forward and leas his body in a way that suggests orgasm. His arm extends, pointing at something in the sky; thus, directing the viewer's eye to a figure floating up in the air. The form appears lifelike, taken over by its ballooned genitals. His genitals take on the effect of a grim-reaper carrying him into the afterlife. This is the death of his unfulfilled sexual desires. The white man tarnishes the ability for a black man or woman to engage in love and sex freely. Pornographic images of tainted sex continue into the next vignette, where an African American woman lifts her legs and from between them fall two infants. They are presented as a poison forced onto this woman from the white man. The birth of a child can be seen as a marvelous and wonderful thing, especially if the parents have actively and lovingly made the decision to have that child. The woman in "Gone" shakes these babies off of her in the same way one would shake off a bug. She allows the innocent infants, an extension of her own blood and self, to fall to their death. The infants are a half of her, but she is unforgiving of the other half of them — the half that is the white man sexually dominating her. The pleasure and enjoyment of sex is forever damaged between these characters.

The story concludes with a caricatured white man physically carrying a caricatured black woman on his shoulders. Similarly to the young "Negress," the woman in this scene shares the features of "kinky hair" and a "thick nose." The man trudges with the weight of her on top of him. She holds a broom in her hand and spits something into the dirt. This scene shares the features of "kinky hair" and a "thick nose." The man trudges with the weight of her on top of him. "Gone" centers on white masters sexually dominating enslaved black women. Walker's use of black and white is of "slave: to clean and please the white man. The narrative still, the black woman continues to do her duties as a "white man's burden" is connoted with racial superiority. His arm extends, pointing at something in the sky; thus, directing the viewer's eye to a figure floating up in the air. The form appears lifelike, taken over by its ballooned genitals. His genitals take on the effect of a grim-reaper carrying him into the afterlife. This is the death of his unfulfilled sexual desires. The white man tarnishes the ability for a black man or woman to engage in love and sex freely. Pornographic images of tainted sex continue into the next vignette, where an African American woman lifts her legs and from between them fall two infants. They are presented as a poison forced onto this woman from the white man. The birth of a child can be seen as a marvelous and wonderful thing, especially if the parents have actively and lovingly made the decision to have that child. The woman in "Gone" shakes these babies off of her in the same way one would shake off a bug. She allows the innocent infants, an extension of her own blood and self, to fall to their death. The infants are a half of her, but she is unforgiving of the other half of them — the half that is the white man sexually dominating her. The pleasure and enjoyment of sex is forever damaged between these characters.

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The “Negress” does not take pleasure in this act; however, the man whom she fellates does. He extends his arms forward and leads his body in a way that suggests orgasm. His arm extends, pointing at something in the sky; thus, directing the viewer’s eye to a figure floating up in the air. The form appears lifeless, taken over by its ballooned genitals. His genitals take on the effect of a grim-reaper carrying him into the afterlife. This is the death of his unfulfilled sexual desires. The white man tarnishes the ability for a black man or woman to engage in love and sex freely. Pornographic images of tainted sex continue into the next vignette, where an African American woman lifts her legs and from between them fall two infants. They are presented as a poison forced onto this woman from the white man. The birth of a child can be seen as a marvelous and wonderful thing, especially if the parents have actively and lovingly made the decision to have that child. The woman in “Gone” shakes these babies off of her in the same way one would shake off a bug. She allows the innocent infants, an extension of her own blood and self, to fall to their death. The infants are a half of her, but she is unforgiving of the other half of them — the half that is the white man sexually dominating her. The pleasure and enjoyment of sex is forever damaged between these characters.

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