

EXAGGERATION, HUMOUR, AND VULGARITY: A BLACK CAMP READING OF KARA WALKER'S *MARVELOUS SUGAR BABY*

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Figure 1. Kara Walker, *A Subtlety*, Polystyrene foam and sugar, 2014. Front Photograph by Jason Wyche. <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com/2014>



Figure 2. Kara Walker, *A Subtlety*, Polystyrene foam and sugar, 2014. Side Photograph by Jason Wyche. <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com/2014>



Figure 3. Kara Walker, *A Subtlety*, Polystyrene foam and sugar, 2014. Back Photograph by Jason Wyche. <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com/2014>

INTRODUCTION

When viewed through the aesthetic lens of black camp, Kara Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby* can be understood as deconstructing race and questioning normative approaches to American history.¹ Walker explores how slavery can be embodied in a monumental sculpture of a naked Southern mammy, who was the central piece of the artist's 2014 installation at the Domino Sugar Refinery in Brooklyn. Constructed from white polystyrene blocks and coated with a mixture of refined white sugar and water, *Sugar Baby* appears as if she were carved from a solid block of the same sweet commodity that helped fuel the slave trade in the Americas. This hybrid figure bears the racialized features of an African woman and the elongated body of a lioness to evoke the ancient Egyptian Sphinx.² As with her silhouette cut-outs and drawings, Walker's characteristic use of racial stereotypes involves taking "derogatory figures from history" and "set[ting] [them] loose on the world to do their own thing."³ In the case of *Sugar Baby*, which was exhibited as a site-specific work in a public art venue, the artist exercised a subversive power in provoking visceral responses from her audience in order to create an additional work of performance art. The poetic and imaginative aspects of the sculpture were deliberately overshadowed by its reception, which became a public spectacle and a nihilistic reflection on racism and misogyny.

Using the framework of Susan Sontag's 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Walker's controversial sculpture can be understood as intensifying race, gender, and sexuality. Camp, in the Sontagian sense, is a theatrical strategy of resistance used by gay men to undermine the stigma of queer sexuality and gender expression.⁴ Sontag was ambivalent toward drag performance and its "parodistic rendering of women," stating: "I can't say that I was simply offended. For I was as often amused."⁵ The duality of queer camp in mocking women as well as paying homage to them is comparable to the influence of black camp. Even in the hands of black artists, the use of racial stereotypes

can both undermine as well as reinforce perceptions of black inferiority if the viewer does not, or cannot, recognize the satire. Sontag writes that camp is a mode of aestheticizing the world "not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylization."⁶ As a result, black camp artists such as Walker may create politicized works that are perceived as ugly, obscene, and in poor taste. Betye Saar, a contemporary American artist, has criticized Walker's images as "sort of revolting and negative," adding that they were "a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children."⁷ Others would argue that Walker compels the viewer to gaze at her work with both desire and discomfort so as to challenge what one believes about how racist images function.⁸ The artist reckons with the legacy of slavery through a deliberately ambiguous use of exaggeration, dark humour, and vulgarity.

"THE HALLMARK OF CAMP IS THE SPIRIT OF EXAGGERATION."⁹

Sugar Baby displays the exaggerated physical characteristics used in depictions of the mammy, but questions what we know about the origins of this cultural icon. The historical mammy figure of the antebellum South was usually a young girl forced to care for the home and children of her white masters while being subjected to beatings, whippings, and repeated rape.¹⁰ In contrast, the fictional mammy, as imagined by supporters of the Lost Cause, was a loving and devoted older woman whose enormous size rendered her both asexual and maternal.¹¹ Walker chooses to reinterpret the latter vision of this domestic plantation slave, endowing *Sugar Baby* with enormous breasts that push against her arms, a fleshy backside that rises higher than her shoulders, and curving feet that are contorted inward to frame her genitals (Figures 1, 2, 3). Her face is comprised of prominent lips and cheekbones along with large unseeing eyes and a wide nose, all of which are further amplified by the scale of the entire sculpture (Figure 1). Measuring 35 feet high, 40 feet wide, and 75 feet long, *Sugar Baby* dominates the rectangular factory space and towers over her visitors.¹² It is her imposing size which creates the illusion, similar to the Sphinx, that she is powerful, iconic, and eternal; no part of her can be ignored. Walker's combination of exaggerated features with exaggerated form and monumental scale defamiliarizes the romanticized nursemaid from *Gone with the Wind*, and yet she possesses a familiar body type that is celebrated in popular culture. One can interpret *Sugar Baby* as ridiculing the black female body or deconstructing the mammy stereotype based on the same visual evidence.

By using racial images in her work, Walker also violates a taboo established by the Black Arts Movement, which seeks to promote black uplift and avoid entertaining white audiences with degrading black images.¹³ However, *Sugar Baby* presents a counter-narrative to the mammy as she is not merely an imitation of a racial trope. Instead, her body is purposely sexualized to present breasts that have nursed white children and a vulva that has satisfied the desires of white men while her impassive face only suggests consent.¹⁴ There is an incongruity between the do-rag tied around her hair, which categorizes her as a cherished servant, and her unclothed figure, which

indicates a lack of sexual agency. She has no choice but to be passive, nurturing, and available because her body does not belong to her. By depicting the mammy as part wild feline, Walker exaggerates another stereotype of black women as creatures who naturally exhibit a bestial and unevolved form of sexuality.¹⁵ Just as she satirizes this white supremacist fantasy by denying a fixed representation of the black female 'other,' Walker in turn satirizes the essentialist view of black identity and the expectations placed on her as a black female artist.¹⁶ She contends that "a positive black image" is a "contradiction in terms" because "every image of 'us' is mediated."¹⁷ Instead, she reimagines negative stereotypes to render them uncanny while still recognizable.

"THE WHOLE POINT OF CAMP IS TO DETHRONE THE SERIOUS."¹⁸

Humour and slavery might seem a blasphemous pairing, but Walker uses irony to undermine the despair that arises from an exploration of human cruelty. She portrays a powerless slave as the regal, clever, and dangerous Sphinx who towers above us. Unlike images of the grinning mammy, *Sugar Baby* presents a face as enigmatic as that of the female monster. She does not ask complex questions as we stand before her nor does she provide answers to questions that we might ask ourselves. Does she anticipate pain or pleasure? How real or imaginary is she? What truths could she lead us to? There is a playfulness in the artist sugarcoating the sculpture - quite literally - to transform a brown figure into a white one, similar to the refining process in which molasses is removed to produce white sugar.¹⁹ The name of the sculpture is itself a term of endearment for a person who is generously provided for by a sugar daddy in exchange for sexual favours, which speaks to the irony of the mammy being sexually violated through acts of white male dominance. *The Marvelous Sugar Baby* is also titled *A Subtlety* even though the sculpture is of heroic proportions when compared to the edible sugar sculptures after which the artist has named her.²⁰ Such contradictory details prevent Walker's piece from being overshadowed by the gravity of the subject matter as the artist plays the "trickster," who is "fearless in the face of the sacrosanct."²¹ The viewer is left contemplating the outcome as well as the spirit of her intentions.

"THE LOVER OF CAMP APPRECIATES VULGARITY."²²

As with her previous works, Walker has been accused of indecency with this sculpture due to its graphic nudity. When facing *Sugar Baby*, the viewer stares into her nipples rather than her eyes and when standing behind the sculpture, one is confronted by her scale-size vulva (Figures 1, 3). The position of her body is pornographic with the hips raised, back arched, and buttocks suspended in the air (Figure 2). Rather than resting her weight on her feet, she exposes her genitals for viewing (Figure 3). However, there is no flirtation in this pose as she makes no coy attempt to seduce us, only to offer her body. Given that she dominates the exhibition space with her size, we cannot help but stare at some aspect of her naked body. In this regard, the viewer also assumes the

uneasy role of desiring to see all angles of her anatomy. As we visually consume her from head to haunches, *Sugar Baby's* eyes reveal nothing in return. She only speaks through her left hand, where the tip of the thumb thrusts out suggestively between the first and second fingers. In addition to being the ancient equivalent of showing someone the middle finger, this 'figa' gesture has at least five different meanings that include warding off evil, denying a request, and wishing someone good luck.²³ It is uncertain whether *Sugar Baby* is indicating that we 'fuck off' because we are simultaneously invited to examine, assess, and enjoy her naked body.

In addition to portraying vulgarity, Walker's sculpture inspired it in the behaviour of some viewers who encountered *Sugar Baby* during the two-month exhibition. A sign inside the Domino Sugar Refinery instructed members of the public not to touch the sculpture, and yet encouraged them to take photographs of it and share them online. Instagram was soon filled with obscene images that included men and women cupping the figure's breasts, pinching her nipples, and licking or fingering her buttocks and vulva.²⁴ This was an unintended but not unexpected reaction as the artist explained: "I put a giant 10-foot vagina in the world and people respond to giant 10-foot vaginas in the way that they do."²⁵ Although many visitors were overcome with grief, anger, and empathy while contemplating the historical violence committed against the black female body, others felt embarrassment at the sexually humiliating position of the sculpture. These reactions were aggravated by viewers who chose to superficially engage with a colossal nude for the sake of amusing themselves.²⁶ Unlike a gallery exhibition, in which visitors would be presented with information and their interaction with the art work strictly monitored, Walker's installation was deliberately uncurated. As a result, people left the factory with the same level of knowledge or ignorance as when they entered, but perhaps with more hostility toward their fellow visitors.

CONCLUSION

It was not Walker's intention to encourage meaningful discussions about racism or misogyny, or even to promote education about the history of sugar production. Instead, she sought to control how people behaved by provoking them with the ambivalent nature of *Sugar Baby*, which titillated, confused, and entertained her audience. The artist had some visitors recorded, later screening the footage as a study of how people looked at morally ambiguous art in relation to their own awareness of being looked at.²⁷ The worst aspects of the human spectacle that unfolded over *Sugar Baby* - the obscene selfies along with the insults, shouting, tears, and near brawls - appeared to be the artist's message: racial progress is deceptive. The past continues to maintain its grip over Americans, who were divided over whether *Sugar Baby* was an anthropomorphic representation of a female slave or just a fat naked black woman. In reference to racism defining American identity into the present, Walker cynically asks, "Who would we be without the 'struggle'?"²⁸

The aesthetic debate over how to represent the shared experience of black communities involves the greater politics of whether artists, such as Walker, are censured for depicting black identity through the use of negative stereotypes. As a work of black camp, which “do[es] not offer unproblematic pleasure,” *Sugar Baby* deflects racism only to the extent that she destabilizes black female stereotypes and does not conform to the homogenization of black cultural uplift. Through an examination of the artist’s interviews and writings, it is apparent that Walker invested much research, emotion, and sensitivity in this sculpture, but then became disengaged to observe from a distance as viewers reacted to it. However, she also concedes that her work is challenging and that, despite attempts to incite the worst in people, much of *Sugar Baby*’s reception was positive. “People are stupid,” Walker says, “but the greater majority are conscientious, if not always respectful.”²⁹

NOTES

¹ Stephens, “Prissy’s Quittin’ Time: The Black Camp Aesthetic of Kara Walker,” 647.

² Becker, “The Memory of Sugar,” 67.

³ Ibid, 75.

⁴ Pellegrini, “After Sontag: Future Notes on Camp,” 169-170.

⁵ Ibid, 171.

⁶ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 54.

⁷ Sargent, “Kara Walker Showed Me the Horror of American Life.”

⁸ Wickham, “I undo you, Master: Uncomfortable Encounters in the Work of Kara Walker,” 345-46.

⁹ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 59.

¹⁰ Horwitz, “The Mammy Washington Almost Had.”

¹¹ Musser, “Queering Sugar: Kara Walker’s Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality,” 156.

¹² Becker, “The Memory of Sugar,” 67.

¹³ Ibid, 73.

¹⁴ Ibid, 74.

¹⁵ Musser, “Queering Sugar: Kara Walker’s Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality,” 153.

¹⁶ Wickham, “I undo you, Master: Uncomfortable Encounters in the Work of Kara Walker,” 341.

¹⁷ Walker Art Center, “Do You Like Crème in Your Coffee and Chocolate in Your Milk?” 24/66.

¹⁸ Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 62.

¹⁹ Becker, “The Memory of Sugar,” 70

²⁰ Ibid, 69.

²¹ Ibid, 71.

²² Sontag, “Notes on Camp,” 63.

²³ Becker, “The Memory of Sugar,” 73.

²⁴ Munro, “Kara Walker’s Sugar Sphinx Spawns Offensive Instagram Photos.”

²⁵ Miranda, “Q&A: Kara Walker on the bit of sugar sphinx she saved, video she’s making.”

²⁶ Musser, "Queering Sugar: Kara Walker's Sugar Sphinx and the Intractability of Black Female Sexuality," 159-161.

²⁷ Miranda, "Q&A: Kara Walker on the bit of sugar sphinx she saved, video she's making."

²⁸ St. Félix, "Kara Walker's Next Act."

²⁹ Miranda, "Q&A: Kara Walker on the bit of sugar sphinx she saved, video she's making."

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