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Odes to blackness: Gender representation in the Art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Kara Walker

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Abstract

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The Post-black generation of artists, namely the generation born after the Civil-Rights Era, spawned with the new concept of black aesthetics and its artistic language that has been reflected in the visual arts, using the white supremacist's image of the Negro in order to provide a reinterpretation of history by ironizing stereotypes. This is an issue of growing importance that this dissertation aims to discuss along with the further exploration of self-representation and cultural belonging in the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat and various art creations of Kara Walker.

The investigation of the cultural taboos highlighted controversial artistic means of Jean-Michel Basquiat by exploring the influence of the Post-Civil Rights concept and fusing it with ambiguous and ironic perspective of the Black male hero, while Kara Walker reworked the old South realities by affiliating with her Negress.

The analysis carried out in this study, sheds the light on the nature of irony and the stereotype in the way that it was explicated in the art reproduction of Basquiat and Walker. The results of the investigation have proven that the notion of irony as artistic means became an inevitable element of the artistic representation which is inherent in contemporary Black American artistic discourse. Visual imageries of both artists project social constructions of irony and controversy whose values and meanings promote social healing from unconscious racialization.

Key words: Black aesthetics, Black artistry, identity, Negro image, irony, controversy.

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Introduction

Art has always been an integral part of human life and society, reflecting its entirety, completeness and universal significance, the creation of which becomes a projection of the identity of its author. Marginalization of the black artistic agency has been crucial in relation to the development of African American art, the discourse of which attempted to encompass a variety of experiences, investigating the perspective of heritage and cultural belonging. The Post-black generation of artists, namely the generation born after the Civil-Rights Era, spawned with the new concept of black aesthetics and its artistic language that has been reflected in the visual arts, using the white supremacist's image of the Negro in order to provide a reinterpretation of history by ironizing stereotypes. This is an issue of growing importance that this dissertation aims to discuss along with the further exploration of self-representation and cultural belonging in the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat and various art creations of Kara Walker. The two artists are at the opposite chronological ends of the phenomena described as Post-black, a contemporary tendency in African American art, where Basquiat explored the influence of Post-Civil Rights concept, fusing it with an ambiguous and ironic gaze of the Black male hero and Walker, who is a contemporary artist, has been reworking the antebellum realities of the South, through the presence of femininity. Visual imageries of both artists project social constructions of irony and controversy whose values and meanings promote social healing from unconscious racialization. In order to get closer to understanding the place and purpose of these Post-black artists, the dissertation proceeds with a discussion of the discourse around black artistry of the earlier decades.

The investigation of the first chapter begins by remapping the historical background of African American art representations and cultural belonging in the 19th and 20th century, discussing the issues of the black identity and consciousness, underlying the first attempts of the early artists' self-representation, contemplating on their reflections on the sense of cultural belonging. The aesthetic process of the artists will be discussed pondering on the aspect of the human form and the New Negro image, defining the main role of an artist. After analyzing critical sources, as they appear

relevant to the research question, the discussion will bring forth the issue of gender differentiation.

In Chapter II, the discussion begins with the issue of polyvocality of Basquiat's identity that shaped his ambivalent struggle as a Black American artist to reach the circle of white American fame. Decades after the politicized impulses of 1960s had emerged, Jean-Michel Basquiat was born just as the era of POPism personified by Andy Warhol was asserting itself in the American consciousness, making everybody believe that anybody could do anything. In the next ten years New York bloomed with a new wave of bohemian spirit from East Village galleries to the cluster of clubs such as SoHo, Mudd Club, and Studio 54. Significant names of the white avant-garde had to make a room for Basquiat's phenomenal appearance. His works had been compared to those of white modernists such as Cy Twombly, Rober Rauschenberg, Jean Dubuffet and Andy Warhol. Significantly, the content of his art-works represents the tragedy of black complicity and betrayal, the horror of colonizing whiteness, in a way that is closely connected to his own conflicted sexuality. Despite the claims and counterclaims about the 'blackness' and 'whiteness' of his art as well as his ambiguous persona, he remained a 'black pioneer' of the era. This chapter proceeds with an investigation of such aspects as commercialism, self-appropriation and heritage, the last part concludes with the issue of the black male hero that is the focal point of his oeuvre. The first section discusses his artwork entitled *Mona Lisa* (1983) (Plate 14), and his collaboration with Andy Warhol in the work *Arm and Hammer II* (1985) (Plate 21) underlying the perspective of fame and commercialism. Further on, proceeding with the analysis of art-creations such as *The Nile* (1983) (Plate 15), *The Slave Auction* (1982) (Plate 17) and *Exu* (1988) (Plate 16), through which the artist succeeded to highlight his cultural belonging and an attitude towards African diaspora. The last part of the chapter emphasizes the Black male hero struggles through *Boxer (Untitled)* (1982) (Plate 18), *Self-Portrait* (1982) (Plate 19) and *Zydeco* (1984) (Plate 20). His influence came to be paramount in the way of shocking the public with his ironic criticism that later would be adopted and expanded by artists of the next generation, such as Kara Walker.

The final chapter examines the art creations of one of the most controversial artist of the present time, Kara Walker, the youngest recipient of the "Genius Award" who has produced a significant art corpora. Depicting scenes of miscegenation and

horror, rape and murder she received an abundance of criticism creating a sensation both in the white and black art community by her explosive emergence into the art mainstream. Her cycloramas of black paper cut-outs juxtaposed against the white wall led many viewers to question whether they recycled stereotyping or invested in often negative racial references. These works, which this dissertation further discusses, will be examined in terms of their aesthetic grammar and their intentionality. In the first part of the chapter the artist's early life influences and motivation will be discussed. The second part will deal with the vortex of representations in the works entitled *The End of Uncle Tom (Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) (Plate 22), discussing Walker's artistic visual language; the other work analyzed here, entitled *Letter from a Black Girl* (1998) (Plate 23) is a visual installation of a piece of the literary work of the artist. The last part of the discussion will explore the irony and its visual expressions in the self-portrait entitled *Cut* (1998) (Plate 24, 25) and the presence of femininity in the recent sugar installation *The Subtlety* (2014) (Plate 26, 27, 28, and 29).

The methodology used in this dissertation combines art history with cultural studies, the epistemology of which will be complemented by the insights of visual culture. This dissertation attempts to ponder on the Black American artistic discourse, highlighting the implementation of the issues of race, cultural belonging and artistic identity along with the gender perspectives of Basquiat's Black male hero and Walker's Negress, ironizing the common perception of the stereotype in their oeuvre.

Chapter I. *Black experience of the 19th and 20th centuries: aesthetic experimentation and racial tensions.*

This chapter deals with representation of African American art and cultural belonging in the 19th and 20th century. The investigation begins by overviewing the realities of the 19th century underlying social prejudice and the first attempts of the early artists' self-representation, discussing their reflection on the sense of black identity, the aesthetic process of which will be discussed under the theoretical framework. After analyzing critical sources and works of art that are relevant to the study, this chapter will bring forth the issue of the 20th century black consciousness that began with the flow of the Harlem Renaissance Movement, pondering on the aspect of the New Negro image underlying gender differentiations.

1. 'Inner sense of identity' of the 19th century African American artist.

Art occupied a significant position in the system of consciousness and identity formation throughout all the African American historical development on the American terrain where self-representation has always remained a major priority goal as well as a point of disagreement among African American artists. Artistic self-representation is a highly complex process where art has a significant 'arsenal' of specific 'tools' of influence on the human consciousness, which is accompanied by changes in political, social and cultural spheres. African American art development was founded under the direct influences of ideological and socio-economical processes where cultural contexts had a significant effect on forming a sense of identity.

The first artistic impulses of slaves revealed an impulse to preserve their folk art tradition. Despite being suppressed by their white masters, early artisans made courageous attempts to struggle against major social injustices and should be included into the history of African American experience, reflecting realities of that difficult time, opposing the dehumanising effects of soul-destroying labour.

For the purpose of the study, it is important to mention the significant artists of the era, insofar as their extensive art corpora influenced further contribution to the Black American artistic experience.

The first outstanding representative is Dave the Potter, one of those who managed to withstand the attempts of African-American subjugation and whose name is associated with the times of slavery. The objects of his artistic creation were pots that were designed not only for everyday use, but also for the purpose of education and literacy improvement. Celeste-Marie Bernier noted that his work contained "highly visible poetic lines which [he] commonly situated near the rim of his jars, mitigating against dehumanising drudgery" in order to argue for the right of the black slave to an artistic identity (Bernier, 2008: 26). Such artistic practise was thought to be the first significant attempt of an artist's self-representation and expression of cultural belonging under suppressing conditions "advocating resistance under the master's gaze" (Ibid, 36). Expressing the subliminal intent through his sayings such as, "I made this Jar all of cross/if you don't repent, you will be lost", that was left on the surface of the jar to be read by his fellow slaves (De Groft, 1998: 250). *Bernier* assumed that through the reference of Christ crucifixion and death, the idea of the artist's message could stand for an intention of warning to slaveholders as well as a direct attempt to raise religious awareness of the slaves. Trying to struggle against non-spirituality the artist implied a verbal language that promoted the further efforts of creating a new visual language in order to resist and survive the cultural annihilation (Bernier, 2008: 27).

Regarding the topic of religious awareness it is necessary to mention a woman artist, the quilter Harriet Powers, who also became one of the first female art performers in the history of Black American experience by working within folk tradition, depicting human silhouettes, animal and religious figures, representations of which were strikingly similar to traditional African examples.

Analysing her dynamic work of art, entitled *Bible Quilt (1898)* (Plate 1), Bernier noted that it consisted of several panels about various spheres of life, the last of which dwelled upon the theme of religion, namely the crucifixion of Christ, stating that:

> … this time Jesus no longer carries his cross, but is instead nailed to it. His suffering body stands between a white star on the left and a black star on the right. The depiction of a white star on a black circle and a black star on a white circle symbolically positions Christ between these objects to represent racial conflict. His grey body metaphorically operates as a site of racial mixing to dramatize the inextricable relationship between the races, as well as the

importance of faith to transcend physical and psychological differences (Ibid, 40).

Power's work of art became an embodiment of historical narration, portraying the blend of black and white colours where she discovered the grey body as the 'blind spot', specifying the resistance and subjugation of black people of that time.

The next great artist whose work reflected on aesthetics of religious influence was Henry Ossawa Tanner, the painter who successfully portrayed the realities of the Negro life, family and poverty, themes of which will be examined in the artworks such as *The Banjo Lesson* (1893) (Plate 2) and *The Thankful Poor* (1894) (Plate 3).

Tanner was of a European, African, and Native American ancestry for which he faced racial prejudice throughout his life, at the time when "colour differentiation functioned as an intra-group stratifier …[and] a social signifier for the dominant white society" (Boime, 1993: 415). Despite the fact that the young artist was the first academically trained black painter of the U.S. he lived in Paris most of his life painting landscapes and studying works of French masters.[1] The artist engaged in painting Negro subjects during his short interval in Philadelphia, as the critic Albert Boime noted, the artist was the first painter to work on the subject of the black experience reflecting on:

> … the seriousness and pathetic side of life among them,…[as Tanner expressed:] many of the artist's who have represented Negro life have only seen the comic, the ludicrous side of it, and have lacked sympathy with and appreciation for the warm big heart that dwells within such a rough exterior (Tanner qtd. in Boime, 419).

In his most famous work of art entitled *The Banjo Lesson* (Plate 2), the artist presents a commemorative scene portraying how the galore of light spreads across an interior where the centre of attention is an old man and a little pupil who are in a process

[1] Henry Ossawa Tanner was mostly known for painting landscapes and biblical themes throughout his life in Paris where he studied the works of Gustave Courbet, Jean-Baptiste Chardin and Louis Le Nain, artistic influence of whose reflected on the artist's genre of painting: http://www.themasterpiececards.com/famous-paintings-reviewed/bid/81068/Famous-Painters-Henry-Ossawa-Tanner

of teaching and learning music. The artist creates a pictorial allegory of 'passing the knowledge' from one generation to another, foregrounding the appreciation of values not rooted in material wealth as well as the bittersweet joy of musical delight during the complicated time for black people. Insisting on a narrow palette of dark tones in *The Banjo Lesson*, the artist depicted the world of artless simplicity, poverty and deprivation. Tanner emphasized on the aspect of man's material state which is humble as the floorboards and furnishings are unpainted and seemingly unfinished, and a few decorative items, chiefly the two pictures on the wall, are small and indistinct.

Through the colour scale and selective illumination of key figures, Tanner aims at conveying the idea of teaching that becomes that kind of wealth that connects generations, as Boime writes, "here the theme is not the African-American as an object of white entertainment but as the subject of black education… [where] the object of the lesson is less significant than the depth of the pedagogical exchange…" (Boime, 1993: 423). Bernier claimed that "… the African-American musical tradition was not about entertaining whites, but about educating future generations for black creative fulfilment…" (Bernier, 2008: 42).

The other art work of the African American subject *The Thankful Poor* (Plate 3) was executed in 1894, through which the artist celebrated the communication to God as well as expressed the desire to dignify people with whom he was raised, claiming that "through the artist's various views of a man we can all see ourselves", making the audience connect with the depiction of the humble environment (Tanner qtd. in Woodruff, 1970: 9). *In The Thankful Poor* the central figures of the portrayal are an old man and a boy surrounded with objects in the room that are depicted in the greatest detail, where the illuminating light from the window creates a sense of spiritual stillness. A white table with all-white table-ware becomes a centre of attention contrasting with the skin colour of the two figures who are sitting with folded hands in a prayer, honouring God. The divine portrayal suggests that Tanner aimed at expressing the presence of God in human life.

The 19th century African American art representation exposed the realities of social prejudice allowing artists to speak the unspeakable in order to celebrate their resistance to oppression and the consequence of deprivation. Themes of these artworks

became great patterns followed by the next generations of artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, who established their artistic freedom by creating works which resisted popular representations of Africans in the American imagination (Bernier, 2008: 55). As a result, the new generation of artists that emerged during the Harlem Renaissance instated an autonomous African American art tradition by developing their aesthetics from the legacy of the early African American painters.

2. The 20th century 'black consciousness' and the variety of artistic expression.

Contemporary African American artists has been making significant contributions to understanding the relationship of the early 20th century art with blac*k cultural experience. One of the most striking things in the history of the Negro experience on the American terrain was the existing ascendancy over blacks segueing into segregation. On the premise of the existing historical overview, the discussion that follows will bring forth the issue of stereotype and human form in art, examining the subject matter of 'black consciousness' of the 20th century.

Black identity and its visual image has resulted from the interplay of race and the human form. As Henry Ossawa Tanner once said: "Human form, that is to say a man himself, is the most timeless and significant theme in all life and art" and its depiction became a great political issue in America, referring to social inferiority (Tanner qtd. in Woodruff, 1970: 9). The clashes over the representation of the black body, especially at the time of the Great Migration and the blooming of the Harlem Renaissance gave rise to the question of "how the Negro should be treated in art, how he should be pictured by writers and portrayed by artists" (Du Bois, 1926: 220). The human form of the artist's own 'black being' became simultaneously an obstacle and an instrument for self-representation. Cultural theorist and art historian Manthia Diawara said: "Every black face is a statement of social imperfection, inferiority, and mimicry that is placed in isolation with an absent whiteness as its ideal opposite" (Diawara, 1998: 7). From that follows, that the blackface stereotype has been the underlying background against which African American art defined itself. According to Diawara, "every stereotype emerges in the wake of a pre-existing ideology which deforms it, appropriates it, and naturalizes it. The blackface stereotype too, by deforming the body, silences it and leaves room only for white supremacy to speak through it" (Ibid, 8). It

came to be a defined imagistic conception in culture against which the Harlem Renaissance emerged as a multifaceted cultural movement, making a space for a new Negro in the form of a well-educated and talented person.[2] The progress, both symbolic and real, during this period became the point of reference from which the African American community gained a spirit of self-determination that provided a sense of both 'black courage' and 'black consciousness', which became the foundation of the Civil Rights struggles.[3]

In spite of the fact that the Negro was 'in vogue' before the crash of 1929, as Locke remarked, "the pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem", they still had difficulties to be seriously considered as artists in the white mainstream (Locke, 1925/1968: 14). Holding the view that,

> …in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being – a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down', or 'in his place', or 'helped up', to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden. (Ibid, 3)

That was the time when the African Americans took pride in their cultural heritage by highlighting the importance of 'black being', Locke emphasized that, "his shadow, so to speak, has been more real to him than his personality", as if specifying the point of contention between black and white, noting that "the Negro to-day wishes to be known for what he is…" (Ibid, 4-11). Further on, the philosopher claims in his essay *The Negro Youth Speaks* that "the newer motive, then, in being racial is to be so

[2] Harlem Renaissance movement was supported not only by influential circles of the black community, but also by some representatives of white Americans, such as Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Osgood Mason. Many African American musicians became members of musical groups and collectives that were established by white Americans. However, the audience was diverse for which African American art had been created: from the middle-class African Americans to the white population representatives.: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance

[3] Harlem Renaissance encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture adopted from the 19th century. For instance, folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for the artistic and intellectual imagination, which freed blacks from the establishment of past condition: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance

purely for the sake of art." (Locke qtd. in Molesworth, 2012: 186). Noting that this generation of artists carried a great promise for the healing of American racial relationships, that the Negro became a 'conscious contributor', a collaborator and a participant in American civilization, adding that "the great social gain in this is the releasing of our talented group from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression" (Locke, 1925/1968: 10). More to the point he writes, "Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro – they speak as Negroes" (Locke qtd. in Molesworth, 2012: 186).

Aaron Douglas, the first Black American artist who claimed that the black experience, however 'crude', 'rough', and 'neglected' was the main topic of his art where he painted from the souls of [black] people in the United States. In order to show that black was human, "[urging] other artists to dramatize the realities of African Americans and contribute to a new art history" (Bernier, 2008: 59). In the interview with Leslie Collins, Douglas claimed that the 'Negro life' was "a gold mine if you can write or draw it".[4]

Douglas is considered to be not only a painter but also a mentor and a major influence on the African American community, whose art served as a material reflecting Black history. He used an African art tradition to reimagine it in the African American context. Bernier noted that Douglas was determined that this new art era should be built on the Negro heritage that had figured too infrequently in works by black artists produced during the earlier period (Ibid, 58). With his paintings, Douglas allows African Americans a sense of identity with the original culture and belonging in a contemporary society.

In his series of paintings, *Aspects of Negro Life (1934)* the artist approached the inner realities of black life, establishing one of the key feature of African American art [5]

[4] Collins, Leslie. M., 'Interview with Aaron Douglas', 16 July 1971, transcript, Black Oral History Program, Fisk University, Franklin Library Special Collections, Nashville.

[5] Douglas is best known for *Aspects of Negro Life*, a series of four murals completed under the sponsorship of the Works Progress Adminstration in 1934. The murals trace the history of African-Americans from Africa through their migration to America's northern cities. In *Aspects of Negro Life: Song of the Towers*, Douglas presents jazz iconically in the figure of the saxophone player. The musician

(Bearden and Henderson, 1993: 130). In one of his murals entitled *Slavery through Reconstruction (1934)* (Plate 4) he depicted "Ku Klux Klan terrorism with black heroism" in order to represent the reality and make the audience appreciate 'the sense of blackness' more (Bernier, 2008: 65). The painting becomes an interplay between different colourful shades, which complicates the characters on the canvas celebrating aspects of the Negro life in different ways. Marissa Vincenti argues that being "placed in the context of poetry, this prototypical figure transforms into an iconic image of past and presents African-American oral and literary traditions" (Vincenti, 2007: 14). By complying with his formal elements of the geometrical forms and Egyptian motives resembling the depiction of human silhouettes on the surface of ancient vases that portrayed the environmental realities of life, Douglas illuminated mourning of slaves in order to highlight the struggle and resistance (Ibid, 65). His painting reflected his prominent black identity by creating an everlasting effect of inspiration for the next artistic generation's investigation. The artist transformed his oeuvre into an icon in order to preserve African American pride, showing what African Americans were before in contrast to the present.

Douglas depicted flowers on the ground as an embodiment of hope for a better life, symbolising a change with blossoming. The background is yellow with concentric circles against what seems to be the depiction of houses. Tilted heads of every figure are depiced in parallel to the light, transmitting astonishment and terror. The artist suggested that African Americans were indeed progressing, depicting characters in brighter colours, praising the houses on top of the yellow bright mountain with their hands up on top of their heads. On the right half of the canvas, Douglas portrays a man in a hat and a glass in his hand, simultaneously showing happiness of the bright future that is transmitted by the diagonals of the light and the difference in class with the depiction of clothes. Despite the fact that African Americans were only starting the integration into a white-dominated society, the main figure of the painting was a dapper man of a higher class. Douglas succeeded in depicting pride of African Americans by portraying them in straight postures as individuals with power and strength for struggling. Musical instruments, such as the tambourine and the saxophone were

is an emblem of the intersections of African heritage, African American culture, and national identity: http://xroads.virginia.edu/~asi/musi212/brandi/douglas.html

depicted to highlight music as a means of communication, the new 'language' of the slaves as well as their way to unite and struggle together.

In the other painting *Song of the Towers (1934)* (Plate 5), the artist used the kaleidoscope of soft and delicate shades of colour to convey his message. Depicting a black man on the wheel with a green suitcase on the bottom right side of the canvas, the wheel became a representation of the growth of the black artistic industry. On the bottom left side of the painting, there is another black man under the wheel with his head tilted down, representing hopelessness as if commenting on the racial injustices of the society. Vincenti stressed that "Douglas … [formed] a unique expression of race and racial consciousness in his work" where he reminded African American artists of their capacities to express themselves through creativity (Vincenti, 1997: 2).

Another great artist of the generation, Jacob Lawrence, engaged with African American art studies and the history of migration when he moved from his homeland in Atlantic City to Harlem. The artist's series of sixty panels, entitled *The Migration Series* (1940) became his most famous work of art where the dominant basic colours of tempera on the flat surface of each canvas became his new artistic language in depiction and understanding the migration of African Americans from the South.[6] As Lawrence said:

> Most of my work depicts events from the many Harlems that exist throughout the United States. This is my genre. My surroundings. The people I know . . . the happiness, tragedies, and the sorrows of mankind . . . I am part of the Black community, so I am the Black community speaking.[7]

[6] Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series* is a sequence of 60 paintings, depicting the mass movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North between World War I and World War II—a development that had received little previous public attention. He created the paintings in tempera, a water-base paint that dries rapidly: http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai3/migrations/text10/text10read.htm

[7] Lawrence, Jacob *quoted* in *"Modern Storytellers: Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Faith Ringgold,"* by Stella Paul, Department of Education, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/most/hd_most.htm (October 2004)

By the time the artist began painting the first panel of the series, *The Migration of the Negro* in 1940 (Plate 6), it was his most ambitious project, where "… he examined the impact of race and class decimation, poverty, starvation, lynching, homelessness, labour exploitation and physical abuse on black southern families" (Bernier, 2008: 118). Bernier indicated that,

> …[he]contested popular myths of the North as the *Promised Land* at the same time as he investigated the behaviour of black elites towards the newly arrived southern poor… [as in] *The Migration of the Negro* series [he] projected the focus on their internal complexities rather than their physical vulnerabilities, by exhibiting of the victims of the Black American oppression (Ibid, 117-119).

Lawrence … [was] participating in a 'quest' to create the 'art for people' in order to transcend the harnessing evidence of the reality, showing that images can have a powerful and a profound effect on the audience (Ibid, 10).

Another significant artist, Charles Alston, a young student of Columbia University first came across the racial prejudice when applying for the life-drawing course in 1925 was denied. However, the talent of his had not been devalued and soon the artist received the Arthur Wesley Dow Fellowship for the graduate work at Columbia's Teachers College. As a graduate student, Alston got involved with the Harlem Renaissance art community after engaging with Lock's *New Negro Movement*, he became a significant contributor to the African American art history.[8]

The artist's portrait entitled *Girl in a Red Dress* (1934) (Plate 7) depicts a beautiful woman of African heritage impeccably dressed in a red dress with a mindful sombre countenance, resembling the European painting tradition. The portrait contains a sense of psychological depth that makes the viewer ponder on the notion of poised elegancy and gentility of African beauty, contrasting with the stereotyped images of that

[8] His studio became a gathering space for intellectual and creative exchange for African American artists, including Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, Bob Blackburn, and Alston's cousin Romare Bearden: http://thejohnsoncollection.org/charles-henry-alston

time. The artist established African American identity in the arts claiming the right of African American subjecthood in the European artistic tradition.[9]

Alston was the one who claimed "…that the artist's social responsibility should never come at the cost of his artistic freedom" (Bernier, 2008: 78). In his later work, entitled *Untitled (African Theme)* (1952) (Plate 8) he visualised abstract combinations of black and brown bodies uniting with parts of a colourful background that spill together into a jazzy mixture of sounds, transmitting the idea of the ultimate calling of African American artists through music and creative expression.

Decades after the Social Realism of the 30's, Norman Lewis, as an aspiring African American artist disapproved of the artistic involvement in politics and explored the full potential of the Abstract Expressionism by changing the colours and lines, transmitting the idea of the painting process as a 'divine' action itself, creating art for art, avoiding political inclination. However, he was deeply concerned with the struggle for black equality. His black-and-white paintings like *Post Mortem* (1969) (Plate 9) represented the power of black people. As Lewis stated, "I never felt the freeness…rather than being an artist, I am an oddity".[10] The artist used the black colour as a sign of sublime power against the white 'abstraction', portraying the idea of "fragility of whiteness in comparison with the strength of blackness…" (Bernier, 2008: 170). With the help of black, the white colour became visible. He experimented with abstract forms and techniques not to paint Civil Rights directly, even though it affected him immensely. The purpose of his art was "…to encourage his audiences to reconsider its representation in the mainstream" (Ibid, 172).

His contemporary, Romare Bearden is recognized as one of the most creative and original visual artists of the 20th century. He experimented with many different mediums and artistic styles, but is best known for his richly textured collages. Similar to

[9] Portraiture, a 'safe' subject matter for emerging artists in the late 19th century and early 20th century, involved patrons, and therefore was a stable way to make a decent living as an artist: https://maryckhayes.wordpress.com/2012/10/12/racial-identity-in-art-the-black-aesthetic/

[10] Ghent, Henri**,** 'Interview with Norman Lewis' 14 July, 1968: http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-norman-lewis-11465

Lewis, Romare Bearden said that the "Negro was becoming too much of an abstraction, rather than the reality art can give a subject" (Bearden, 1969: 245-60).

Bearden is particularly innovative with his collage in the artwork *The Street* (1964) (Plate 10) where he used images of African American people on the street, conveying the idea of an urban ghetto, representing the reality with a strong presences of blackness. A bridge is depicted on the upper right side of the canvas, an evident division between white and black as an accurate connection between the neighbourhood and the white world. Faces and bodies on the canvas mirror an individual attitude of the artist by staring at the viewer with their popping eyes, transmitting the idea of sorrow and despair through the distant reality. Kimberly Lamm noted that,

> Bearden divulges is a restless drama of construction and destruction that continually complicates the binaries of visibility and invisibility, continually rejecting and redefining visual forms that 'document' the complexity of black culture into fixed perceptual forms (Lamm, 2003: 824).

Assuming that the contradiction of the depicted reality is hidden in the images of a sleeping child and a man with a guitar that are portrayed with a use of defragmentation technique, created an unaligned subjectivity of oppressed people of the streets. All the figures of the artwork convey the idea of an unattained distance from the white world as well as the white mainstream. In *The Street* the artist experimented with photographic collages and fragments in order to depict cotton field workers somehow torn apart in pieces in order to show how the "African-American identities have been fragmented, ruptured and split apart in white mainstream" (Bernier, 2008: 178).

Bearden, one of the leading artists of the Civil Rights Era organized a collective of black artists in order to discuss the issues concerning the representation of the black artist in the early 60's that later was called the Spiral Group. Emma Amos was the only woman in the collective among African American men that included such artist as Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and others. The Group had two different and sometimes contradictory objectives where some artists considered that being African American was a priority while others wanted artistic recognition. Spiral's first official exhibition took place in 1965 presenting art works of a strict limitation of

black and white colour spectrum, reflecting on the difficulties of agreeing what the black identity was.[11] It was during the time when Bearden developed his technique of collage by combining photographs of African masks and faces.

In 1969, the Metropolitan Museum of Art held a Symposium entitled *The black artist in America*, discussing the status of the black artist, "mainly the imbalance of their representation in mainstream galleries, museums and national annual and biennial exhibitions" (Bearden, 1969: 114). The topic of the argument was thrown towards the problem of the black artist and the black men in America, as Bearden asked: "What could be done to have [a black artist] better known? Within his own community and within the mainstream of America art? 'because most people don't associate […] with being Black'" (Ibid 245-249). During the discussion, Lawrence suggested that, "it's going to take an education – educating the white community to respect and to recognise the intellectual capacity of Black artists". William Williams, a black artist who exhibited not only at the Studio Museum in Harlem's Inaugural Show, but also at the Museum of Modern Art, agreed that, " …one of the things that's happening is that every show that concerns Black artists is really a sociological show" (Ibid, 246). The idea suggested by the collective was to organise the artist-in-residence program where "they would be asked to … produce their own work, produce it on a serious, aggressive level and also to act as male images, symbols of attainment for the community"(Ibid, 246). Taking into consideration that none of the women artists were invited to participate in the discussion, male artists continued revealing the black sense of identity. Tom Lloyd, an artist whose artistic means consisted of industrial lamps that flash in alternating colours, said: "We have to bring art to the Black community", while Williams specified that, "…there should be a specific form of art that a black artist does that should be immediately identifiable" (Ibid, 249-249). In spite of different suggestions, the artists failed to give a unanimous resolution creating a dissonance of the argument about the distinctiveness of the black artistry. Lloyd expressed his idea saying that "[he does not] know what makes Black art except that it exists in the Black community… It's related

[11] Members of Spiral included Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Charles Alston, and Reginald Gammon, among others. The exhibition held in 1965 was a success, but the group members eventually moved apart and on to other concerns.:.http://www.artsbma.org/exhibition/spiral-perspectives-on-an-african-american-art-collective/

because [he is] Black, and [he knows] where [his] feelings lie". He said: "When I say 'Black art' I mean the Black experience on a total scale: being Black, our heritage, Africa, living in a Black community" (Ibid, 256).

The absence of women's art representation was noticeable in the argument organized by the Spiral collective, the subjecthood of which required attention in the art world. Emma Amos, the only female artist of the Spiral collective "…was aware of the conspicuous absence of any other women artists, saying, '… I was probably less threatening to their egos, as I was not yet of much consequence'" (Amos qtd. in Farrington, 2005: 157).

The artist was one of those who specified gender issues in order to attract attention to her art. In the later work of art entitled *Tightrope* (1994) (Plate 11) the artist depicted a woman in the centre of the canvas balancing on a tightrope, representing not only the gender role, but also the racial prejudice and sexuality. The character is portrayed carrying an umbrella in one hand and the laundry on the other. She becomes an embodiment of a mother, a wife, and an individual trying to keep up with the world while millions of eyes are watching her performance. The American flag print on her clothing represents society's expectation towards her. The t-shirt with a hanger that the performer is holding transmits the idea of the womanhood with a vivid depiction of a nude bleeding female torso. The artist is transmitting the idea of the objectified and sexualized being of a woman, with the depiction of her nudity she becomes a woman hero struggling against the stereotyped gender roles.

Other women artists such as Betye Saar, challenged the dominance of male artists within the gallery and museum spaces throughout the 1970s.[12] Saar addressed not only issues of gender but also called attention to issues of race in her artwork *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) (Plate 12). With the use of the mammy and Aunt Jemima figures, the artist reconfigures the meaning of these stereotypical icons to ones that demand power and agency within society.

[12] Organizations such as Women Artists in Revolution and The Gorilla Girls not only fought against the lack of a female presence within the art world, but also fought to call attention to issues of political and social justice across the board.

The background of *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* is covered with Aunt Jemima advertisements, while the foreground is dominated by a larger Aunt Jemima notepad holder with a picture of a mammy figure and a white baby inside. The larger Aunt Jemima holds a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other, transforming her from a happy servant and caregiver to a proud militant who demands agency within society. A large, clenched fist symbolizing the black power stands before the notepad holder symbolizing the aggressive radical means used by African Americans in the 1970s in order to protect their interests. Aunt Jemima is transformed from a passive domestic into a symbol of black power, liberating herself from both a history of white oppression and traditional gender roles. The aim of the artist was to turn the derogatory piece into a positive meaning. The work came to be an assemblage of symbolic representation of empowerment through such objects as the rifle and a hand-grenade.[13]

As a result, the 20th century artists of the first decades became 'conscious' contributors to the art field through their identity representations. African American artist made a remarkable effort during that difficult time in America. Art became a useful means of expressing their artistic and cultural belonging by the way of portraying the reality and attempting to answer the questions that were concerned with the social and political problems. They succeeded in black artistic development by recreating imagistic concepts in culture, projecting the 'colour' of their black identities that, in consequence, influenced the consciousness of the others artists of the proceeding decades.

[13] Saar collects derogatory images of African Americans, now called Black Collectibles, as a way of understanding how Whites have historically defined Blacks—as caricatures, as objects, and sometimes as less than human. The Mammie, a Black female servant, usually depicted as fat, docile, and smiling, entered into popular culture before the turn of the century. Since these images defined how Blacks were often perceived by Whites and were sometimes the source of how Blacks saw themselves, Saar incorporated them in her art, liberating her Mammie: http://www.bluffton.edu/~sullivanm/race/race4.html

Chapter II. *Jean-Michel Basquiat: From the 'Black primitive' to the 'Black male hero', an outsider inside the mainstream.*

This chapter discusses the Jean-Michel Basquiat phenomena on the basis of his extensive art corpora, highlighting the concepts of commercialism, irony and heritage, namely his tribute to cultural memory. Becoming an artist of the Neo-expressionism trend, Basquiat was frequently referred to as the "Black Picasso", known as a celebrity, a new trend-setter of New York. Despite the fact of the early fame in his life, it is relevant to say that the artist always paid the homage to his heritage, which this chapter aims to emphasise. The first section will discuss the artist's attitude towards his fame during the commercialized era in his artwork, concentrating on the painting of *Mona Lisa* (1983) (Plate 14) and his collaboration with Andy Warhol that reflected in *Arm and Hammer II* (1985) (Plate 21). Further, proceeding with the analysis of art-creations entitled *The Nile* (1983) (Plate 15), *The Slave Auction* (1982) (Plate 17) and *Exu* (1988) (Plate 16), this chapter will examine how the artist's cultural memory is made visible through these depictions. The last part of the chapter deals with the artist's inner struggle, putting his Black male hero on display through the works of art entitled, *Boxer (Untitled)* (1982) (Plate 18), *Self-Portrait* (1982) (Plate 19) and *Zydeco* (1984) (Plate 20).

1. *Street origins – the roots of the downtown aesthetics of Jean-Michel Basquiat.*

An artist of Haitian and Puerto Rican heritage, Jean-Michel Basquiat made a sudden entrance into American artistic mainstream. Becoming world-wide famous he achieved international recognition as a celebrity artist and a child of the experimental 80's. When Basquiat was about 8, he was hit by a car while playing in the street. He underwent a splenectomy and suffered several internal injuries. While he was recuperating from his injuries, his mother brought him the *Gray's Anatomy* book to keep him occupied. This book would prove to be influential in his future artistic outlook. The family resided in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, for five years, then moved to San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1974. After two years, they returned to New York City (Bethany, 1988). Heir to the racial configuration of the American art exchange and to the detrimental appraisals of blackness in the American mainstream media, Jean Michel Basquiat appeared on the late 1970's New York City street art scene as a young, angry, ironically satiric black

American graffiti writer – he called himself *SAMO* (Rodriguez 2010: 228). According to Mary Boone, artists who ´worked in the 70s moved further by exploring new boundaries, where "the new art [had] a much broader appeal, it [had] images in it, [it was] colourful – and you [could] see something in it without a doctoral degree".[14] An assimilated Abstract Expressionism featuring more personalized and subjective figurative imagery came to the fore, characterized by its psychological and conceptual undertones.[15] The artist was thrown into this art world alongside with the growing popularity of marginal, untrained art during the early 1980's. Further, many critics and reviewers of his day cited his apparent drug addictions and street origins as license to handle him and his oeuvre in a decidedly exoticized, sensationalist manner (Saggese, 229). Phoebe Hoban noted another important point, in her book *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (1999), that Jean's art portrayed a "fragmented experience, as Basquiat was living in a state of hyper-stimulation induced by drugs, television and American material fantasies. It is a place where young people get trapped in the Reagan era and where they still get trapped now" (Hoban, 1998: 3). Saggese noted that "… curator Richard Marshall compared Basquiat's visual vocabulary to that of Jean Dubuffet and art brut, and his predilection for expressive gestures to those of Jackson Pollock and Cy

[14] Boone, Mary cited in Lisbet Nilson, "Making It Neo," *Artnews* 82, 1983: 67.

[15] Abstract Expressionism, the dominant art movement that implied the techniques of abstraction and artists' inherent and unconscious way of expressing masculinity caused the departure from the traditional art. This chapter introduces artistic intent of art movements implying the influence of masculinity portrayal by the white avant-garde artists of the second half of the XX century. Techniques and styles of which were implied by the further generation of artists regardless of the racial preconception, namely by Jean Michel Basquiat. A decisive factor in the appearance of the Abstract Expressionism as an art movement was the preceding bitter experience of the 1930's crisis and turmoil of the World War II, the main idea of which was the rejection of the easel and all the accumulated and gained experience of the centuries of art tradition. In the post-war period, American artists began to appropriate the western values to the American art field that also influenced the appearance of innovative techniques throughout the decade. That implied the admiration of the "primitive" referring to the power of freedom and paradox of the delightful oddity that did not resonate with the laws of the society: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abstract_expressionism

Twombly"[16] (Marshall qtd. in Saggese, 2014: 15). Marshall wrote that "Picasso's work gave Basquiat the authority and the precedent to pursue his own brash and aggressive self portraits" [and] "from Cy Twombly, Basquiat also took license and instruction on how to draw, scribble, write, collage, and paint simultaneously".[17] In the artwork entitled *Mona Lisa* from 1983 (Plate 14) the appropriations and influences of the previous artists' generations and decades are self-evident. Taking the original painting of Leonardo Da Vinci, Basquiat changed and reproduced his own version of it by covering the fifteenth century landscape with yellow paint, using the technique of pastiche.[18] The authentic river remained marked with the subtlety of white layer of paint, framing the isle with the thin line. On the black bottom side of the canvas the corpus flows in the cohesion with the ground painted in the technique of art brut, accentuating the artist's primary interest with the anatomy by specifying the hands of *La Gioconda* by cutting them off the body. On the top left side, the artist scribbled [THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER FOR ALL DEBTS PUBLIC+PRIVATE] as well as numbers from each side turning a canvas into a legal banknote. By specifying the title in the centre of the top yellow half of the canvas, the artist scribbled [FEDERAL

[16] Despite the fact that American innovative painting techniques of the 50s derived from the western tradition it differed from the European art tradition. Ideological program of American Art was in a process of "proving" the world that its system was entirely "free" underlying the freedom of expression while the European painting in the post-war period was characterized by the theme of tragic. European artists expressed motives of death, hopelessness, obsessive nightmares implementing intellectualism at the same time when the newly appeared American artists completely rejected the cultural tradition of painting. In Europe, American Abstract Expressionism is opposed to the French tachisme that is based on their high level of cultural disclosure and aesthetics which developed in parallel to American art direction. In contrast to the dropping developed by Pollock, tachisme was characterized by a less aggressive manner of painting with a great attention to colours and ease of forms. While in Europe, Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* (meaning "raw art," often referred to as 'outsider art') for art produced by non-professionals working outside aesthetic norms, such as art by psychiatric patients, prisoners, and children.: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Dubuffet.

[17] Richard Marshall, "Repelling Ghosts", in Marshall, *Jean-Michel Basquiat*, 1992: 16.

[18] Such an artistic attempt was not the first appropriation of Da Vinci's masterpiece. Marcel Duchamp released the reproduction in 1919 painted in the technique of 'ready-made', where he drew a goatee and a moustache to the protagonist of the painting, which became a commercially available object on a postcard.

RESERVE], transferring the idea of commercialism, as if trying to render Andy Warhol's point of view that anybody could do anything by creating his own currency. The artist caricatured the face of Da Vinci's character by transforming the complexion of the female character, highlighting the visibility of red eyes transmitted the ambiguous perception of her image. With her mouth wide open in a smile, the artist created a resemblance to the Jean Dubuffet artwork *Will to Power* (1946) (Plate 13), where a grotesque nude male dominates the surface of the painting with his inlaid white teeth and eyes wide open. In the same artistic manner and technique of art-brut both artists enacted instances of visual mockery; in this case, Basquiat depicted the authority and a greedy commercialism portrayal of the era t ironizing the idea of his own image as a commercialised artist.[19] Rexford Stead said: "Staying close to the mainstream of America art was a way for black artists to find acceptance and commissions. Perhaps the conformity (or better, sublimation) was in itself another kind of black experience" (Stead, 1976: 9). In the way of copying from Leonardo Da Vinci, Basquiat self-appropriate. It is possible to observe the later references to currency in the collaboration with the "fame legislator" Andy Warhol, where Basquiat collaborated with his "idol" transforming an "Arm and Hammer" logo into a coin featuring Charlie Parker. "These early associations with the American and European avant-garde, not to mention his

[19] In Jean Dubuffet artwork entitled *Will to Power* (1946) (Plate 13), a nude male posture is transferring the conception of 'machismo' by becoming the centre of attention on the canvas with his roughness of expression, studded teeth, and budging furious eyes reflecting his fierce and power for struggle. Standing in a straight position with his hands held behind the back making the viewer insecure of the unexpected intention of the depicted posture. Dubuffet painted his caricature in order to mock Fascism's claims to authority as it emasculates the male posture expressing aggression. The artist's 'raw art' was contrary to everything expected from a painter of the French art tradition, which pushed to re-contextualisation of the established assumptions of art tradition. The following fragment refers to art-brut signifying its importance emphasizing the artist's vision of savagery in the art field:

> It seems to me that many people are beginning to ask themselves if the Occident has not many very important things to learn from these savages. Maybe in many cases their solutions and their ways of doing, which first appeared to us very rough, are more clever than ours. It may be that ours are the rough ones. It may be that refinement, cerebrations, depth of mind are on their side and not on ours. Personally, I believe very much in the values of savagery. I mean instinct, passion, mood, violence, madness (Dubuffet, 1951).

collaborations with Warhol led to discussions of Basquiat's work in the context of a predominantly white art history" [20] (Saggese, 2014: 15). Nick Mirzoeff, in the book edited by Amelia Johns, *Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, noted that in their collaboration *Arm and Hammer* II (1985) (Plate 21), "Basquiat and Warhol restaged such a conjunction to very different effect. On the right-hand side of the canvas, Warhol silk-screened his version of the *Arm and Hammer* logo from cleaning products and baking soda. On the left, Basquiat painted a revised version from his diasporic perspective, placing a penny at the heart of the logo. Instead of the usual figure of a dead president, Basquiat painted an African American with a saxophone coming out of his mouth. The word [COMMEMORATIVE], spelt as here and struck out, hovers over the coin, as if to suggest that in 1955 (the date on the coin) a commemorative penny for African Americans had been considered and rejected" (Mirzoeff, 2006: 503). Mary Boone, the curator of one of the most famous galleries in New York of the 80s said:

> Everything that happened in the eighties had to do with greed and speed. And the fact is that art also epitomized what the eighties were about – you know, luxury, glamour, disposable income, excess...[21]

Tony Shafrazi, the owner of the *Shafrazi Art Gallery* in New York, marked a major turning point in the artist's life by stating that they were the "hot couple" of the decade, saying:

> Warhol and Basquiat, the most famous white and most famous black artist. I think it was wonderful. Andy got a real charge out of having a protégé who was a genius. And Jean, maybe he had a bit of his father in him, because he was running with a world-class star, and thereby he was the other world-class star. It was great. It was mutually beneficial".[22]

As Phoebe Hoban said: "It was Warhol's approval that stamped Basquiat with instant celebrity. Basquiat has sought a good father in Warhol…" (Hoban, 1999: 274).

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[20] References to Pablo Picasso, Cy Twombly, Jean Dubuffet, and Robert Rauschenberg in both Basquiat's work and the criticism surrounding it remain particularly abundant (Saggese, 2014: 15).

[21] Phoebe Hoban interview with Mary Boone, in *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, 1998: 256.

[22] Phoebe Hoban interview with Henry Geldzahler in *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art*, 1998: 270.

Basquiat became known as "the first *black* artist to achieve anything close to blue-chip status in the contemporary art market".[23] The artist whose first name was *SAMO*, introduced into the art world of the 80's as art-brut and primitive. Basquiat made a phenomenal appearance by appropriating "ideas from a wide range of sources – from art history to contemporary package labels – and in exploiting these elements he shaped an innovative language of painting that corresponded to his own contemporary experience" (Saggese, 2014: 15).

2. *The artist's multifaceted visualizations of identity.*

Robert Farris Thompson noted that "some critics extrapolate from Jean-Michel's Haitian name knowledge of Haiti and religion of the Haitian masses, vodun, or 'voodoo' as they put it. This is not true; Basquiat never travelled to Haiti; he never spoke Creole, the language of the Haitian people" (Thompson qtd. in Saggese,2014: 29). Dick Hebdige seems to support Thompson's point of view saying that "Basquiat's birthright did not include a hotline to Haiti and he grew up in a household where Caribbean and African art were things you learned about in books and museums. His primitivism was neither more nor less authentic or intuitive than Picasso's" (Hebdige, 1992: 65). Drawing on these assumptions of the critics it becomes relevant to assume that Basquiat was in a binary category, in-between white and non-white categorizations, appropriating white-european techniques and ideas. However, going back to the African American art history, Tanner said: "Staying close to the mainstream of American art was a way for black artists to find acceptance and commissions. Perhaps this conformity (or better, sublimation) was in itself another kind of [his] 'black experience'" (Rexford, 1976: 9). "It is impossible to deny the stylistic similarities between Basquiat and his European predecessors, his work never quite converges with the European canon of art history" (Saggese, 2014: 16). It has become possible to assume that the technique can be elaborated, but the notion of artistic reification had a wider context to be expressed. The artist himself had been undeniably the first black person who afforded the privilege of being included into the world of the white art mainstream, though he was conscious

[23] Hebdige, Dick. "Welcome to the Terrordome: Jean-Michel Basquiat and the "Dark" Side of Hybridity." *Jean-Michel Basquiat*. Ed. Richard Marshall. New York: Whitney/Abrams, 1992: 60-70.

of his own heritage and that made his persona sensitive to racial stereotypes. As Suzanne Mallouk, his intimate, stated in the interview of New York magazine:

> To a big opening at the Mary Boone gallery he wore very expensive Comme des Garçons clothing, but he wore this straw hat. It was sort of to give the impression of an ignorant, uneducated black man, from the farm almost. He did it on purpose. He would play with these black stereotypes to [mingle] with people, to be subversive, to make people stare at their own racism in the face.[24]

The question of race and racism played an important part in his life as well as his public image as a black artist. By imposing his own blackness rather than hiding it in the mainstream he implicated irony to make the audience react. As Henry Louis Gates said: "Race has been an invisible quality, a persistent yet implicit presence" (Gates, 1985: 2). The primitivism he used was intentional means in order to make his blackness visible and present. The artist succeeded in demonstrating his attitude towards his heritage in the following passage of 1985 when he was asked of his future plans to direct movies, Basquiat replied that he intended to create movies "in which black people are portrayed as being people of the human race. And not aliens and not all negative and not all thieves and drug dealers and the whole bit".[25] In the other interview the artist made a claim about his connection to the African heritage despite the fact that he had been considered to be in a binary category artist. The artist said:

> I've never been to Africa. I'm an artist who has been influenced by his New York environment. But I have a cultural memory. I don't need to look for it; it exists. It's over there, in Africa. That doesn't mean that I have to go live there. Our cultural memory follows us everywhere, wherever you live.[26]

Susanne Reichling, the writer and critic, has been one of a few to claimed that Basquiat's interest in Africa was beyond simple historicism and social critique. She has argued that Basquiat's references to Africa was an expression of his identity as an African American artist, saying: "In contrast to a primitivizing engagement with African

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[24] Mallouk, Suzanne, interview by Phoebe Hoban, New York City, April 6, 2008.

[25] Johnson B. and DavisT., interview with Jean- Michel Basquiat, Beverly Hills, California, 1985.

[26] Demosthenes Davvetas, interview with Basquiat, "Jean-Michel Basquiat," lxiii.

art, which is only interested in its formal vocabulary and magical quality, in his works, Basquiat refers to the function of African art for African-American identity" (Reichling,1998: 83). According to Hall, the contemporary condition should be concerned with "not the rediscovery but the production of identity" (Hall, 2000: 224.) It has been the precise effect the artist was aiming by making "the African and the African American remain inseparable and in constant negotiation" (Saggese, 2014: 36). The example that follows, demonstrates the artist's intention and attitude towards his heritage and the history of his nation. In *The Nile* (1983) (Plate 15), "the artist deliberately places the history of Africa and African America in parallel (Ibid, 37). On the left panel of the *Nile*, the artist painted two vertically aligned heads below the word [NUBA], possibly a misspelling of the [NUBIA], which also refers to the people who inhabit the Nuba Mountains in the south-central region of Sudan in Africa. To the right of the lower head, Basquiat wrote the word [SALT], outlined it with a box, and the crossed out the first letter – a reference to the trade of salt throughout the continent. A large boat, with oars descending below it, stretches across the middle sections of the left and center panels; in the center of the structure appears the name of the Egyptian ruler [AMENOPHIS] – with several letters crossed out. The references to Egypt also include the phrase [DOG GUARDING THE PHARAOH] in the upper-right corner and [THEBES], the capital of the New Kingdom of Egypt, in the lower-left corner of the right panel. (ibid, 37). "… the bright yellow curved shape at the bottom of the central panel, labelled several times both above and below with the word [SICKLE]" (Brentjes, 1970: 61). Basquiat transforms the sickle image into a transition of slaves from Africa to the Americas. "The left side of the boat starts in the same panel as the [NUBA] people and stretches across the painting so that the right edge of the boat points toward a black figure, drawn on the right panel with the word [SLAVE] written several times across the torso and crossed out. Basquiat clarifies the relationship between the people of Africa and those transported to the Americas during the Atlantic slave trade," placing… [TENNESSEE] below the [THEBES], which connects ancient Egypt to the United States. (Saggese, 2014: 40).

A similar effect is present in the work of art entitled *Slave Auction* from 1982 (Plate 17), which also explores the themes of connection of African and African American. This artwork represents the idea of the slave auction by depicting the ocean

and the passage from one terrain to another painted in a dark blue colour, in the centre of which a construction of a ship takes place. A ship becomes a central figure on the canvas transmitting the idea of the transition of the slaves. The auction has been depicted on the right side of the canvas with a central image of an auction dealer who stands in a contrasting portrayal to the transparent depictions of slaves. The dealer is inviting the audience to choose the category of a slave with his hands wide open. The white skull with the white halo is depicted on the left side of the canvas as if communicating with the slaves from the right side of the canvas, transmitting the idea of what their destinies would be on the other terrain. Basquiat becomes critical about the fate of his nation emphasizing the effect of violence by portraying them as saints and endowing one of the slave families with halos above their heads.

Furthermore, Howardena Pindell's *Autobiography: Water/ Ancestors/ Middle Passage/ Family Ghosts* from 1988 representing broken up bodies and partially erased text reinvents Jean-Michel Basquiat collage. This suggests that Basquiat's practices were accepted not only by the white commercialised mainstream but also by black modernists. Despite the fact that scholars and critics might judge the artist as being close to the white mainstream working on the machinery of white money, Basquiat paid a tribute to his heritage by demonstrating his cultural memory through the works of art mentioned above. Stuart Hall claimed that the artist's identity was not "grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past", which he succeeded to demonstrate in the *The Nile* (1983) (Plate 15) and the *Slave Auction* (1982) (Plate 17) (Hall, 2000: 224).

The artist demonstrated the application of the diasporic connection in the drawing *Exu* (1988) (Plate 16), where the key figure of the African diaspora is Esu-Elegbara, the Yoruba orisa also known throughout Africa and its diasporas as Eshu, Elegba, Eleggua, Echu-Eleggua, Exu, and Papa Legba.[27] "… with Exu, Basquiat

27 African diasporic figure – a carved statues Elegbara is a short man with a beard, pointed teeth, polished skin black as night, and with the curious habit of walking with a limp, due to his having one foot in the world of the humans and one foot in the spiritual realm. His statues sometimes portray him as holding a calabash in his left hand in which the divine ase of Olodunmare rests. This ase, pronounced ah-shay, is the power of divine command and he has the discretion to use it as he sees fit. At other times he is seen with a magic bag or gourd, or a type of wand in hand. This takes the name of Ado Asure which contains fortunes or magic inside. In some verses it is said that he points his wand and whatever he wishes comes

provides a point of entry into discussions of the African diaspora and of its reconciliation of the complexities inherent in creating meaning at the intersection of art and culture." (Saggese, 2014: 45). "Esu-Elegbara, the subject of Basquiat's *Exu*, became subtly transformed into many saints in the Americas. These adaptations and transfers allowed displaced Africans to maintain connections to African traditions while also creating meaningful associations to New World cultures. …Esu-Elegbara is particularly important because he is the Yoruba deity present in all of the major African-inspired religions, including Vodou (Haiti, Louisiana, and the Dominican Republic), etc. (Lawal, 2004: 302).

3. Irony and the struggle of the 'Black male' hero.

It is important to highlight that the main objective of his extensive art corpora, the Black male leading character, the issue that will be discussed in this sub-chapter. It is therefore important to state that the art of Basquiat is deeply intellectual and self-reflexive. The precise effect that the author was aiming at was expressed in the artwork entitled *Boxer (Untitled)* (1982) (Plate 18) that mingles with notions of the artist's own Black American identity and the identities of his audience. By depicting a black fighter of a heavy construction on a white background with his boxer gloves in the air, the artist applied a scratching technique on the head of the main personage, as if trying to convey a specific message, assuming that the very creation can have two different stories and meanings behind it. First, referring to the point of view that the depicted boxer can serve as a self-portrait, as the author had been through numerous life difficulties facing different problems. He depicted himself as a fighter ready to struggle with the outer world. The artist's rendering of a black character on a white background is treated as a struggle against racism, as there were not many black people involved in the world of art. Obviously, being different, being African American, he had to face the judgements. The expression of the boxer is quite easy to understand, as his eyes are white and wide

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to pass. Elegbara is said to have eyes in the front and back of his head as shown in his carved statues, by the hook-like outgrowth attached at the back of his head. It is here where his other eyes are said to be. This can be thought of as having the ability to see into the future or the past, and also as having foresight and hindsight, something we need in our daily lives as we make split-second decisions which can have far reaching consequences: https://www.farinadeolokun.com/esu-elegbara-esu-is-not-satan.html

open trying to "read" the white background. However, perceiving it with his closed mouth and the halo on the top of his head would mean that the author perceives himself as someone "outside" the mainstream. He is not changing his heritage, right on the contrary he is proud of it, showing the world his social position against the judgements as depicted in the painting. Another point of view states that such a portrayal could considered as the depiction of one of the famous black boxers back then seen as an inspiration. It is believed that Basquiat praised many black heroes in the history in his works, particularly athletes and musicians such as Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Jimi Hendrix. Basquiat was trying to represent African American identity as it can be vividly observed through his own words: "I realized that I didn't see many paintings with black people in them".[28] By depicting a boxer with his hands up in the air showed that he had run a battle he was proud of, amplifying that that black people were significant to him as well as to art history.

Evidently, Basquiat used many lines in his paintings, the technique of which is executed in a child-like manner. In support of this, he stated: "I like kids' work more than work by real artists any day".[29] By drawing those lines, Basquiat shows that people are not perfect, but if they put their differences apart, things could work out. Nevertheless, those lines could also represent what he had been through as an African American fighter, the difficulties he had to face and people he had to confront to get to this point or level he is right now. Basquiat did an excellent job in this painting portraying black people by having the black boxer gloves in the air representing black power.

In the artist's artwork *Self-Portrait* (Plate 19) of 1982, the artist intended to imply the technique of pastiche depicting himself through the embodiment of a black giant painted on a smeared white space. The black body with an arrow in his left hand that seems to function like an eraser, for the various smears all across the surface of this canvas indicate the present absence of "*erased"* signifiers, which this giant, pharaoh-sized shadow body has wiped clean from the surface of inscription that he stands before. "The human body as totemic, ancestral presence will become the new apparatus that not

[28] Basquiat Jean-Michel interview by Thompson, *Marshall's Catalogue*, 1992.

[29] Basquiat Jean-Michel interview by McGuigan, N*ew York Times Magazine*, 2005.

only captures and attempts to neutralize the signifier overload, but will be precisely pitted *against* Basquiat's cityscapes" (Ebert, 2012). This could represent how he felt towards the society or his life most of the time, expressing his Black male power in contrast to the white mainstream judgements, trying to express his own identity as an African American artist.

Other ways of depicting African American male identity that also skirts out this issue can be exemplified the artwork entitled *Zydeco* (1984) (Plate 20). The basic premise of Basquiat's aesthetics was based on mechanic connections between disparate visual images and texts in the majority of his works where the Black male figure becomes in different embodiment of Black being attended by symbolical and textual annotations. With *Zydeco* (1984) (Plate 20) the artist shows his audience that marginal cultures are appropriated and disseminated for consumption by mainstream media much in the same way that the 1980's mainstream avant-garde appropriated 'marginal art' for its own consumption and profit. Nevertheless, Basquiat is concerned with the fact that this practice goes widely unrecognized by masses; surface-level conceptions and idyllic, mythic associations hold precedence in the mainstream while the inner workings of the mainstream are never self-reflexively interrogated. *Zydeco* is associated with music of African American which is jazz. By taking a closer look at the painting, it becomes noticeable that it is therefore different from the other painting. The piece is triptych, but the colours are bright and the author seems to have avoided the scratching technique, as he implied earlier. The artwork is vibrant, as the energy of the performance depicted by the composing piece of a stage could be easily traced. One can suppose that there is a live performance taking place while the crowd of faces at the very bottom represents a vivid audience. It is obvious that the person depicted in the middle is black, playing the accordion. The scattered blocks of white act as a loud burst of sound, creating a sense of rhythm that is mostly associated with African American culture. On the other panel, the other character is filming the performer with the outward flow of the music in a film, radio, photography and recording. The word [ZYDECO] three times on the top, the bottom, and the middle on the picture. In support of this, the artist says: "I cross the words, so you will see them – the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them". [30] As if identifying himself with the sound of it simultaneously with African

[30] Basquiat Jean-Michel interview by Thompso*n, Marshall's catalogue,* 1992.

heritage. Taking the premise of zydeco as a structured genre of jazz, it becomes obvious that the composition is less improvisatory because of the thick blocks of colour and more precise depiction of equipment. Putting a Black male hero forward was a significant step in the struggle for preserving the descendant identity, as well as referring to the powerful Black male hero by stating: "The black person is the protagonist in most of my paintings…" [31] letting black people believe and making white ones perceive.

On the basis of this analysis of a selection of Basquiat's artworks, the chapter concludes that the artist's struggle for preserving and highlighting his identity of origin through the perspective of the Black male hero played a significant role, as becoming world-wide famous he opened the new possibilities to his followers. Nevertheless, the analysis showed that the Black male hero takes the most prominent place in Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings. Basquiat invented a unique artistic vocabulary and language by complying white avant-garde techniques into his own oeuvre, describing an inner experience that a previous untapped audience could relate to in a universal sense as well as he overcame the limit and broke the boundaries of art and stereotype.

The analysis of *Boxer (Untitled)* (1982) (Plate 18) shed the light on the assumption that the author had run an important battle against racism by using the techniques of scratching and drawing lines. Basquiat referred to the meaning that art was not to be perfect as the artist himself. Though, each and every line is important, as if representing what the author was through in his life. In his *Self-Portrait* (1982) (Plate 19) the artist showed how he felt towards the society and his life, transmitting the idea of his Black male power in contrast to the white mainstream judgements, expressing his own identity as an African American art creator. The analysis of *Zydeco* (1984) (Plate 20) showed that the implication of jazz music can easily be traced, flashing out author's full affiliation with his descendant identity, as the music depicted takes its roots from the African American heritage. The main objective of the artist's persona and his art corpora had been discussed as well as the aim of this chapter, highlighting the issue of the Black male hero.

[31] Basquiat Jean-Michel interview by Thompso*n, Marshall's catalogue,* 1992.

Chapter III. *Vortex of meanings in visual arts of Kara Walker.*

This chapter explores the aesthetic language of the innovative and controversial Black American art creator, the artist, Kara Walker, whose way of highlighting irony as the main point of her representation, carried Black art into the realm of exploration of cultural taboos. In the first part of the present analysis, the aspect of the early life influences and motivation will be discussed. The second part will deal with the vortex of representations in the works of art entitled *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995) (Plate 22), discussing Walker's artistic visual language along with the art work entitled *Letter from a Black Girl* (1998) (Plate 23), which is a visual installation of a piece of literary work. In the last part of the chapter, the discussion will proceed with the exploration of the irony and its visual expressions in the self-portrait *Cut* (1998) (Plate 24, 25) and the recent sugar installation *The Subtlety* (2014) (Plate 26, 27, 28, and 29).

1. *Primary influences in the early aesthetics of the artist.*

Kara Walker, a master of shocking fictional personalization ingrained in the stereotypes of the racist South underlying the antebellum realities, has long reflected on the legacy of slavery and on representations of Black womanhood that are deeply rooted in American consciousness. She became one of the most controversial and complex contemporary African American artists whose black paper cut-outs represent the revival of the neoclassical aesthetics as a contemporary artistic medium, which can transfer the viewer to the late 18th and early 19th centuries.[32] Adopting the Victorian style into her post-modern art, Walker has turned it into a powerful force invoking complexities of the slavery system, exploring themes of human exploitation and biased relationship between the white power and the oppressed. Over the past decade, her depictions of historical narratives in the form of the room-sized tableaux haunted by subjugation, sexuality and violence have gained international recognition, representing the grotesque life of the plantation pointing at the master/mistresses and slave relationship where the

[32] The silhouette was a parlour art practiced by genteel ladies and gentlemen, who created portraits, landscapes, and decorative motifs. There were also traveling silhouettists who took their craft around the country. The 18th- and 19th-century silhouette was also associated with the pseudo-science of physiognomy, which held that one could analyse psychological and racial types by studying profiles.

Black woman is represented in a subverting aesthetic. Her scenarios became scandalous readings of African American history that expose the "unspeakable" psychological injury inherited from slavery. By deploying irony, Walker's narrative consists of a vortex of meanings such as pleasure fused with subversion, violence and desire, subordination and class.

The artist was born in California in 1969, but due to the relocation to the state of Georgia at the age of 13, Walker encountered her primary artistic influence in her father who was a formely educated artist, of whom Walker commented:

> One of my earliest memories involves sitting on my dad's lap in his studio in the garage of our house and watching him draw. I remember thinking: 'I want to do that, too,' and I pretty much decided then and there at age 2½ or 3 that I was an artist just like Dad.[33]

The first time Walker addressed the issue of race was when she started her Master's project at the Rhode Island School of Design exploring and highlighting the necessity for exposing the darkest side of the history. In 1994 one of her first murals was considered an extremely controversial art work, with its black paper-cut silhouettes contrasting with the white wall, transmitting an idea of racialised South in the times of slavery, giving her an instant entrance into the art mainstream that brought world recognition to the artist.[34] Introducing the discourse around blackness she created a powerful strategy for the rediscovery of social mores and traditions of the previous generations that have been perpetuated in the stereotypes which are still vivid in the contemporary consciousness. Walker made viewers ponder on her visual language, providing the perspective of the "unspeakable" in her antebellum reproduction of social relations. With her black paper cut-outs she depicted her own black identity, empowering her inner "Negress", challenging the human imagination with her "racially coded mayhem" (Shaw, 2004: 18).

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[33] Flo Wilson, "On Walls and the Walkers," The International Review of African American Art 20.3: 17–19.

[34] Kara Walker, *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*, 1994.

The artist adopted predominantly Western tradition of silhouette imagery that underlies the Johann Casper Lavater's physiognomic theory, which stated that "shades are the weakest, most vapid, but, at the same time, when the light is at a proper distance, and falls properly on the countenance to take the profile accurately, the truest representation that can be given of man" (Lavater, 1844: 187-188). Fusing it with avant-garde gazes she had been the subject of a binary reception "[making] work that people love to hate and hate to love (Gilman, 2008: 640).

As the famous writer and critic Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw said, "[the artist was] a part of the post-Warholian relationship that she had come to have with her own celebrity" which certifies that her avant-garde influence extended her aesthetic strategies in terms of the subject matter about the fascination with the white Western tradition… (Shaw, 2004: 6). Recognizing the influence of the avant-garde tradition, Walker's art resonates with the art production of the previously discussed controversial artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat. Like Basquiat, whose visual artistic language relies on the discursive system of codes the meaning of which the audience has to decipher, Walker's display of Victorian imagery is encoded with a perplexed specificity in the depiction of slavery. Adopting Basquiat's way of presenting the viewer with the play of words, signs and imagery, her art involves the viewer in a complicated process of deciphering and understanding, as meanings are not immediately readable.

The two artists representing two different time ends follow parallel tracks with similar ironic concepts of their art, exploring the cultural boundaries, making the audience meditate on allegorically depicted compositions. Walker's work started to be the projection of her own associations extrapolated from the antebellum South, making the stereotypical black icon work in a different way from a grotesque perspective. As Tomas Mann stated referring to her work "the striking feature of modern art is that it has ceased to recognize the categories of the tragic and the comic…It sees life as tragi-comedy, with the result that the grotesque is the most genuine style",[35] [where Walker] "… could reshape and manipulate racist icons of white supremacy such as the nigger wench, the mammy, and the pickaninny (Mann qtd in Shaw, 2004: 18).

[35] Thomas Mann quoted in Frances K. Barasch, "The Meaning of the Grotesque", 1968: 14.

2. Ironic repertoire in the construction of the Black woman.

This discussion proceeds with the analysis of Walker's 1997 mural installation entitled *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (Plate 22), the discourse of which relies on the literary text invoked on slave narratives, "the nasty and unfathomable bits of detritus that have been left out of familiar histories of American race relations" (Shaw, 2004: 7). As Miles Unger, an art historian and journalist said, "one of the virtues of (Walker's) work is to demonstrate the extent to which the very concept of race is a powerful fiction based on the construction of a mythical Other upon whom we project our irrational fears and compulsive desires" (Unger, 1998: 29). In *The End of Uncle Tom,* which is a reinterpretation of a Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Walker highlighted the preconceived notions of African American womanhood in the form of Black female "hyper-sexuality".

The first part of the tableau starts with the depiction of the three slave women being involved in the process of nurturing each other with their breasts exposed to the viewer, as if trying to feed each other with milk, which stands as a reference to the encoded information about their heritage. Gallery curator Yasmil Raymond, who stated in "Maladies of Power: A Kara Walker Lexicon", an essay dedicated to the artist, that the "ancestry is the fluid that flows in Walker's breastfeeding imagery… [and the lactation as the maternal act] is rendered as an oral transfusion… ancestral lineage [of which] is both dished out and consumed by so many nameless [human beings]" [36] (Raymond, 2007: 366).

The next grotesque depiction in the vicious scenario proceeds with the Negro child defecating and spreading its footprints all across the entire installation, right after which the viewer is surprised by the central figure of the Little Eva with her tilted backwards axe. In this depiction she attempts to hit the slave child in front of her while the sharp end of an axe is pointing at the slave behind her.

[36] Some slave women served as nursemaids to the mistress' children, and some as birthmothers of the master's illegitimate offspring (Raymond, 2007: 365).

The third scene is the pure exhibition of evilness in the face of an elderly obese man/master who is leaning his back on a sword as if trying to murder the baby under it while the front part of his body is merging with the body of another subordinate of his who is attempting to rip off the palm tree in a desire to run away and break free, the depiction of which brings associations of sodomy.

The last scene is another shocking excavation from the past where the kneeling man with his hands folded in a prayer is giving birth to a child, where the cord between them represents motherhood.

A woman being torn apart is the concluding image of the scenario, transmitting the feeling of ambiguity, an ambivalent attitude towards the racially complex tableau.

As Walker commented in an interview: "I mean very often because of the nature of the cut-outs, the content doesn't reveal itself right away", as it is not only because of the complicated artistic repertoire, but also because of its connection to the racially bounded subject matter.[37] American historian and cultural critic Henry Louis Gates claimed that "the large number and variety of inherently racist images in American culture attest to a particularly American preoccupation with marginalizing black Americans by flooding the culture with an-Other-Negro, a Negro who conformed to the deepest social fears and fantasies of the larger society" (Gates, 1990). Walker as one who confronts and shocks the mainstream with her imagery, creates the "margins [that] contained all pertinent information and whose centers were spaces of blank…negative interiority…[the visualisation of which also compounds artist's 'private sexual fantasies' with the major focus on the presence of the Black female silhouette]" (Shaw, 21-39). Walker constructs a fragmented and intricate story juxtaposing her silhouettes with her own references to sexuality of her fictional characters of Black women that represent mutual nursing in the first part of the tableau, conveying the genetic information about their cultural memory and their heritage. One can also read the link to historical realities from the old South where the boundaries between "acceptable and

[37] Kara Walker, quoted in Alexei Worth, "Black and White and Kara Walker", Art New England 17 (December 1995/January 1996): 27.

unacceptable" were blurred challenging the reader of a given oeuvre to recreate a cohesive narration of the holistic story. As Shaw comments about this mural:

> It prompts the viewer to remember that a slave woman's breasts, along with the rest of her body, did not actually belong to her, her owner controlled them… women have neglected their duties as slaves and are now nursing each other…with the attention they give to their erotic activity (44-47).

The central composition with the protagonizing mistress holding an axe plays one of the most important roles in this black and white fictional 18th century mural setting, the ideological concern of which consists of a conjunctive denotations of violence and evasion. Despite the struggle between the master/mistress and the slaves, there is a greedy obsession expressed by the tilted backwards axe of the Eva. "Violence toward the other is really violence toward the self; this is why the axe is turned backward, for the other represents the externalization of the repulsive that is always within" (Ibid, 54).

The next depiction binds together the horrific associations of murder, punishment and subversion, as "it centers on the silhouette of an adolescent slave girl bending at the waist, raising her buttocks in the air, and grasping a corn stalk with both hands for support...They are further connected by his abdomen, which is physically and metaphorically supported by the labour of her back…she is becoming one with him (Ibid, 55). The depiction is transgressing the totalizing white power of the past, questioning the relationship between the master and the subordinate, inverting the "New Negro" generation strategy of seeking a new critical alignment by creating an invisible distance and replacing it with the recovery of its crucial reality.

The feminised slave man is depicted in a prayer giving birth to a child. "In Walker's tableau, it is the father, feminized by the act of giving birth, who defecates his child…The defecated child becomes the ultimate unformed gothic creature in the process of fantastic transformation from a state of humanity to one of human waste" (Ibid, 61).

In support of her theatrical composition Walker made it clear that it was about "… power, it [was] about submission, it [was] about glorified rape fantasies! There's

always a heroine who's strong and wins in the end and gets what she wants, and all these background characters. It's really intricate way of linking the reader with the heroine with the author. Everyone's involved with this titillation".[38]

The depicted woman that is torn apart becomes the definition of ambiguity putting the guilt about the slavery on display for the audience. The main motif that pervades Walker's work is interpreted as an assertion of her own power, her inner "Negress", the image of whom functions through references to female mutual nursing, violence, obsession, punishment and sodomy, all of which resonate with the desire to merge into oneness with the oppressor. As Searles said: "Kara Walker wants her viewer to be distracted…disturbed, titillated even and then confused and guilty about it…she would prefer for all these emotions to course through the viewer at once" (Searles, 2006: 18).

Scholars and critics of Walker's artwork responded aggressively to her visual strategy. In 1997, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the veteran African American artist Betye Saar first became so disturbed by Walker's art work that she launched a campaign of boycott writing a letter to the Mac Arthur Foundation Award committee, accusing Walker of negative stereotyping in her work saying: "Here we are at the end of the millennium seeing work that is very sexist and derogatory." She complained that this was a flaw of that generation: lack of personal integrity, the desire to be rich and famous at all costs, being as nasty as humanly possible. She is quoted as saying: "I have nothing against Kara except I think she is young and foolish…as a grandmother, I can't do much but I can write. Kara is selling us down the river".[39] Arlene Keizer later defended the artist in her essay "Gone Astray in the Flash: Kara Walker, Black Women Writers, and African American Postmemory" saying: "The fact that negative racist stereotypes are alive in the minds of some viewers does not negate

[38] Kara Walker, quoted in Hilarie M.Sheets, "Cut It Out!" *ArtNews* 101,no. 4 (April 2002): 128.

[39] Betye Saar quoted in Juliette Bowls, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," International Review of African American Art 14. No. 3 (1997) 3. Online version.

Walker's talent… [and] it is doubtful that creating only "positive" images of Blacks would change the options of Whites that already hold racist ideas" [40] (31-32).

Walker's art traces the origins of slavery with provocative images, highlighting the African diasporic experience, providing a point of entry into an eloquent discussion, not offering any reconciliation with the complex criticism against the artist. Her artistic visual language embodied in her Negress proposes a particular vision of post-memory, which as Marianne Hirsch said "is a powerful form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through projection, investment, and creation…Postmemory characterizes the experience of those…whose own belated stories are displaced by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that they can neither nor re-create". [41]

Other critics consider that "her representations are confounding because these women often appear to be assenting to the violation and receiving pleasure in the process or display with no readable affect. Only rarely are they obviously or violently resisting. In some of Walker's textual artworks, black women describe themselves as active sexual agents" (Keizer, 2008: 1656). For example, in her wall installation of a literary work, *Letter from a Black Girl*, (Plate 23), the artist victimizes her Negress describing her sacrifice though emotions, addressing an imagined master figure. In a poetic fashion, Walker creates drama implying certain misspelling on purpose in order to transfer the viewer into the reality of the black and white relationship. The narrative of the Negress evokes emotions in the audience, stating:

Dear you hypocritical fucking Twerp,

> Id just like to thank you for taking hold of the last four years of my life and raising my hopes for the future. Id like to thank you for giving me

[40] These older artists, including Betye Saar, Faith Ringgold, and Howardena Pindel, as well as commentators like Juliette Bowles, are often highlighted as Walker's main detractors, rendering the attack on her work a form of internecine, intergenerational warfare in African American intellectual and cultural life (Keizer, 2008: 1649).

[41] Marianne Hirsch, "Projected Memory: Holocaust Photographs in Personal and Public Fantasy", 1999: 8.

> clothes when I needed them and food when I needed it and for fucking my brains out when my brains needed fucking. I hope that the time we spent in the Quarters with my family sleeping nearby quietly ignoring what you proceeded to do to me – what, rather I proceeded to do to you – ws worthwhile for you, that you got the stimulation you so needed. Because now That Im free of that poison you call Life, that stringy, sour, white strand you called Sacred and me saviour, that peculiar institution we engaged in because there was no other foreseeable alternative, I am LOST.
>
> Dear you duplicitous, idiot, Worm,
>
> Now that youve forgotten how you like your coffee and why you raised your pious fist to the sky, and the reason for your stunning African Art collection, and the war we fought together, and the promises you made and the laws we rewrote, I am left here alone to recreate My WHOLE HISTORY without benefit of you, my compliment, my enemy, my oppressor, my Love.[42]

In a 1996 *Flash Art* magazine article, Walker states: "That already has a slightly masochistic effect: to have just been the body for somebody's life story. I guess that's when I became a slave just a little bit."[43] The following year Walker commented: "It seems like I had to actually reinvent or make up my own racist situations so I would know how to deal with then as black people in the past did. In order to have a real connection with my history, I had to be somebody's slave. But I was in control: that's the difference".[44]

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[42] Walker, Kara, *Letter from a Black Girl*, 1998. Installation view, Wooster Gardens/Brent Sikkema, New York. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

[43] Juliette Bowles, "Extreme Times Call for Extreme Heroes," International Review of African American Art 14 no. 3 (1997): 5. Verbatim.

[44] Kara Walker, "Pea, Ball, Bounce: Interview with Kara Walker," interview by James Hannaham, *Interview*, November 1998, 117.

It is not only that the Negress is trying to resurrect and free herself from the relationship with the master and the subjugation, she is also trying to address Betye Saar's attestations, putting her own artistic identity through the process of being somebody's slave as well as contradicting with what Howardena Pindell once said: "Kara Walker's work is being used as a weapon against the Black community..." [45]

3. The signification of the Negress.

As a consequence of Walker's early fame and her rediscovery of the Negress it became unavoidable that the artist would use her own body as a medium for art creation. The artwork entitled *Cut* (1998) (Plate 24, 25) is a black paper cut-out which became a reproduction of her own photograph taken by Noe De Witto, which was for the *Interview* magazine along with the interview conducted by James Hannaham in 1998.

Using her own photograph for a self–portrait the artist depicted her Negress in a disguise of a "fallen angel", [where] "Walker figure…having nearly sliced off her own hands, she [is gliding] through the air in a carefree, almost ecstatic manner, feeling no pain (Shaw, 135). The silhouette is an artist's embodiment of her inner sense of blackness, by resurrecting her she is letting her free of all the predicament and critical accusations. The female image is depicted with her skirt folded up like "'Marry Poppins', as she kicks up her heels while dressed as a high-style servant" (Ibid, 133). With her hands up high above the head she is holding a razor, making a cut on the wrist in order to demonstrate her freedom. Like Basquiat before her, she is the "flavour of the month," a product presented to a hungry white art audience waiting to see how good she tastes. (Ibid, 139).

The influence that shaped her art goes back to a thorough study of art history and famous artists of the previous century, but also to the undeniable fact of her cultural belonging that made her art an inevitable part of her artistic identity. She knows how to see the hidden under the covers of the centuries, not being afraid of looking back into the latent racialism, abuse, and human exploitation, portraying it to the fullest in her overtly subversive cycloramas and the other art creations. The viewer is able to observe

[45] Pindell, Howardena, postscript to "Diaspora/Realities/Strategies", 2007.

remarkably dynamic and expressive figures that the artist unites into a multifunctional composition, endowing it with a specific attitude creating an ironic story. Black paper cut-outs stand out distinctly on the white wall creating a manoeuver of oneness by being alive and recalcitrant, dreadfully witty scenes which are provoking to the mind and human imagination.

Scenes of satisfaction, violence and greed are interlinked with irony and sexuality creating a subversive emotional effect. From this follows that Walker's figures are not statically fixed, but in active motion, where every character is involved in a moving ensemble of a racially abusive cartoon. An epoch of slavery is figuratively presented which takes a prominent place in this representation of black shades of black beings. The artist herself is not afraid of the negative reaction from the viewer, on the contrary, she is depicting reality subjectively as it was, revealing the truth with its poignant aspects. The artist is not only an apologist of the black cut-outs technique, but also a master of a sugar installation entitled *The Subtlety (or the Marvellous Sugar Baby)* (2014) (Plates:26-29), depicting the scenes of the Negro life, leaving the room for the viewer's imagination and fantasy.

Sugar refinement is a process where the raw reed is being discoloured, turning the brown mass into the crystals of white powder, where Walker as a non-conformist artist was able to find a deep symbolism which gave rise to a new work of art – an enormous white sphinx, the location of which took place in a former sugar factory. In an interview conducted by Audie Cornishon for National Public Radio, Walker explains: "Basically, it was blood sugar…like we talk about blood diamonds today, there were pamphlets saying this sugar has blood on its hands".[46] *The Subtlety* is the dedication to the beauty of the Sugar Baby and the "the unpaid and overworked artisans who have refined our sweet tastes from the cane fields to the kitchens of the New World."(Walker, Plate 29). Nato Thompson, *The Subtlety* curator, says:

> Sugar sculptures that adorned aristocratic banquets in England and France in the Middle Ages, when sugar was strictly a luxury commodity. These

[46] Audie Cornish, "Artist Kara Walker Draws Us Into Bitter History With Something Sweet." National Public Radio, May 16, 2014: http://www.npr.org/2014/05/16/313017716/artist-kara-walker-draws-us-into-bitter-history-with-something-sweet

> subtleties, which frequently represented people and events that sent political messages, were admired and then eaten by the guests.[47]

In the middle of the artful space, a ten meters sculpture catches the eye of a viewer, the sugar-white woman with distinct African features of a defiant character and a strict countenance is standing on her knees and elbows coping a position of the Egyptian sphinx. The left hand of the mysterious sugar Sphinx is folded into a fist, so that a large finger is hidden between the index and a middle finger. The artist's interest in the dark side of American culture of racism and violence reflected an intent of such gesture which might have several meanings, one of which stands for one of the oldest symbols of fertility as well as the outright insult. Feminine forms emphasized in a cat pose of an arched back with exaggeratedly big facial features remind the viewers that not so long ago the average white man perceived women of colour as inanimate sexual objects, incapable of human feelings. The breasts of the Sugar Baby are captured in sugar and exhibited for the audience, transmitting an idea of the "hyper-sexualised" Black slave ready for the viewer's consumption.

The giant is surrounded by sculptures of sugar little slaves caring fruit baskets, (Plates: 5-6). The artist explains that the concept of 5 inch boy sculptures are based on the very popular porcelain figures of the past, depicting little Black slaves holding baskets as the storage for caramel candies in the form of the furniture accessory. As Valerie Loichot, explains:

> Kara Walker threw broken body parts and remains into the fruit-bearing baskets of their surviving brothers. The offering of food turns into an offering of human flesh, gesturing that sugar production and consumption are acts of cannibalism…[the] installation makes it clear that the true cannibalism was the machinery of colonization and enslavement.[48]

Walker's installation became the "'homage' to overworked … artisans who improved sweet tastes from the sugar cane plantations on the kitchens of the New

[47] Nato Thompson, "Curatorial Statement": http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker/curatorial-statement/

[48] Valerie Loichot, "Kara Walker's Blood Sugar: A Subtlety or the Marvelous Sugar Baby", 2014: http://southernspaces.org/2014/kara-walkers-blood-sugar-subtlety-or-marvelous-sugar-baby

World" (Walker, Plate 29). As the artist explains in the interview with Kara Rooney, "[The Sugar Baby] is basically a New World sphinx. A New World thinking of the sugar plantations, the Americas, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the sort of Rolling Stones-y brown sugar dovetailing of sex and slavery as it reaches the American imagination".[49]

On the basis of Walker's analysed art corpora, the chapter concludes that the artist's aesthetic language and the way of highlighting irony throughout the oeuvre played a significant role, as the artist's negotiation with the slavery-based history opens new possibilities to reinterpretation. The analysis showed that moving beyond the binary of formalism provided a re-imagination of contemporary notions of the stereotype. The *Sugar Baby* criticizes stereotypes that for several centuries "hit" American women of African descent with the stream of racism. Her aesthetic vocabulary made the viewer ponder on a warped artistic representation of the Negress, exploring cultural taboos.

[49] Walker Kara interview by Kara Rooney, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 2014: http://www.brooklynrail.org/2014/05/art/kara-walker-with-kara-rooney

Conclusions

This dissertation represents an attempt to understand recent trends in African American artistic discourse, highlighting the aspects of the Post-Black generation of artists, in particular exploring the white supremacist's image of the Negro, providing reinterpretation of the history by ironizing the stereotype. Defining the realities of the 19th and 20th centuries, the first chapter highlighted the main aspects of artistic representation, underlying social prejudice. The discussion emphasized the issue of the black consciousness of the Black American visual artist and many strategies that invoked to express the inner sense of identity. The analysis of numerous works of art brought the investigation to the conclusion that the early artistic motives and ideas of the 19th and 20th became considerable influences for contemporary art on the premise of reconstructing the initial concept and the role of the Negro image. The data obtained in the course of the research indicates that there is a peculiar place for both male and female gender representation within the art mainstream.

The discussion proceeded by highlighting the aspects of Jean-Michel Basquiat's art corpora and his strategy of deploying irony as a major tool of his artistic language. The second chapter discussed his early influences, taking on the aspects of commercialism, self-appropriation, fame and struggle for preserving heritage throughout his oeuvre. According to the information obtained in the process of investigation, the discussion concluded that the perspective of the Black male role is predominant in Basquiat's art production and shapes the evolution of his development, implicating strategies that were developed in order to highlight cultural belonging. This data was used as a springboard for the art corpora analysis that demonstrated the interests and points of view of the artist, projecting his artistic identity by aligning with the Black hero on the canvas in order to make the audience ponder on the issues of colour and cultural belonging.

Equally important is the fact that Kara Walker, a contemporary artist, whose art production has been influenced by Basquiat's deployment of irony in "inappropriate" and subversive way, provoked a conflict in the art mainstream that was considered as the most flagrant violation in artistic representation of the Black image and history. Analyzing Walker's artworks in the third chapter, the discussion observed a constant imposition on the common perception of the Negress. Taking into consideration the fact

that the vortex of representations as her aesthetic language was implemented into the art corpora, the content of which became shocking to the public. Working on racial constructions of the past, Walker gave voice to her Negress, exploring emotional nature and identity of the African female subjecthood.

The results of the investigation have proven that the notion of irony as artistic means became an inevitable element of the artistic representation which is inherent in contemporary Black American artistic discourse. The investigation of the cultural taboos highlighted controversial artistic means of Jean-Michel Basquiat by exploring the influence of the Post-Civil Rights concept and fusing it with ambiguous and ironic perspective of the Black male hero, while Kara Walker reworked the old South realities by affiliating with her Negress.

The analysis carried out in this study, sheds the light on the nature of irony and the stereotype in the way that it was explicated in the art reproduction of Basquiat and Walker. The results, however, are far from conclusive and open up opportunities for further research.

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Illustrations

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Harriet Powers. Bible Quilt, 1898. 175 x 266.7 cm. Cotton plain weave, pieced, appliqued, embroidered, and quilted. Object Place, Athens, Georgia, United States.

Plate 2.

Henry Ossawa Tanner. The Banjo Lesson, 1893, oil on canvas, may be seen at the Hampton University Museum in Hampton, Virginia.

Plate 3.

Henry Ossawa Tanner. *The Thankful Poor*, 1894. Oil on canvas, 2' 11 1/2" by 3' 8 1/4". Collection of William H. and Camille Cosby.

Plate 4.

Aaron Douglas, *Slavery Through Reconstruction*, *Aspects of Negro Life* Series, 1934. 84 x 96 cm, oil on canvas.

Plate 5.

Aaron Douglas, *Song of the towers*, 1966, Oil on canvas, 30 x 25", State of Wisconsin, Executive Residence, Madison.

Plate 6.

Jacob Lawrence, *The Migration of the Negro*, panel 1, 1940-41. tempera on hardboard, 30.5 x 45.7 cm. The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.Artwork © Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence, courtesy of the Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation.

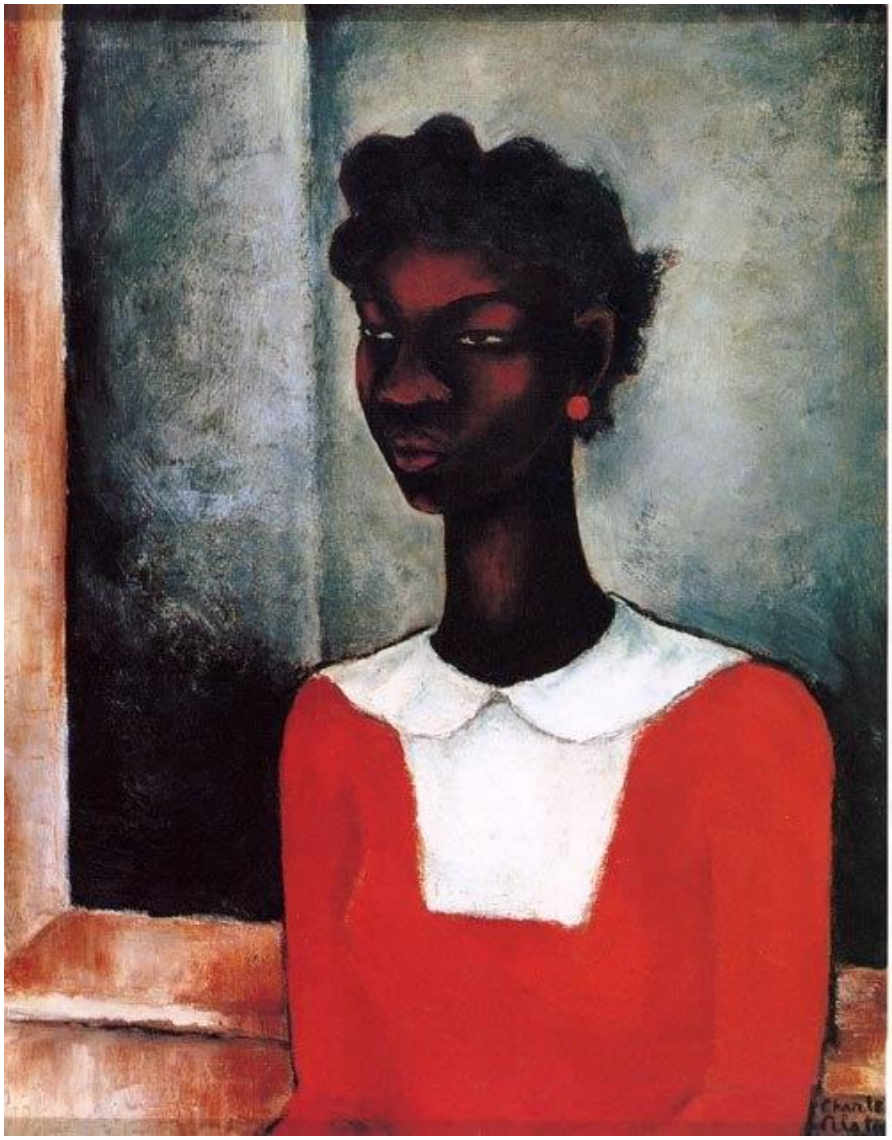

Plate 7.

Charles Alston, *Girl in a Red Dress*, 1934, oil on canvas, 26 x 22 inches, Copyright The Harmon and Harriet Kelley Collection of African American Art.

Plate 8.

Charles Alston, Untitled *(African Theme)*, 1952. Oil on canvas. 20 x 16 in.

Plate 9.

Norman Lewis, *Post Mortem*, 1964, oil on canvas. Gift of the Fabergé Society, 2001.9. Exhibition: "From the Margins: Lee Krasner, Norman Lewis, 1945 – 1952" Venues & dates: The Jewish Museum.

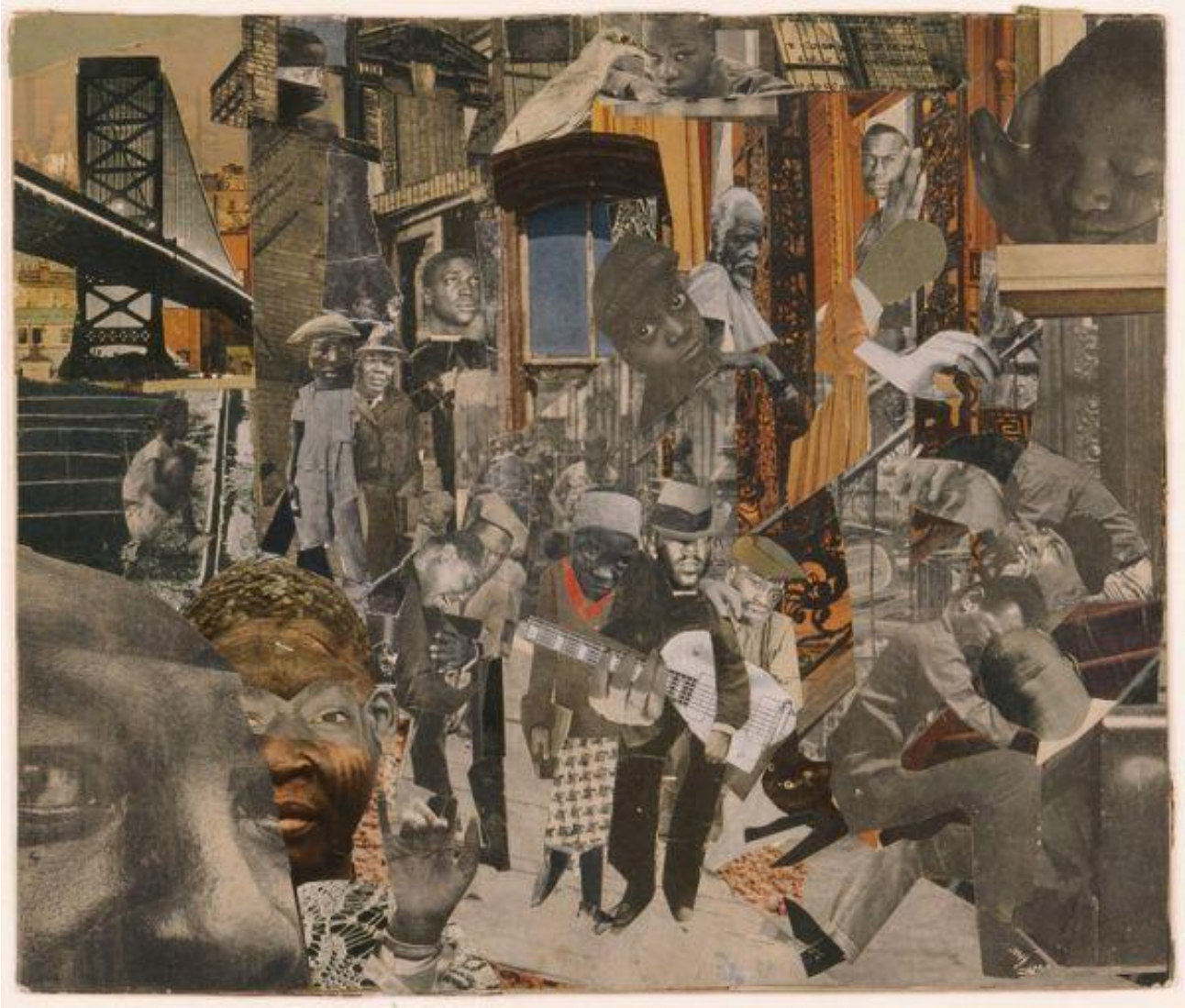

Plate 10.

Romare Bearden. *The Street*, 1964, 32.7 x 39.05 cm. Paper collage on cardboard. Gift of Friends of Art and African American Art © Romare Bearden/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Plate 11.

Emma Amos. *Tightrope*, 1994. 208.3 x 147.3.Acrylic on linen canvas, African fabric borders.

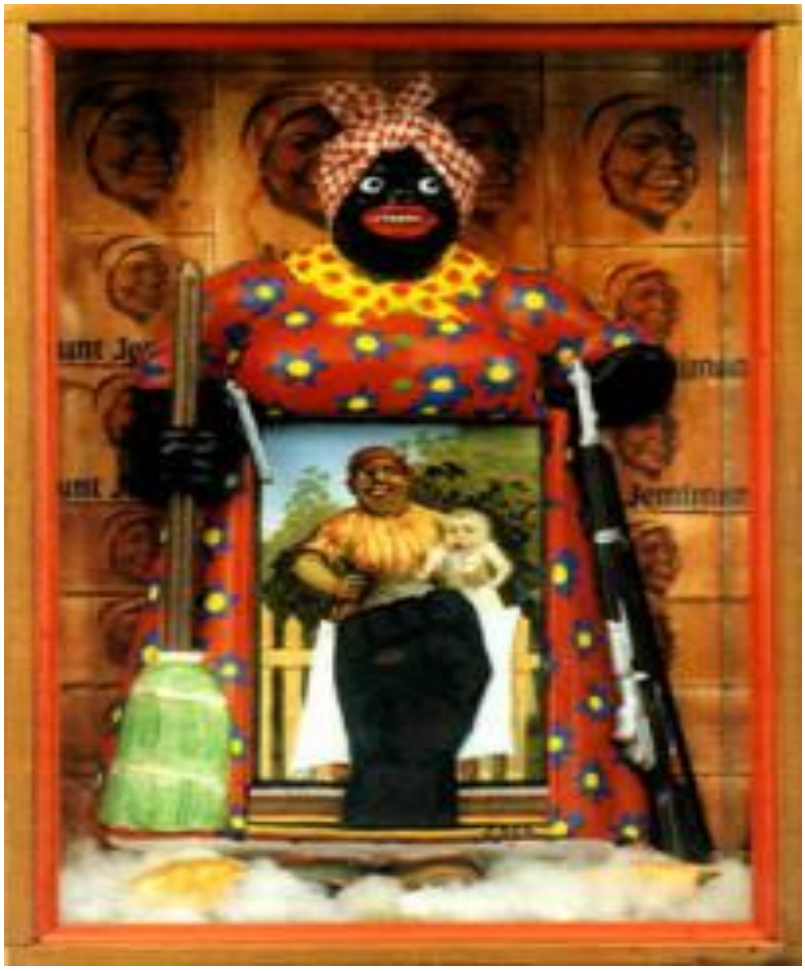

Plate 12.

Betye Saar. *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972; mixed media; 11 ¾ x 8 x 2 ¾ in. Courtesy the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive

Plate 13.

Jean Dubuffet, *Will to Power*, 1946. Oil, pebbles, sand, and glass on canvas 116.2 x 88.9 cm, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

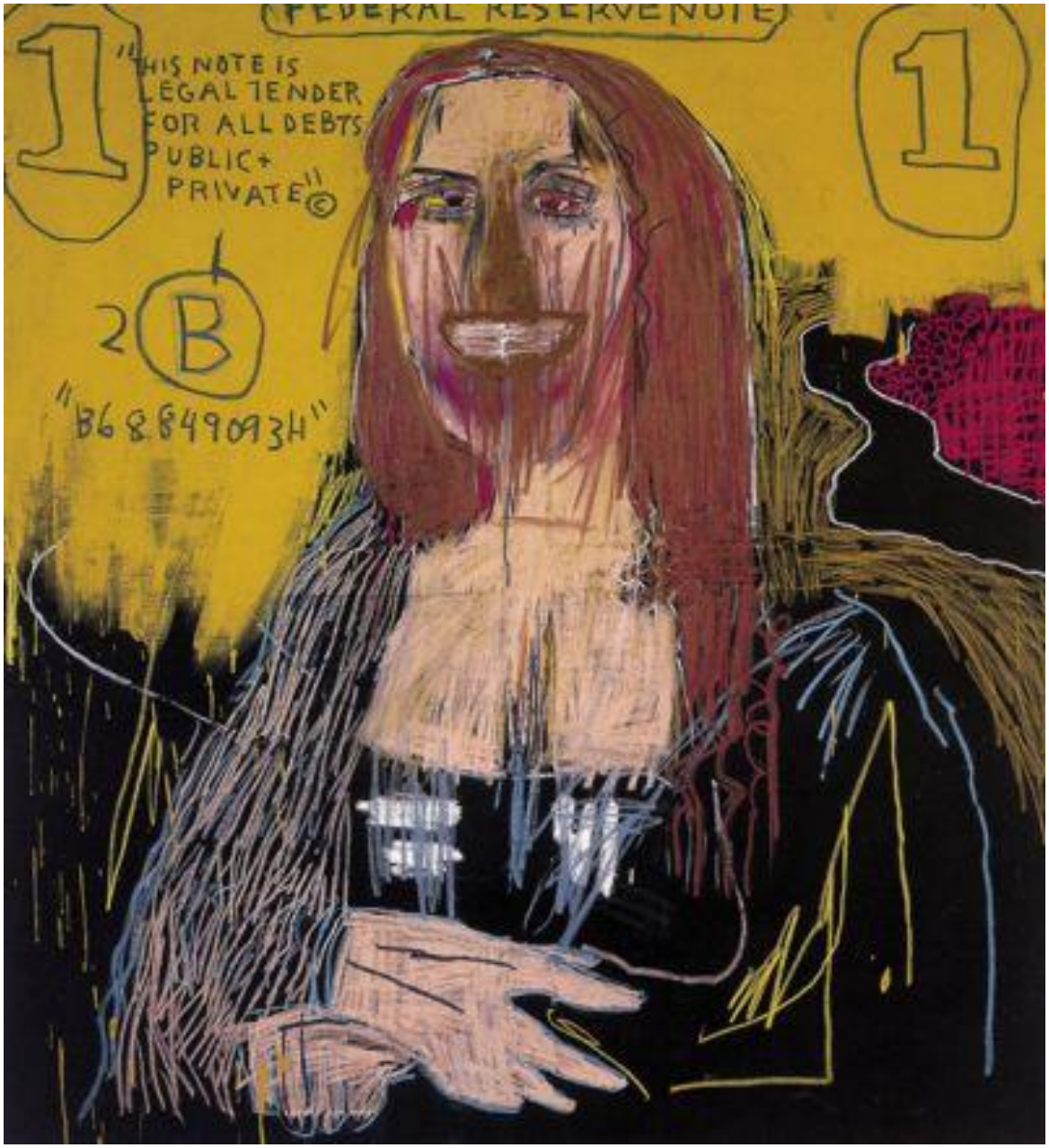

Plate 14.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Mona Lisa*, 1983. Acrylic and pencil on canvas, 169,5 x 154,5. Private collection. Photograph: Banque d'Images, ADAGP/Art Resourse, NY. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Plate 15.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *The Nile*, 1983. Acrylic and crayon on canvas, 172.5 x 358 cm. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Plate 16.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Exu*, 1988. Acrylic and oil paintstick on canvas, 199.5 x 254 cm. Private collection. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Plate 17.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Slave Auction*, 1982. Acryllic and pastel paint on canvas. 183 x 305,5 cm ,Anina Nosei Art Gallery, New York, © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Plate 18.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *(Untitled) Boxer*, 1982. Acrylic and crayon on canvas, Vrej Baghoomian Gallery, New York. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Plate 19.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Self-Portrait*, 1982. Acrylic and crayon, 193 x 239 cm. Private collection. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Plate 20.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Zydeco*, 1984. Acrylic and oil on canvas, Bank Austria Kunstforum, Vienna. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

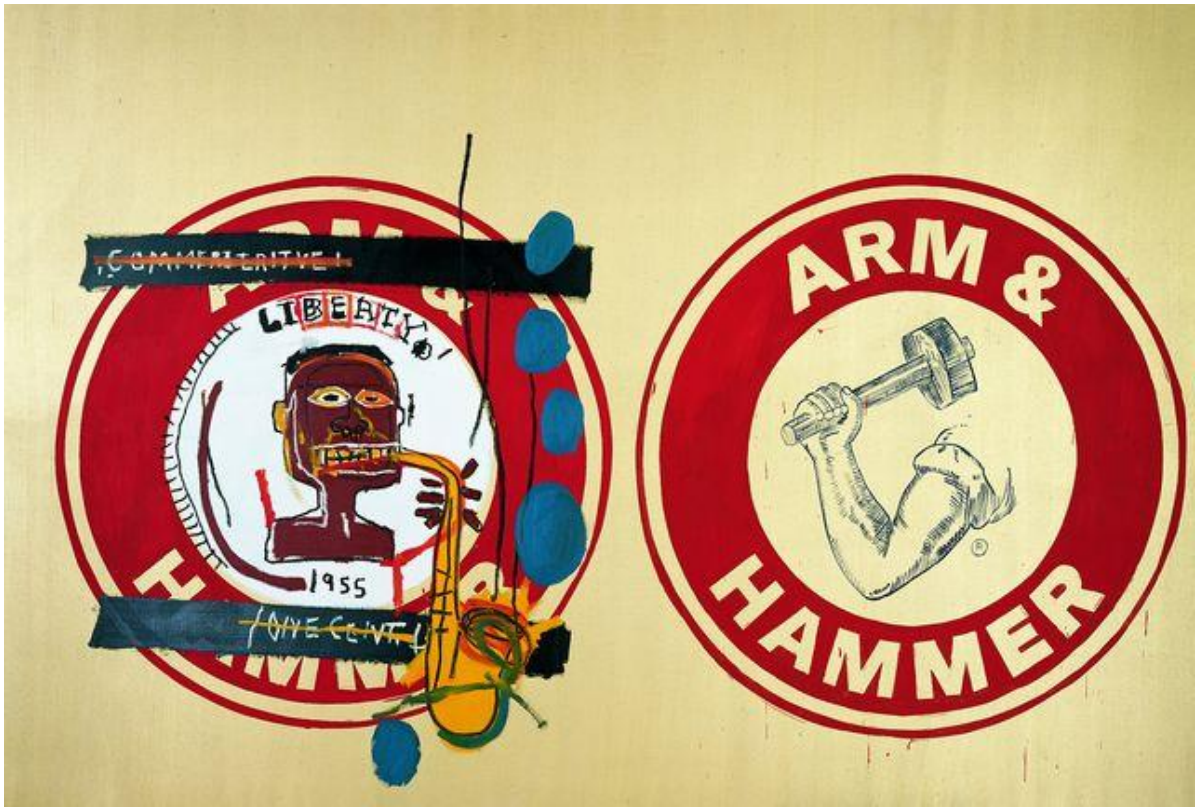

Plate 21.

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, Untitled (Arm and Hammer II), 1985. Acrylic, oil paintstick, and silk screen on canvas, 167 x 285 cm. Bischofberger Collection, Switzerland. © The Estate of Jean-Michel Basquiat. © The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc./ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Plate 22.

Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom (Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven), and Detail* 1995. Cut paper.

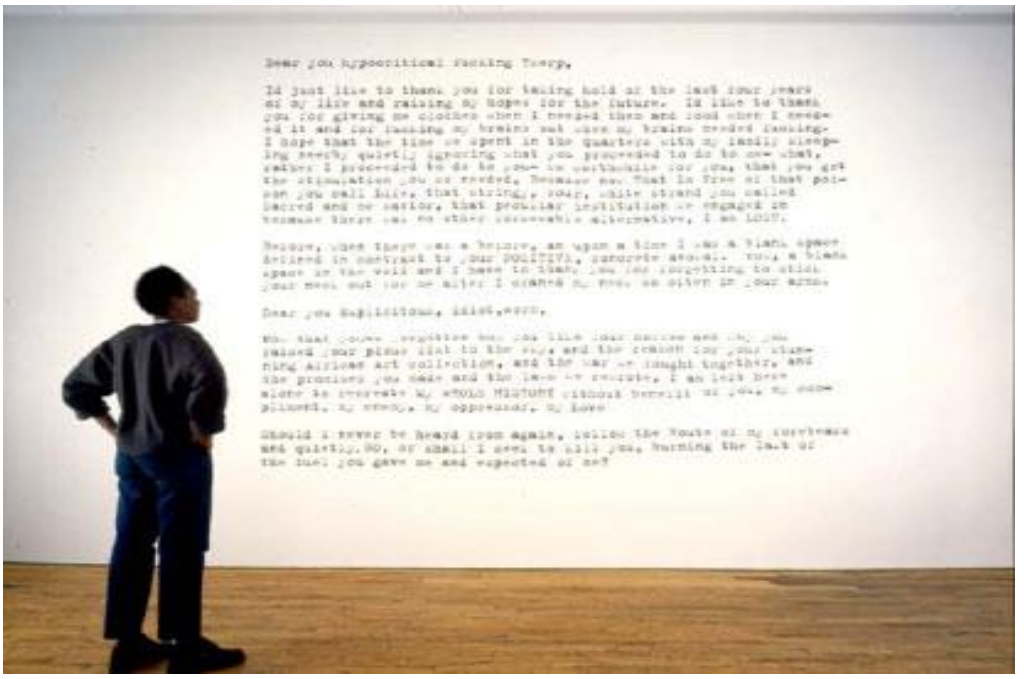

Plate 23.

Kara Walker, *Letter from a Black Girl*, 1998. Installation view, Wooster Gardens/Brent Sikkema, New York. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

Plate 24.

Noe DeWitt *Kara Walker*, photograph 1998.

Plate 25.

Kara Walker, Cut, 88x54 in, 1998, Wooster Gardens, New York.

Plate 26.

Eric Konon. *Frozen*, photograph inside Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, Brooklyn, New York, June 6, 2014. Courtesy of Eric Konon.

Plate 27.

Several Seconds photograph. *Sugar Sublime: Kara Walker, Domino sugar*, photograph inside Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, Brooklyn, New York, May 31, 2014. Courtesy of Several Seconds.

Plate 28.

Eric Konon photograph. *Approach*, photograph inside Kara Walker's*A Subtlety*, Brooklyn, New York, June 6, 2014. Courtesy of Eric Konon.

Plate 29.

Wall text for Kara Walker's *A Subtlety*, Brooklyn, New York, May 18, 2014. Photograph by Ann Hilton Fisher. Courtesy of Ann Hilton Fisher.