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# Between Transnationalism and Globalization: Kara Walker's cultural hybridities

Therese Steffen

Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges. Along with the global market and global circuits of production has emerged a global order, a new logic and structure of rule – in short, a new form of sovereignty. Empire is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world.

Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, xi

Kunst hat die Globalisierung überwunden. Muss nun die Globalisierung der Kunst überwunden werden? [Art has overcome globalisation. Now does the globalisation of art have to be overcome?]

Harald Szeemann, Venice Biennale, June 2001

## 1. Globalization: an attempt at “circumscribing the elephant”<sup>1</sup>

Cultural diversity and cultural contingencies have become defining features of contemporary societies and discourses. As a result of a global exchange of goods and ideas, of multifarious border-crossings, crossovers, and hence, pluralisms, a hitherto unknown variety of hybrid industrial products, social forms, lifestyles, as well as artistic configurations has emerged. Yet, the more such terms as diversity, hybridity, and above all, globalization, gain

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<sup>1</sup>An attempt at describing globalization likens us to the blind men who encountered the elephant, in the now hackneyed old Indian parable about the way all of us always misread reality: one person mistakes the trunk for a snake, another the leg for a tree, and so forth.

currency as ubiquitous and tenacious trademarks of postmodern industrial and cultural production, the more they remain hardly definable catch-all-phrases and passe-partouts. Despite multitudinous publications on the issue of globalization, no single comprehensive theoretical concept so far describes the economic and social change that has transformed the world since the 1970s, particularly since the meeting of leading Western politicians at the Château de Rambouillet in November 1975. In the "Declaration of Rambouillet" the idea of economic globalization rose to prominence for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

In an attempt at "circumscribing the elephant," distinctions can at least be drawn between internationalization, understood as an increasing economic activity beyond national boundaries, and globalization, understood as a far-reaching and more complex form of internationalization that entails a political, financial, and functional integration of geographically dispersed activities. From a marketing position, globalization encompasses worldwide expansion and coordination of key functions such as research, product development, production, and marketing. International economic and political networks and cooperations contribute to and partake in the process. Hence, globalization can be perceived as a more advanced stage of the process of internationalization (Zeller 29). Though globalization does entail economic, political as well as cultural phenomena, the terminology of globalism, according to Geeta Kapur, refers first and foremost

to an ideology of the market, dictated by the IMF, the World Bank and the G-7 plus executive, crowned by Gatt; to a global market of which the USA, having "won" the cold war, is the moral conductor. It sets the norm not only for free trade but also (in the same universalizing mode) for human rights, for historical and cultural studies. What is being globalized is therefore American-style capitalism and its implicit worldview (Kapur 192).

Edward Said's 1994 study, *Culture and Imperialism*, also ends on the theme of US-American economic and cultural domination and delivers its protest against globalization in a spirit of sustained opposition to imperial power, a protest that more recent critics have no longer voiced so openly.<sup>3</sup> Said writes: "There are far too many politicized people on earth today for any nation to readily accept the finality of America's mission to lead the world" (348). These "far too many politicized people on earth" preeminently inhabit

<sup>2</sup> Cf. paragraphs 3, 8, 11, 16 of the declaration.

<sup>3</sup> An exception to the rule is the 2000 publication of *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, a neo-Marxist critique of both global capitalism, and capital globalization.

the politically alive geography of the South – i.e., the less developed South of any region.

In a series of articles entitled “Globalisierung – aus anderer Sicht” the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* opened up a debate in December 2000. A significantly undetermined first question reads:

Does globalization finally unite the population of this world into humanity – or does it create an immense field of old and new tensions? Such questions cannot be answered, but, at least, must remain under close scrutiny.

[Schliesst die Globalisierung die Weltbevölkerung endlich zur Menschheit zusammen – oder schafft sie ein gewaltiges Spannungsfeld für alte und neue Differenzen? Solche Fragen können nicht beantwortet, müssen aber zumindest im Auge behalten werden. (12 December 2000, 62)]

Yet, the process of globalization, particularly felt as US-American economic and cultural supremacy, is by now no longer merely “under close scrutiny,” but under terroristic fire. Globalization has indeed emerged as the new double villain – economic and cultural – to be challenged worldwide: not only during a storm of protest against the World Economic Forum in Davos, but also in Gothenburg, Genoa, and, most recently, on 11 September 2001 in New York.

Beyond worldwide exploitative market conditions and warlike counter-measures, globalization has above all become the buzzword for international connectedness: the new electronic agora. We may as well add the worldwide distribution of dominant academic theory. Hence, while keeping a critical eye on globalization’s unifying and separating tendencies, we also need to watch the accompanying cultural discourses that have generated similar passe-partouts of critical understanding. The widespread currency of Homi K. Bhabha’s celebratory use of cultural “in-betweenness” is but one of many examples.<sup>4</sup> Though critical of any colonial past, Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak, heading their fellow postcolonial critics, have been so successful worldwide that postcolonial theory seems to provide even the apt cultural legitimation for recent global economic fusions. Bhabha states:

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the third space which enables other positions to emerge. The third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom. (Bhabha 89)

<sup>4</sup> Other terms are, e.g., “third space,” “center,” “margin.”

Even more troublesome is the following point: how should we, limited as we are to our study of English and American literature and culture, deal with a phenomenon that falls outside the academic disciplines? Globalization, as a sign of the emergence of new kinds of worldwide social, economic and cultural phenomena is, after all, an unclassifiable topic that challenges nineteenth-century academic boundaries. It seems to concern politics and economics in immediate ways, but just as immediately culture and sociology, not to speak of information and the media, jurisdiction or ecology, consumerism and daily life. Globalization, according to Fredric Jameson, indeed proves to be

the proverbial elephant, described by its blind observers in so many diverse ways. Yet one can still posit the existence of the elephant in the absence of a single persuasive and dominant theory; nor are blinded questions the most unsatisfactory way to explore this kind of relational and multileveled phenomenon.” (Jameson xi)

In their most recent attempt at “describing the elephant,” in a study entitled *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri draw a well-rounded transdisciplinary portrait of globalization that may as well serve as prefatory summary. Their *Empire*, understood as globalization, does not rule “as a transitory movement of history,” but as a regime with no temporal boundaries, outside of history and at the end of history:

. . . the rule of Empire operates on all registers of the social order extending down to the depths of the social world. Empire not only manages a territory and a population but also creates the very world it inhabits. It not only regulates human interactions but also seeks directly to rule over human nature. The object of its rule is social life in its entirety, and thus Empire presents the paradigmatic form of biopower. (Hardt and Negri xv)

There is always something daring and speculative, unprotected and unsafe, in the approach of a hardly classifiable topic. However, as academics working in an English-language-dominated field, we are required not only to keep the process of globalization “under close scrutiny,” but to analyze literary and visual artefacts connected to it.

Before we turn to the analysis of Kara Walker’s transnational oeuvre in a globalized art scene, let us first outline some trajectories of art and globalization in general.

## 2. Art as a transnational and global phenomenon

Scholarly awareness of transnational, even global movements beyond worldwide economic exchange, movements by, among others, (im)mi-grants, women, or slaves, has, like these movements themselves, a considerable history (Doyle 1986, Kristeva 1991). In her study, "Globalisierung, Geschlecht, Gestaltung," Ilse Lenz portrays migration as an important opportunity for cultural fusion where scholars and artists act as major mediators:

Migration mobilizes individuals as well as groups; they form "transnational communities" in which cultural syntheses are tried out, mingled afresh and partly transmitted to new countries. An . . . important group of mediators are the "transnational intellectuals," the scholars, journalists or artists.

[In der Migration werden auch Individuen und Gruppen mobil und bilden "transnational communities," in denen kulturelle Synthesen erprobt, neu gemischt und teils an die Zielländer vermittelt werden. Eine . . . wichtige Vermittlergruppe sind die "transnationalen Intellektuellen," die WissenschaftlerInnen, JournalistInnen oder KünstlerInnen. (Lenz 23)]

What renders this transnational awareness different from earlier historical reports of issues like slavery or immigration is the attempt to map the emergence of a world culture constituted out of a mobility unimaginable in past times. The shift is from global movements as specific history to a concern with the analysis of such movements both as consequences of the history of our times and as fundamentally constitutive of the *Zeitgeist* of late capitalism.

Within the scope of American literary and visual culture, and within the framework of this paper, I shall suggest the following questions and preliminary answers concerning transnational art and artists moving in a globalized world:

What does globalization imply artistically? It allows for cultural fusions, hybridity; and greater (market) mobility. Art centers like the Guggenheim and the Ludwig Collection operate worldwide and are, therefore, often nicknamed McGuggenheim, or McLudwig in tune with McDonald's globalized and franchised fast food presence.

Does globalization allow for economic and artistic freedom worldwide? Yes and no; art follows capitalist machinations and mechanisms similar to those of the stock market; greater mobility does not necessarily grant greater artistic freedom.

Is globalization but the modern version of cosmopolitanism? Cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, was and still is a class-related way of acquiring and sharing knowledge, taste, insight, and power. It combines urban sophistication and leisure with an adventurous spirit. Theodore Roosevelt and Henry James, among others, are impersonations of a cosmopolitan world view. Globalization, on the other hand, is mobility, the conquest of foreign grounds with financial interests at stake. Whereas cosmopolitanism is a rather private individual form of cultural growth, globalization is a collective means of capital gain.

Is art not always already transnational, cosmopolitan, global, i.e., of “universal” appeal and understanding? Indeed, good art is always both local and global at the same time. Art always transcends boundaries, and internationally hailed art does serve as a global financial asset. Yet, in addition to this, transnational art consciously uses and fuses various cultural traditions.

Does transnational diversity as a form of cultural globalization offer a brighter perspective for artists? Kara Walker’s clever and successful strategy of literally cutting her way from the margins of Afro-America into the very centers of Western art suggests this may be the case. Since 1996 her work has been exhibited, acclaimed, and blamed for its use of black stereotypes, in, among other places, San Francisco, New York, Chicago, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Venice, Geneva, Basel, Munich, and Berlin. In 2001 Kara Walker was also named artist of the Deutsche Bank, a definite step in a globalized art market.

### 3. Between transnationalism and globalization: Kara Walker’s cultural hybridities

The oeuvre of the young Afro-American artist, Kara Walker – a shooting star of the international art scene who was born in Stockton, California in 1969, and now lives with her German husband in Rhode Island – is a relevant and revealing instance of a hybrid transnational visual art that fuses elements of various cultural backgrounds, most notably Afro-American and European, and thus attracts art connoisseurs and investors on both sides of the Atlantic.

By analyzing two significant works, firstly, her *Safety Curtain at the Vienna State Opera* (1998/99), and secondly, her installation entitled *Endless*

*Conundrum, an African Anonymous Adventuress* that was created in situ for the Beyeler Foundation in Riehen (June 2001), I shall tackle the aforementioned issues in more detail.

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Kara Walker's life-size razorcut figures and scenes "told in papyrotonomies," her cycloramas of slave narratives, minstrelsy, hidden and open cruelty and lust, differ from theater performances, but are highly performative nonetheless as she cuts and arranges most of her installations on location. Her art dances up to the viewer, seductive in the sweet guise of European Victorian or Biedermeier silhouettes.

Silhouettes or shades ("Schattenrisse") generally refer to contours of a black head, body, or group of bodies. Named after the unpopular and extremely parsimonious French Minister of Finance to King Louis XV, Etienne de Silhouette (1709-1767), cutouts were cheap compared to paintings and, therefore, well suited to serve the lower bourgeoisie with remembrances of family, friends, and acquaintances. Silhouettes were either painted in candlelight or cut out from paper. The highly popular genre was inspired around 1800 by Chinese and Javanese shadow theaters. Silhouettes were popular with Goethe, Lavater, and Voltaire, who commissioned his cutouts from the "prince of silhouettes" himself, Jean Huber. During the Romantic era scenic shadow paintings/panoramas by, among others, Runge, Andersen, Schwind, Diefenbach, and Menzel, were also well known. In addition, Arnim, Kerner, and Mörike rediscovered the silhouette. Silhouettes and scenic arrangements entered Europe via Italy, mainly as fairground amusements and were originally used to frame devotional pictures and religious scenes. Even in the 21st century silhouettes have lost nothing of their deep-seated attraction. Not only do silhouettes hark back to private histories of puppeteering and shadow games but to the art history of mankind. Silhouettes and paper cuts both open up and shape the space of subjective myth-making as well as the abysses of fairy-tale phantasms. Until the invention of photography (Daguerrotype 1837), silhouettes served as surrogates for the beloved, as indicated by Pliny the Elder's (23-79 A.D.) reports of the founding myth of silhouette painting: to keep her absent husband true to her heart's and eyes' remembrance, the daughter of the Corinthian potter Butades put her beloved's silhouette on the wall. Yet inscribed in these changeable contours of the shadow are also transience and the harbingers of death: there is no real life in the clichéd copy, silhouettes intimate.

The fact that the silhouette says a lot with very little information is a trait it shares with the stereotype. This is Kara Walker's starting point. With a directness that is almost grotesque, her images confront us with the scenes between American master and girl slave that the history books never talk about. However, Walker is not concerned with rectifying the master narrative but conveying her own experience (Herzog 8). The experience reflected

in these formally canny, yet contentwise so uncanny silhouettes is that of a young black woman who has moved from California to the southern capital of Georgia, Atlanta, as one of the generation following the great Civil Rights Movement. Despite the general efforts to achieve a multicultural society in the Deep South, she was confronted daily with the undercurrent of racism, a racism that was quite “normal” and ubiquitous even in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Her double stigmatization, as woman and as black, emerges in the shadowy scenes that fill entire walls where she depicts the violence between blacks and whites in bizarre episodes, series, and surprising juxtapositions. In the silhouette technique the whites are black as well, and one has to study the profiles carefully to identify racial markers; in doing so, one only discovers new monstrosities. It is fascinating to see how Kara Walker subversively “costumes” racism in the USA in an historical decorative European genre, and thus unpretentiously thematizes aspects of her own (and our) social and gender-specific reality. How does she comment on her large silhouettes made of black paper glued to walls, yet walking, sailing, flying, often as in airborne ecstasy?

I discovered that the silhouette was a near perfect solution to a complex project that I set for myself. I had begun, about six years ago [1992], to try and uncover the often subtle and uncomfortable ways racism, and racist and sexist stereotypes influence and script our everyday lives. The “scripting” was especially pronounced in the American South, where I grew up, where a longing for a romanticized and homogenous “past” lingers and retains all of its former power in the form of dubious arts. . . . Romance novels, pornographic fantasies, cartoons, antique postcards and collectible figurines. I’ve been interested in the way in which black people (or commonly: “African-Americans”), or the way at least I responded to, or ignored, or reaffirmed or reinforced certain stereotypes. The silhouette is the most concise way of summing up a number of interests. First: that this work is loosely concerned with “the Historical,” “the ‘LOW’ arts,” and the everyday. Second: that this shadowy form mirrors our (or my) thought process. . . . It kind of offers a weak denial of “unclean” thoughts, it believes itself to be very polite and very true – like genteel Southern aristocracy. Third: that it offers me a chance to intertwine a kind of beauty with a violent lust that is sometimes self-incriminating, full of excess also, everyone is rendered black. (Kara Walker, Interview with Hans-Ulrich Obrist 2000, 12)

Kara Walker’s view of the silhouette echoes the Swiss physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater’s judgment of the shade’s power:<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> There is an increasing interest in the technique; cf. among others, the following exhibits: *Schattenrisse: Silhouetten und Cutouts*, Lenbachhaus München, 2001; *Johann Caspar Lavater*, Kunsthaus Zürich, 2001.

Shades are the weakest, most vapid, but, at the same time, when the light is at proper distance, and falls properly on the countenance to take the profile accurately, the truest representation that can be given of man. The weakest, for it is not positive, it is only something negative, only the boundary line of half the countenance. The truest, because it is the immediate expression of nature, such as not the ablest painter is capable of drawing, by hand, after nature.

The shade contains but one line; no motion, light, colour, height or depth; no eye, ear, nostril or cheek; but a very small part of the lip; yet how decisively is it significant! The reader soon shall judge, be convinced, and exercise his judgment.

... No art can attain to the truth of the shade, taken with precision ... (187-88)

Shades collect the distracted attention, confine it to an outline, and thus render the observation more simple, easy, and precise. (189)

But in using the silhouette to perfection, Walker strongly refutes the blatant racism in Lavater's portrayals. To him the "black African" was but: "Thierisch beschränkt, doch geschickt im Kleinen, worinn er beschränkt ist," [reduced like an animal yet apt in the small affairs to which he is bound.] (Ackermann 51).

Thus, Kara Walker deliberately clothes an uncanny content in a canny form to attack the very conditions which commonly reproduce racism and sexism. She brings in disruptive factors by using bizarre oversized caricature elements and stereotypes. Cut paper and adhesive, finely-cut nastiness, is Walker's cultural fusion, her personal creation of gray areas between the black and white of the silhouette that shock us out of our canny longings for "Heim" and "Heimat."

Kara Walker's reinterpretation of the fire curtain at the Vienna State Opera in 1998/99 is a poignant example of transnational art. The extremely heavy safety curtain, morphed into cultural "unsafety" by Kara Walker, serves to divide the stage and auditorium like a wall when no performance is on but also during the intervals. Its function is to keep firebrands off the audience; it further divides the fictitious timespace of the stage from the real-time world of the audience, who unavoidably notice the curtain.

Since 1955 the curtain had shown an outmoded "Orpheus and Eurydice" scene by the former Nazi artist Rudolf Eisenmenger, a design that had been preferred over an artistically far superior work by Fritz Wotruba. Eisenmenger's classicizing motif celebrated Christoph Willibald Gluck, according to Nazi propaganda an innovator in German opera (Schlebrügge 54). When the

topic of a new design was raised in 1997, it was felt that, out of respect for its symbolic historical function, Eisenmenger's picture should not be destroyed. The organization "Museum in Progress" with its wide experience in temporary art presentations was brought in as a partner. Every season a new curtain design will be presented and simply hung on top of the old curtain without destroying it. Thus, Walker's design also works against the firebrand of an unsavory past and creates a palimpsest that layers the atrocities of both slavery and fascism. In black and white around a golden ground that was taken from the hidden Eisenmenger picture, the tableau elegantly matches the splendor of the auditorium and the black tail-coats of the all-male Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra.

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The picture comes together like a stage set with its horizontal and vertical division into three distinct areas: the lower third consists of a golden ground spread over a black and white cave-like underground. From this rugged base golden promontories and a towering range of black snowcapped mountains to their right rise into the empty sky of a white middle ground. One quickly recognizes three trees, their unified tops speckled with eyes that penetratingly gaze back at the audience. Six human figures more or less visible behind, between, below, on top, or up in the trees populate the scene. They invite all kinds of associative starting points which the viewer can combine.

However, what first appears to be a charming fairy-tale illustration actually packs quite a punch, as the silhouettes have less to do with idylls and tranquil craftsmanship than with a grotesque malignance palpable even in the trees themselves. They are overgrown with marsh moss and spiderwebs, and nastiness is revealed behind each element in the picture. The scenery which dances on the curtain is not only an aesthetic interplay of shades and shadows, it also recalls Eisenmenger's realm of death lurking right below the surface. Thus, Walker's curtain evokes no elegiac kingdom of the dead from which Orpheus wanted to bring back his beloved Eurydice with the power of music. Hers is a shadowy world which is inhabited by some real evil spirits of European culture. Walker stated that the safety curtain could be reduced to her "very American picture of Austria, to one simple hybrid: HEIDI and death" (Walker, in Schlebrügge 46). But why is Heidi, of Swiss literary origin, moved to an Austrian hilltop? Does Walker know no better? She does, yet deliberately creates a hybrid Heidi of Swiss, Austrian, and US-American cultural ingredients. In Walker's rendering, the Swiss author Johanna Spyri's pietist and protestant Heidi of the 1870s fuses with a Catholic Austrian version of a Biedermeier "dirndl" with her Mozart braids and shoes. Moreover, the figure of the singing Maria from the 1960 musical "The Sound of Music," so highly popular in the U.S.A., joins in the myth of Heidi and fuses all into the globalized version of a pretty singing Alpine girl. Not only does this process indicate how we ourselves can be forced into the furnace of clichés,<sup>6</sup> but also how thoughtfully and playfully Walker places Heidi/Maria across another hybrid figure on a snowcapped mountain: the golden fusion of Maria/Mary/Eurydice. Whereas Heidi/Maria represents the material "low" world of fairy tale and popular musicals, Maria/Mary/Eurydice stands for the spiritual "high" world of religion and classical myth. Conjointly, these ele-

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<sup>6</sup> For an extensive investigation into the figure, myth, and function of Heidi, see Ernst Halter, ed. *Heidi – Karrieren einer Figur*.

vated and somehow remote female figures – while oscillating between innocence and experience, life and death, salvation and temptation – hold the threats and atrocities of the middle ground at bay.

The culture and history which Walker experienced in Austria as “a black person looking for signs of herself” in the stereotypes which she gathered is projected onto further individual figures which appear to be magically embedded in the landscape of the curtain: the Meisl-Moor of the popular coffee house, hanging from the tree like a monkey, who offers an overtly eroticized offal to Maria/Mary/Eurydice, thus confronting her with her suppressed sexuality, and the black Jewish Saxophone player who morphs from a white Orpheus into an Orfeo negro. Kara Walker calls him “the black Jew” which she took directly from a poster for the Nazi exhibition “Degenerate Music” (1938) (Obrist “Kara Walker in conversation” 4). The image is of particular interest to Walker given the rift that has emerged lately between American Black and Jewish communities which have long shared an interest in human rights as well as a common history. A closer look at the dark player in the lower left corner of the curtain reveals that this hybrid of an African American<sup>7</sup> and Jewish musician produces yet a third uncanny presence. Out of his saxophone waxes a turbaned Arabian head that represents an ever-pressing Islamic threat to Vienna and the Western world.<sup>8</sup> Walker states that “[this] hybridization of Blacks, Jews and Turks is especially interesting . . . because it means never having to say your [sic!] sorry.” (Walker, in Schlebrügge 15). Again, her fusion of three types of otherness into one symbolic figure pushes the image of the cultural Other as entertainer to the limits. The audience cannot do away with what is terrifyingly different, because Walker’s Black-Jewish-Turk is a powerfully visible new text against the subtext of Orpheus the singer. The turbaned jazz musician is indeed included “to contrast the divine music of Orpheus whose Eurydice marches off to investigate this seductive coffee,” that is, the bean of the Meisl-Moor, a link to Arabica coffee roasts (Walker, in Obrist “Kara Walker in conversation” 4). With these allusions in mind the cultural fairy-tale-like coziness of the silhouette is disturbed right away; this is continued in the central figure of “Hans in Luck.” The striding fairy-tale embodiment of the Happy go Lucky with horrible nails on his shoes is yet another incarnation of terror and death. The only free-standing figure does not turn towards the skull but is looking into the

<sup>7</sup> Bill Traylor’s renderings of Afro-American blues players come to mind; see *Deep Blue. Bill Traylor 1854-1994* (Köln: DuMont, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Venice’s victory at Lepanto 1571; then Vienna’s fights against the Turkish threat between 1663-99, particularly the siege of Vienna in 1683.

air. Nonetheless, the central “bone-breaker” addresses, even mirrors all the figures under whose common culture death lurks. However, its counterpart is the striding and happy fairy-tale figure. Walker’s “Hans in Luck,” however, seems to be prepared for violence as he swings a large mallet while his mind appears to be elsewhere. The skull has not yet been hit. “Hans in Luck” is certainly the anti-hero of the entire scene, the largest figure, breaking out of the miniature and walking right out from fairy tales into the realm of real-time politics. Not only distortion but also enlargement indicate the negative content of a figure. “Hans in Luck” – in action, and in size – most powerfully suggests the destructive demons inherent in canny myths as well as in the repressed demons of an unsavory past. Together they produce a spine-chilling picture of a world waiting for the fatal ending that would put the world in order again. Only, in this fairy-tale there seems to be no spirit of reconciliation.

By means of kitsch, cliché and stereotypes, seemingly transported into her Afro-American language, Kara Walker brings to light suppressed, unwanted and even demonic aspects of German-speaking culture in all figures, even the one who is hiding behind a tree. Yet Walker crosses and fills the stereotyped cliché of the silhouette in yet another twist: the roles of victimizers and victims are not as clear-cut as her contours: women and men can be both, for Kara Walker deliberately embraces and avoids the cliché on the thematic level: Eurydice and Heidi are both ambiguous figures. Only the subtle nuances of the close up open to the beholder the deeper meanings of fragmented, augmented, altered and often tortured bodies that are – in spite of their isolation – always related in pain and agony. Although the contours with their more or less flat noses or protruding lips – not the black content within – do serve as ethnic and gendered identity markers, something for which Kara Walker has been severely criticized within her own community (e.g. by Betye Saar), it is precisely the contours that serve a different purpose in her work: in using the contour as the decisive line of story-telling, of the human condition beyond the dark body mass, Kara Walker draws the uncanny corporeal facts to the forefront of the visible. Her use of contours, I argue, is both a political and ethical device: “Western” in its psychoanalytic analysis of the repressed, and Afro-American in its anthropological search – not unlike Zora Neale Hurston’s *Of Mule and Men* – as it was, and still is in the shadows of our unconscious, in our desire for and condemnation of the repressed. Walker precisely renegotiates between difference and alterity, between lust and pain, between the past and the present, between negative and positive, between Western, and deeply African-American and American

mainstream tendencies. Her artistic strategy is a counter argument of simultaneous resistance and production, of fierce anger and dark mourning. The silhouette itself produces an additional delay between the perception of form and content as it immediately captures in black what cannot be understood at first glance. The uncanny depth emanates slowly from dark outlines and surfaces.

Tradition with its myths and fairy-tale figures is a depository of dominant discourses, social practices, and relations. Yet, as tradition hides its own crevices and interstices under clear-cut outlines, as clear unruffled features, black against white, it both absorbs and rejects according to its most prominent configuration. Self-reflexivity is particularly tested and challenged by seemingly smooth-cut features, inherited portions of a white culture in black "face." Defacing and broken away from their points of origin, Kara Walker's silhouettes float around on white and golden walls like black islands, residues of a culture that has hitherto been banned from the public white open spaces of opera houses or museums. Thus, her revisions of history and tradition clearly enliven and politicize any white space.

Seen from a white perspective, Walker's silhouettes are an urban and hip race-conscious critique. Yet, from a black angle, as the rage among black artists has demonstrated, they are also "hot stuff." The use of black stereotypes in contemporary visual practice is highly controversial, in that it recycles black stereotypes laden with racist imagery: mammies, sambos, Amos and Andy, Toms, Aunt Jemima, Uncle Mose. It is nothing short of a bad reconstruction of insulting and degrading images, particularly so because representations of stereotypical blacks originate in Southern gothic. With her contemporary Vienna safety curtain, Kara Walker has predominantly used white stereotypes, which are themselves twisted and torn apart in her suggestive juxtapositions.

When Pablo Picasso and his contemporaries discovered "negro sculpture" around 1900 and used it in their art, they were not interested in the originators and their living conditions.<sup>9</sup> Henri Matisse – across whose work Kara Walker placed her *Endless Conundrum, an African Anonymous Adventuress* – did at least go to Tahiti in 1930, but there is practically no documentary evidence of any contact with the creators of that exotic world of forms from which the old man was to "distil" his own paradise around fifteen years later, in a hotel room in Nice, using scissors and paper. Today, against the background of post-colonialism and political correctness, the

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<sup>9</sup> Sieglinde Lemke, "Hybridity: The Subtext of Modernism. Doing and Undoing Primitivism," in *Crossover*, Therese Steffen, ed., 49-60.

successors of those “primitives” are starting to use our aesthetic tradition to reflect their identities. We see this not only in the art being produced today in other parts of the world but also in the art of the so-called minorities in the Western (diaspora), like that of Kara Walker.

Kara Walker’s *Endless Conundrum, an African Anonymous Adventuress* (2001) represents a cultural polylogue in various ways: as a child Kara Walker used to have a reproduction of Matisse’s silkscreen print, *Oceania, the Sky*, hanging in her room. At the Beyeler Foundation Matisse’s original *Oceania* mirrors the very figures and forms being created by her across the wall, thus taking her youthful private dialogue into the public grounds of the museum.

Thus, Kara Walker’s installation is acting with other works exhibited and reacting against the artistic concepts of the Beyeler Foundation, in particular Ernst Beyeler’s inclusion of “tribal art” among Western classical modernity. She is rather critical of the reception of “Primitivism” in classic Modernism (for example, by Picasso), as well as its classic presentation in the Foundation.

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To her, there is no true inclusion of “black art” there but rather an omnipresent “extinction of the mysterious black soul.” With her black (here also partly brown) silhouettes, Walker thus conjures up a kind of extinction on and of the white wall. This is manifested mainly in disturbing scenes, in which violence, eroticism, creation and wildness coincide. In the process, Walker also does not spare the “WHITE cube” of the museum from “juicy” challenges of excrement, childbirth, and copulation. Yet, above all these monstrous scenes of seduction, annihilation, abuse, violence, and appropriation – not to mention the motionless intertwined black and brown sculptures – that develop left and right along a unilateral axis, an icon of black beauty and liberation dances her way out of misery: Josephine Baker is shaking her way free of both black and white confinements. Dancing on top of Walker’s large installation, she is wiggling off her legendary banana costume of the “Revue Nègre” and of countless performances on and off stage. Not black but brown bananas, or rather, phalloi, are flying from her body, freeing her from both the symbolic and imaginary constrictions of a beautiful black body which attracted the gaze of countless admirers. In dancing she gets rid of her phalloi; yet she herself becomes a phallic figure as her movements are masculine rather than feminine. Hers is a star’s triumph over black and white cooptation. Furthermore, her body can no longer be pinned down on a white wall. She will move out of stereotypical confinements, including the museum installation itself. White (in black) and black are confronted with each other because Josephine Baker is dancing on a white beheaded man whose fantasies she must have excited. While he is licking her toes, she performs her black act of revenge, not unlike Salome.

Kara Walker finally calls Brancusi’s endless pillar by its name and, in the right lower corner, Pygmalion comes to life as he sculpts himself a black beauty. Thus, he represents Everyman and Everywoman bringing his or her imagination into life, just as facing these silhouettes, we as an audience are forced to. The anonymous figures are typically African and tied to the bottom of the installation. A range of characters are blocked, unfree, caught in an act of statuesque dancing, or dead. The black man’s stereotypical sexual prowess is threatened, as is a fettered child’s survival. Below the liberated and liberating Josephine Baker, the shadows of the Beyeler Foundation enter the picture in the figures of the nail fetishist and Rodin’s jumping “Iris” in the upper left. Visible is the leitmotif of a woman’s shell-shaped genitals (originally the navel of the nail fetish), which according to the artist is an image for birth and creation, the marker of life and death beyond Freudian phallicism. Consequently, next to Baker, the nail fetishist also dances

out of the picture. What Kara Walker celebrates here is a black art mass for discredited black Modernism, for the black inspiration that has been too long appropriated under the denigrating misnomer "primitivism" in modern art. These black figures are not cultured in a Freudian sense: they excrement and copulate wherever they please. Yet they initiated white Modernism and infuse it with their life juices. The relationship between Modernism and Primitivism is at the center of this installation with the clear message that black figures nourish the white scene of Modernism far beyond mere decorative and exotic touches. Kara Walker, who went through the Foundation before she began her work, thinking repeatedly "only a dead nigger is a good nigger," sought to reestablish black life as a source of major inspiration for white art and white museums. Her installation is a landmark of pre- and postmodernism, and beyond, of antimodernism. Her installation is an antidote to both ornament and abstraction: it is figurative, and decorative at first glance, yet, monstrous, canny and uncanny, mythological, intertextual and antimodernist as it soaks into awareness. Art is what you see; but Modernism is more than you see on its white surface, Kara Walker wishes the visitor to acknowledge. Faced by her work, one becomes aware how one just took for granted their, and the Foundation's, view of Modernism. The black soul, Kara Walker maintains, is being used in the project of white Modernism, consumed and appropriated into a higher and whiter form of art. By contrast, her aim is to bring the "black soul" back to the scene.

Kara Walker uses and fuses a range of allusions, both black and white. She clearly rebels against the cooptation and mindless consumption of the "exotic other," the black person, black art, and black mythology. Her hybrid installation has a multifarious global appeal as soon as one starts reading and deciphering the subversive context. It is hybrid at its best according to Hartwig Isernhagen's definition: "Hybridity, in order to become a positive thing, thus has to be performatively/interactively communicative. If the performance does not come off – then we do not have hybridity as gain, but hybridity as loss: The fragmentation of culture, the unmotivated switching of codes" (Isernhagen 43). With her silhouettes Kara Walker not only unmasks racist ur-images and keeps her personal demons at bay; her art also continuously balances loss and gain.

## Conclusions

Kara Walker's hybrid transnational sceneries and historiographies in silhouette technique represent a unique moment of globalized art as she moves marginalized or repressed topics to the forefront of attention world-wide. Not only does her art travel, she herself travels as an artist, creating her oeuvre wherever she is asked to perform with her pair of scissors. In this time of a "world culture," then, identities are experienced as multiple and fluid rather than singular and bounded and the experience of place develops in fuzzy zones of interactions rather than within the politically and geographically delimited spaces of specific nation-states. The leitmotif for this theoretical turn in the social and cultural sciences is the so-called diasporic identity: marked by the condition of ontological nomadism which is the very epitome of the postcolonial condition.

The process of globalization comprises more than a mere expansion on socio-economic and transnational corporate levels. What is involved is also a diversity of cultures that fuse and grow between the debris and ruins of an ever-expanding world market, a diversity that emerges from the margins of a dominant culture. The African-American artist Kara Walker embodies and enacts this transnational cultural (ex)change as she persistently moves a repressed black past right into the consciousness of the white US-American and European master narrative. In adhering to the white folkloristic pattern of the Biedermeier silhouette, she literally outlines for the audience a sense of formal familiarity that contains nothing but abuse and horror. Via the silhouettes the beholder is lured into the picture by the canny coziness of folk art and then forced to acknowledge what we otherwise prefer to ignore. Walker's clever artistic fusion of a well-known "cheap" and low European art form with scenes from the US-American black holocaust, scenes that meanwhile travel the world from San Francisco to Chicago, from New York to Vienna and Munich, from Basel to Venice and Berlin, create a form of globalization not "top down" but "bottom up." Hers is a subversive artistic – not terroristic – strategy that undermines current discourses, a dialogue between complicity and complacency because globalization "bottom up" implies a culture that reinterprets values and cultural resources in favor of a more inclusive view. Kara Walker's art seizes people's imagination and re-politicizes their minds in extraordinary ways. Her cutouts continue to provide a discomfiting mixture of decoration and confrontation as they poignantly defy and counteract the exhibit's motto "Ornament and Abstraction."

How does Kara Walker proceed from here? Her most recent work<sup>10</sup> includes the shadows of an audience of mixed ethnic background thrown onto and back from the pictures. Walker now integrates one's shadow, and the positions of active beholder and passive, displayed past overlap. In other words: every beholder IS the race, the racial difference, the past; whether white or Indian; his or her shadow moves along with the history of black oppression; the elements of the racial formula become interchangeable.

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<sup>10</sup> Shown at Sikkema Gallery, New York, through 13 October 2001.

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