

## THE END OF UNCLE TOM

A woman, her body ripped vertically in half, introduces *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* from 1995 (figs. 3 and 4), while a visual narrative with both life and death at stake undulates beyond the accusatory gesture of her pointed finger. An adult man raises his hands to the sky, begging for deliverance, and delivers a baby. A second man, obese and legless, stabs one child with his sword while joined at the pelvis with another. A trio of children play a dangerous game that involves a hatchet, a chopping block, a sharp stick, and a bucket. One child has left the group and is making her way, with rhythmic defecation, toward three adult women who are naked to the waist and nursing each other. A baby girl falls from the lap of one woman while reaching for her breast. With its references to scatology, infanticide, sodomy, pedophilia, and child neglect, this tableau is a troubling tribute to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—the sentimental, antislavery novel written in 1852. It is clearly not a straightforward illustration, yet the title and explicit references to racialized and sexualized violence on an antebellum plantation leave little doubt that there is a significant relationship between the two works.

Cut from black paper and adhered to white gallery walls, this scene is composed of figures set within a landscape and depicted in silhouette. The medium is particularly apt for this work, and for Walker's project more broadly, for a number of reasons. Materially, the cutouts anchor the work in the nineteenth century, when they were at their most popular in the United States. Formally, they isolate and cast into sharp relief some of the features and characteristics that are, stereotypically, used to describe racial identity while



FIGURE 3

Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

simultaneously obscuring the visual information that would otherwise provide clues to her subjects' attitudes, motivations, and subjectivity. *The End of Uncle Tom*, in particular, is composed of life-sized figural groupings that stretch across the length of a gallery wall. Like a cyclorama, a source of inspiration for Walker, the scene encourages viewers to walk past it—giving the experience of the work a temporal quality that reinforces its narrative undercurrents. The placement of the groupings also moves up the side of the wall, creating a sense of space and perspective that belies the two-dimensionality of the cut paper. It is possible to take in the work, visually, at once; but understanding each grouping, as well as its relationship to each of the others, requires moving back and forth, and closer and further away, which puts the viewer in a constant but changing physical relationship with the installation.

*The End of Uncle Tom* is at once visually beautiful and narratively opaque. Individual characters are cut using simple, sinuous lines that belie the complexity of their activities. Meanwhile, implied trajectories—the woman's pointed gesture, the physical evidence of movement left behind by the single-booted child—suggest an order in which this drama might be read, and the gentle rise and fall of the character groups alludes to an invisible topography made up of narrative arcs. It seems clear, even in the absence of the work's title, that certain themes animate this cluster of vignettes: birth, death, and various acts associated with each; racial difference, repetition, and aberrant relationships between adults and children.

Once the title of the installation is considered, certain specific characters begin to resolve out of the murky narrative—bringing with them tangled webs of desires, relationships, and backstories from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The older man who begs for deliverance might be the kindly, paternal Uncle Tom, but why is he partially exposed and giving birth? His literary nemesis, the irredeemable racist Simon Legree, might be embodied by the peg-legged man who violates two children at once; but the violent acts carried out by



Legree in the novel are not the ones on display here. Topsy and Eva emerge from the trio of children; Topsy maintains a characteristic mischievousness, but Eva—who is peaceful and loving in the book, yet dangerous and chaotic in silhouette—has departed wildly from her traditional role. The title offers clues to the installation's meaning, yet frustrates attempts to discern that meaning by refusing to connect the images to the story in the most simple and immediately satisfying way—as an illustration of events that took place in the novel. But what could these images be, if not representations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*? How could Uncle Tom, Legree, Topsy, and Eva exist in a world other than the one created by Stowe? If they are not illustrating the novel, then what are they illustrating?

The perplexity generated by *The End of Uncle Tom* has been considered by a number of scholars, most of whom make brief reference to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to identify one or two of Walker's silhouetted characters, then leave the novel behind—choosing to interpret Walker's work as a commentary on something larger than a single novel. In *Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker*, for example, Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw argues that Walker's *End of Uncle Tom* is an attempt to tell the stories that were edited out of antebellum histories of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from Toni Morrison, Shaw uses the “rememory” of “disremembered” trauma to describe Walker's work as “the return of the repressed”—a process through which the repressed or edited narratives of slavery are recovered and retold. “In *The End of Uncle Tom* . . .,” Shaw writes, “Kara Walker takes a deficient history that is both visual and textual and re-members it in a way that calls forth the ghosts from our collective psyche.”<sup>2</sup> For Shaw, this installation may cite a specific work of fiction, but it does so in order to address the incompleteness of a genre—slave narratives.

Darby English takes a different approach in a chapter that considers *The End of Uncle Tom*. He “refute[s] the iconographical reading of Walker's tableaux, in favor of an embedded one.”<sup>3</sup> English asserts that the opacity of meaning in Walker's works is, in fact, precisely the meaning—that creating a deliberately unfulfilled “desire to know” in the viewer is Walker's point. Accordingly, viewers who “accept . . . the invitation to derive knowledge from them” ultimately only derive evidence of their own urgency to pinpoint the artist's



FIGURE 4

Kara Walker, *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

Installation view: *Kara Walker: My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*, Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, 2008. Photograph: Joshua White.

intentions.<sup>4</sup> English's argument, importantly, highlights Walker's strategic use of ambiguity; however, he does not ask why *this* story, why *these* characters. What is it about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that makes it such an effective referent?

While scholars such as Shaw and English offer valuable readings of *The End of Uncle Tom*, their interpretations tend to use *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a jumping-off point for analyses that consider problems other than Walker's literal connection to Stowe's novel.<sup>5</sup> *Uncle Tom's Cabin* serves as a point of departure, an example, or a metaphor for larger issues connected to the representation of race, sexuality, and violence. This is symptomatic of the fact that Walker's references to well-known stories are often underexamined—mentioned only briefly, or dismissed as superficial, ironic, or made primarily to shock and confuse. This is an understandable tendency, because Walker is known for making provocative statements through words and images, and the line of

demarcation between artistic persona and personal philosophy is often deliberately unclear. When a title like *The End of Uncle Tom* offers to shed light on a discomfiting visual scenario—only to tease and then withdraw that offer when the characters thus illuminated behave unexpectedly—one can imagine that less attention might be given to the work's connection to the novel. This tendency to take her references to familiar stories at face value may also be due to the disciplinary logistics required to think about art through, or alongside, literature. In some cases, however, the appearance of superficiality, irony, or wordplay actually disguises a thoroughgoing engagement with a specific historical text. One of the main goals for this chapter, and for this book, is to take these references much more seriously—more literally, and literarily.

A compelling reason for doing so can be found in Walker's own consideration of the installation: "In a piece like *The End of Uncle Tom*, . . . I was thinking about continuing this novel . . . in a similar landscape, a literary landscape, . . . the literary antebellum South. . . . I had been reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and I was once again thinking about Harriet Beecher Stowe and her vision of a black man. What is this guy to her?"<sup>6</sup> Walker's allusions to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* go much deeper than the title of the work, and they raise a number of provocative questions. What does it mean to continue a novel in purely visual form? How do literary characters remain legible when removed from narrative context? How and why does this story from 1852 continue to inspire contemporary artists such as Walker?

In what follows, I propose a close reading of *The End of Uncle Tom* alongside *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to bring out not only the depth of Walker's engagement with the novel but also what her resistance to, and reiteration of, the narrative reveals about a 150-year tradition of retelling this epic work. At stake is a more complex understanding of both Walker's practice and the ongoing influence of Stowe's novel on the ways in which racialized identity is imagined, constructed, consumed, and reproduced.

## CONTEXTS

In an essay often published along with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe tells readers who are concerned about slavery, but unsure of what action to take, that "there is one thing that every individual can do,—they can see to it that *they feel right*."<sup>7</sup> Stowe used the strategies of sentimental fiction to generate readers' right feelings, and the result—an antislavery novel credited with both galvanizing abolitionist activity and popularizing racist stereotypes—has generated controversy and revenue, as well as critical and creative reinterpretations, ever since. First serialized, then published as a novel in 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* set records from the beginning—selling three hundred thousand copies in the United States in its first year.<sup>8</sup> The story was adapted for the stage just a few months after the novel was published, and has since been visually produced in the form of illustrated novels and children's books, minstrel shows, illustrated sheet music, operas, ballets, plays, musicals, television programs, and major films.

By the mid-twentieth century, the novel was under critical scrutiny. Following protests, theatrical productions were closed and intellectuals such as James Baldwin and Langston Hughes made public statements about the novel's merits. In "Everybody's Protest Novel," Baldwin harshly criticized Stowe's use of sentimentalism to generate false emotions in her readers.<sup>9</sup> Critics have argued that Baldwin's essay was the major turning point for the reception of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; afterward, it was not possible to write about the story uncritically.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, Hughes challenged the story in different ways: by incorporating certain of its characters and plot elements into his own creative work, and by intentionally disturbing the seamlessness of the narrative by retelling the story in unexpected ways.<sup>11</sup>

In the latter part of the twentieth century, literary and visual retellings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* evolved along mostly separate trajectories.<sup>12</sup> Stowe's novel was reissued with extensive textually based critical framing every few years. Meanwhile, pictorial versions of the story thrived in adaptations for film, television, and live performance, for, as Linda Williams points out, "from the very beginning, and even from its conception, Stowe's novel was something more than literature; its most emotionally resonant components were melodramatic moving pictures."<sup>13</sup> *The King and I* (1956), for example, used a condensed version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to protest slavery and promote Western values in a non-Western cultural context, while Showtime's made-for-television version (1987) attempted to adjust Stowe's original story to then-current standards of political correctness. More recent engagements include Bill T. Jones's 1990 dance *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*, which commingles Stowe's characters with historical figures such as Sojourner Truth and Martin Luther King Jr.; Robert Alexander's 1996 play *I Ain't Yo' Uncle: The New Jack Revisionist Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which Stowe's characters turn Stowe herself into a character and put her on trial for the stereotypes she created; and Glenn Ligon's 2008 video *The Death of Tom*, an abstract reflection on an early twentieth-century film version of the novel. The storytellers and audiences of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—along with the motives of both parties—have changed dramatically over the last century and half. However, just as Stowe used the story to elicit an emotional response to slavery within her readers, contemporary artists use aspects of the novel to provoke a response to the work itself and to the space it has occupied in the collective imaginary since its publication. As Elizabeth Ammons notes, "Responses to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* underscore [that] the novel—powerful and controversial in its own day—continues to prompt strong and often complicated reactions."<sup>14</sup> Walker's silhouette tableau, then, can be situated within a larger group of works that use postmodern representational and discursive techniques to reexamine both Stowe's novel and its cultural impact.

## EXTENDING AND WITHHOLDING EMPATHY

Walker's silhouette of Tom evinces a striking formal similarity to descriptions of brutality associated with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.<sup>15</sup> Although Stowe omitted explicit textual



FIGURE 5

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

descriptions of slaves being whipped, her illustrators were not as circumspect. In fact, Stowe's allusions to whipping provided illustrators with the starting point for extratextual fantasies about violence and subordination. Thus, while the text contains only allusions to Tom's two worst beatings, many illustrators chose to create them visually. For an edition published in 1938, for example, Miguel Covarrubias imagined Tom being whipped by either Sambo or Quimbo, both enslaved by Simon Legree, while the partially disembodied form of Legree looks on.

The Tom in Walker's silhouette and the Tom in Covarrubias's illustration stand in the same pose: bent knees, raised arms, lifted heads, with hands fixed together at the wrists (figs. 5 and 6). Both men wear only pants, although Walker's Tom has disturbingly ambiguous features on his back that might indicate either fabric or flayed skin. Covarrubias's Tom is explicitly bound at the wrists, whereas Walker's intention is somewhat uncertain. He could be praying, but the clenched, slightly splayed fists suggest that his hands are bound by rope rather than clasped in prayer. Covarrubias's Tom appears to be unconscious, as though he had been whipped until he passed out. Walker's Tom may or may not be conscious; the artist provides no clues. The snaky line of the whip connects Tom to his abuser and echoes the inky line connecting Walker's Tom to the infant on the ground. Finally, Covarrubias's Tom has been physically abused under the gazes of two



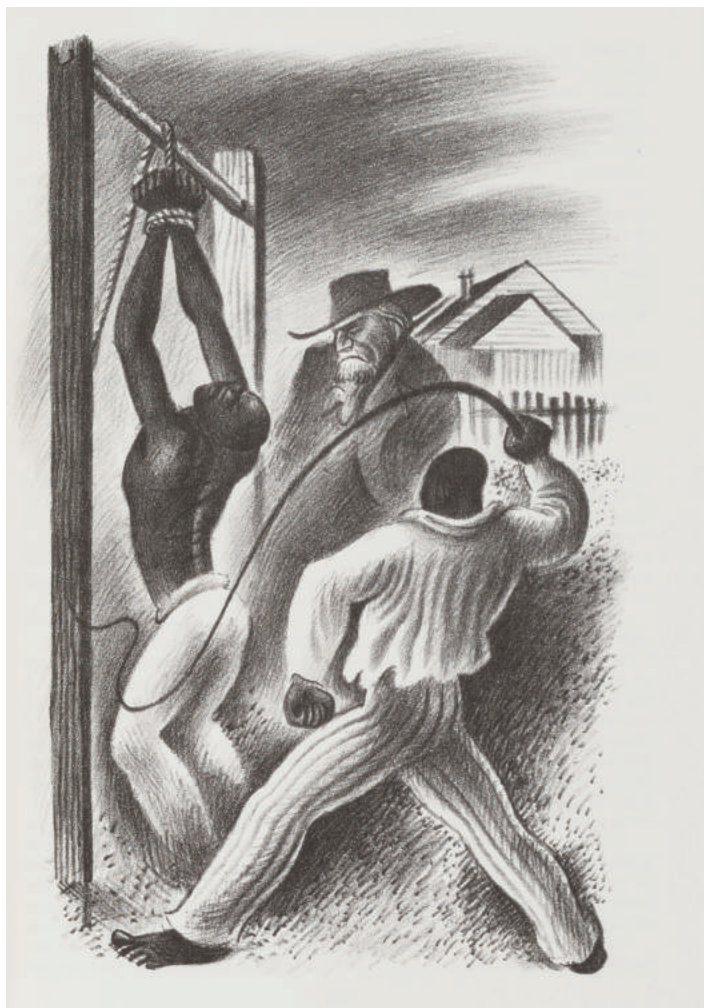


FIGURE 6

Miguel Covarrubias, lithograph illustration for Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1938), facing page 236.

different men: his torturer and Simon Legree. In contrast, viewers of Walker's work bear much more responsibility for the visual consumption of Tom, whose sexually exposed and vulnerable body is largely unwitnessed—a silhouetted half-woman and a disembodied head, which peeks out from under her skirt, observe, but even the child who issues from his body looks away.

Whether praying or bound and beaten—and Walker seems to allude to both visual precedents—Walker's Tom fits easily into both narratives supported by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*: the literary narrative, and the extratextual visual narrative imagined by the novel's illustrators. But Walker pushes viewer credulity past its limits when she disrobes Tom, exposes his nakedness, implies rape, and shows the result—the birth of Tom's baby. This marks a complete, and seemingly incoherent, break from Stowe's novel. Or does it?



Marianne Noble points out that scenes depicting physical abuse in books such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have been used to fulfill explicitly erotic functions—a point that recalls the earlier discussion of rape in *Roots*: “Many readers have confessed that the reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* stimulated masochistic erotic desires. In ‘A Child Is Being Beaten,’ Sigmund Freud observes that many patients have beating fantasies, and many of them use *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for ‘onanistic gratification’: ‘In my patients’ milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the beating-phantasies: those accessible to young people, such as . . . *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.’”<sup>16</sup>

Noble discusses a range of ways that readers might take masochistic pleasure in Tom's beating: the explicit erotic pleasure documented by Freud; the pleasure taken by white men who may identify with abused slaves without threatening their own socially secure positions; or the “fantasies of ecstatic martyrdom” sought by women as a way of recuperating a “language of desire” otherwise forbidden to them culturally.<sup>17</sup> Imagining oneself inside the body of an enslaved and beaten character is, it seems, one of the many complicated pleasures that have been taken from Stowe's novel. This raises an important terminological distinction. Given *Uncle Tom's Cabin's* status as a sentimental novel, it might seem appropriate to describe readers' and viewers' emotional responses to Tom's plight as sympathetic: his torture elicits strong feelings of regret, anger, protectiveness—in other words, sympathy. But what about the kinds of emotional responses that Noble describes—responses that have less to do with imagined solidarity, or the perception of shared experience, and more to do with the projection of self into another's body in order to seek satisfaction? This process might more accurately be described as empathetic rather than sympathetic. And Walker's Tom might represent more than a character and a story—he might demonstrate the kinds of uses that have been made of both his character and his larger story.

Saidiya Hartman's exploration of empathy is helpful here in explaining how Walker's acts of violence, which at first seem wildly unrelated to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, might in fact metaphorically represent readers' relationship with the story. “Properly speaking,” Hartman explains, “empathy is a projection of oneself into another in order to better understand the other.”<sup>18</sup> Quoting Jonathan Boyarin, Hartman argues that “the ambivalent character of empathy—more exactly, the repressive effects of empathy . . . can be located in the ‘obliteration of otherness’ or the facile intimacy that enables identification with the other only as we ‘feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves.’ And as a consequence, empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead.”<sup>19</sup>

Hartman's concept of empathy is one in which the imaginative projection of the self into the unknown, and unknowable, subjective experience of a raced and gendered other is a violent act of colonization. Viewers effectively evacuate their object's subjective possibilities and assume the right to use the raced and gendered body for their reading and viewing pleasure.

If this use of Stowe's characters for illicit reading and viewing pleasure seems extreme—like something relevant only to a few disturbed patients on Freud's couch—

one need only consider the frequency with which Stowe's illustrators enacted this and other wholly extratextual scenes of violence for their readers. In fact, invented scenes of extratextual violence—exaggerated depictions of Eliza escaping across the frozen river, for example, or scenes of slaves being whipped—were common in visual adaptations of the novel.

Although Walker links her silhouette to previous depictions of Tom being whipped, and invites viewers to contextualize this scene within the narrative landscape created by *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she interrupts the viewer's willing suspension of disbelief by moving just a bit further into pornographic territory. Lest the familiarity of the raced, gendered, partly stripped, physically violated body of a black man submitted for readers' and viewers' perusal seem normal, Walker pushes Tom's pants down around his upper thighs, and viewers are confronted with the possibility that he has been raped—and impregnated. Walker points out the implicit conflation of sexual availability and violence, and her image is troubling precisely because it provokes critical examination of the eroticization of violence by providing the very same.

Evidence of Tom's molestation can be inferred from Stowe's narrative: he is beaten to death, and his dead body testifies to the lust and violence that Legree, Sambo, and Quimbo all feel. Not apparent is evidence of the readers and viewers who may have taken various kinds of pleasure in Tom's vulnerability for 150 years—who have used his plight for personal gratification. Stripped, bound, and beaten, Tom is mute but revived every time *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is retold.

Tom's baby is equally mute, but it offers eloquent testimony that Legree is not the only one who has taken pleasure from Tom's pain. Everyone who attempts to empathize with Tom's experiences shares responsibility. The children in Walker's silhouette (for the baby that Legree is skewering could easily be Tom's as well) not only resonate with Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*—a collection of short stories about racial violence—but also provide evidence of the productive capacity of imaginative projection. There are, and will continue to be, repercussions when individuals, and cultures, project erotic desires into the violated bodies of raced and gendered characters.

For much of the novel, Tom's fate is bound up with that of Simon Legree, the evil slave-owner who ultimately orders him whipped to death, and it makes sense that Walker sets them near each other, back to back. They serve as mutual foils—black and white, enslaved and slave owner, righteous and evil—and their opposing symmetry is borne out in silhouette. Like Tom's final, fatal beating, Legree's most violent scenes are left undescribed by Stowe. A scorched black tree in his yard alludes to a slave he burned alive. The "wailings and groans of despair" that are heard in Legree's house are issued by the last inhabitant of the garret, a slave who was tortured and murdered.<sup>20</sup> Stowe tells us that Legree strikes Tom when Tom defies his order to beat another slave, but Tom's two most severe beatings are only implied. The first beating occurs during a chapter break; one chapter ends with Tom being "dragged . . . unresisting from the place" by "two gigantic Negroes," and the next chapter opens with Tom suffering from his newly inflicted inju-

ries.<sup>21</sup> Stowe fills the textual space where the next beating would fall with an explanation for why she does not include the disturbing scenario: “What man has nerve to do, man has not nerve to hear. What brother-man and brother-Christian must suffer, cannot be told us, even in our secret chamber, it so harrows up the soul!”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Stowe alludes to the sexual violence Legree commits against his female slaves but never depicts it. We know Emmeline’s fate from the passage in which Legree fondles her, assuring her she’s going to have “fine times” with him, then takes her into the house after sending the rest of the slaves to their quarters. We know Cassy’s fate because she confesses to Tom, worried about losing the small margin of power and safety that proximity to Legree affords: “I’ve lived with [Legree] these five years, and cursed every moment of my life,—night and day! And now, he’s got a new one,—a young thing, only fifteen . . . to hell with her!”<sup>23</sup>

Legree’s villainy as a literary character is constructed through layers of allusions; he is a palimpsest composed of the blasted tree, the harrowed ghost, his run-down property, his preliminary beating of Tom, and his drinking. When visual artists are confronted with the task of reconciling Stowe’s multifarious allusions in the body of one man, he often, of necessity, appears as an exaggeration, and it is not surprising that, confronted with this same challenge, Walker shows Legree engaged in hyperbolic violence—simultaneously molesting one child while nonchalantly killing another.

If Stowe’s complicated portrayals of St. Clare and Mr. Bird—characters who want to do good but are confused or rendered impotent by a corrupt system—make readers anxious about the precise location of racism, then Legree’s villainy compensates. Stowe’s readers need not fear that they might be accidentally, unknowingly, or implicitly supporting a racist society, because there is no mistaking the presence of the kind of racism Legree represents. Based on the flagrance of Legree’s character, readers may even conclude that racism does not exist at all because it is unlikely that they will ever encounter such hyperbole. Stowe employs a heavy-handed technique that demands outrage from readers and leaves less attention and concern for more nuanced but equally damaging kinds of racism.

Walker is not the first to explore the hypervillainy of Legree. In 1935, poet E. E. Cummings wrote a ballet version of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. Cummings describes stage directions and characterization in verse, and his published efforts provide a remarkable example of the sublimation of Legree, as he is transformed from Stowe’s “alluded evil” by way of poetry into the physicality of dance. Legree’s entrance onto the stage is titled “dance of To Kill . . . Legree”:

not furiously merely but exudingly, not hatefully simply but excretingly, shoots his itlike passion at and with blackly lightningwraps its helike stung prey—flopswooping which spouttumbles. Withfully atishly weaving, a clenched thingbeast sends against a limp manthing ripplesprinting squirmsquirts of darkness. Hellspace swallows jumps, digests flights, spews coastings, of the marvellously everywhere wandering effigy. Hurtling, spurtling, a supreme outdivingly entirely inplunging red fiend flogs a mad shadow. Gradually air, annexing earth, marries the slaying and the slain; now two morsels of one nothing

caperingly embrace, now through one's poor honest antics flash the other's crisp richly electric gestures  
—and against Hell anachronistically looming<sup>24</sup>

To accommodate the profundity of Legree's evil, Cummings crafts something that is decidedly nonhuman; we are not meant to read Legree as a social actor who makes decisions and takes actions in a specific historical time and place. Instead he is a demon, possessed of superhuman powers—a “thingbeast” from hell.

Producers for the Showtime network took a more moderate approach in 1987 when they reworked *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for a prime-time television audience<sup>25</sup>—an adaptation that was just one of several film versions produced in the latter part of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, they shared Cummings's sense of urgency, constructing Legree in increasingly despicable ways. They did this in part by taking significant thematic and dialogic liberties while adhering to the general plot of the novel. In Stowe's story, Legree and George, the son of Tom's original owners, have a confrontation near the cart that George has laden with Tom's dead body. Frustrated by Legree's cruelty and his own bad timing, George punches Legree in the face. Legree falls to the ground, then gets back up, feeling something other than what the reader might expect. As Stowe explains, “Some men . . . are decidedly bettered by being knocked down. If a man lays them fairly flat in the dust, they seem immediately to conceive a respect for him; and Legree was one of this sort. As he rose, therefore, and brushed the dust from his clothes, he eyed the slowly-retreating wagon with some evident consideration; nor did he open his mouth till it was out of sight.”<sup>26</sup>

Showtime's version of Legree is simultaneously more evil and more pitiful than Stowe's, and the destabilizing contradictions in the character are more extreme. When George confronts Legree and punches him, Legree doesn't just fall, he lands face first in a large, muddy puddle of water, where his girth prevents him from immediately recovering. While he is wallowing in this ridiculous position, Sambo and Quimbo approach from behind, consider drowning him in the puddle, then shake their heads and leave—Legree is so pitiful that retribution would not be worth their time. As a final demonstration of his ignominy, when Legree does manage to pull his face out of the water, he can only kneel in the puddle as he is convulsed with wheezing, high-pitched sobs.

The Showtime production erases the more subtle aspects of Stowe's character by layering humiliation on humiliation.<sup>27</sup> This Legree has no capacity to feel respect for someone who betters him physically. If Showtime meant to show racism in the worst possible light, the network ultimately failed: the Legree of their creation is an unconvincing character. If he is so weak, how has he managed to keep a plantation under control? Sambo and Quimbo's show of mercy is honorable only at a superficial level; because they remain enslaved, their action is deeply incoherent. Legree is a cipher, ultimately crushed by the incompatible desires of his showtime creators.

Beginning with Stowe, who wanted to imply a character more terrible than she was able or willing to write, and continuing to the present, Simon Legree has been written,



FIGURE 7

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

danced, and filmed as an extreme caricature whose failings are embellished as the story is retold, even while other characters are rehabilitated to fit contemporary notions of moderation. It is the willing suspension of disbelief that allows readers and viewers to accept Legree as a valid character—to overlook that he is composed of multiple contradictions and deeply unstable parts. And it is precisely this suspension of disbelief that Walker interrupts in her silhouette of Legree.

Walker's Legree (fig. 7) makes explicit the exaggerated and contradictory nature of the evil that other artists use to categorize the character. Her Legree conjures multiple scenarios, which are, to varying degrees, physically and logistically impossible. He is obese and supports his weight by leaning on a saber and resting his immense belly on the back of a child that he appears to be raping, or birthing. The two figures share one leg, and it is unclear to whom it belongs: it may be Legree's, or the child's. If the leg belongs to the child, it may or may not block viewers' ability to see Legree's own fleshly limb. However it is equally possible that this Legree has no legs, save for a pirate's wooden peg (which would echo the partial disembodiment of Covarrubias's Legree). Given the configuration of limbs, he may be incapable, even, of standing upright (though he does), or of walking, and he is certainly unable to give chase, should his victim decide to escape. His intentional violation of one child's body is punctuated by the seemingly careless destruction of another's as he simultaneously impales an infant with the tip of his saber.

Other scholars have drawn out the metaphorical implications of a white man who is supported by the body and labor of a black girl who is, in turn, pinned between sexual assault and the very object of that labor.<sup>28</sup> Equally as important, however, is that Walker renders explicit the way that Legree has been—and continues to be—constructed in order to satisfy viewer expectations. Legree is the ultimate racist in Stowe's novel, yet he is a deeply unstable character, visually and narratively. Further, the destabilizing contradictions in Legree's character that Walker illustrates are consistent with a temporal



FIGURE 8

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

trajectory: Legree's evil is both more extreme and less probable in Showtime's 1987 production than in Stowe's 1852 novel. Showtime's Legree assures viewers that only the most evil and repulsive human beings are capable of racism, that such afflicted individuals are easy to recognize and are beyond the reach of empathetic identification. By using Legree's implausibility to breach the narrative rather than to further it, Walker's silhouette interrupts the suspension of disbelief and asks viewers: What is the cost of representing racism as impossible, ridiculous hyperbole?

With heroes and villains and nothing in between, many reinterpretations of Stowe's novel ensure that racism is easy to spot and always external—viewers do not have to look inward. Inability to empathize with Legree acts as a distancing mechanism and allows the pleasure of fixing racism at a discrete and external point. Perhaps this is one reason why the story has proved to be so unflaggingly entertaining. Walker's interruption of the suspension of disbelief makes the pleasure of distancing oneself from participation in a racist system explicit. When Walker's engagement with Stowe's novel is taken seriously, this image prompts viewers to confront the ramifications of a canonical work of American fiction—and its ongoing multigenre reinterpretations—that has constructed racism as both impossible and external, for over 150 years.

The rhythmic qualities of *The End of Uncle Tom* ask the viewer to consider the similarities of Tom and Legree as well as their differences (fig. 8). Tom and Legree are half-men, with one arm and one leg apiece. The act of depiction is simultaneously an act of reduction: to be seen in profile is to become a half-person. Symmetrically arranged, standing back to back, both men turn their bodies, gazes, and attention toward their respective sources of power—God for Tom; the slave system for Legree. Being halved has



not prevented either Tom or Legree from procreating, but they face away from the children they have produced. Tom's umbilical cord and Legree's sword are curved and penetrate the chest of an infant victim, physically connecting the men to the babies, "one by violence and the other by bloodline," as Shaw points out.<sup>29</sup> Arguably, one child is being given life and the other death, but it is difficult to make, and hold, this determination. Viewers might think that the child at the end of the sword is being killed, but Stowe articulates a more paradoxical mythology of birth and death—one that is different for black children than for white.

The children who die in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* all leave behind miserable earthly existences. Eva, the only white child who dies, and the only child who is not murdered, is trapped between a politically and socially impotent father and a cold and absent mother. Ostensibly stricken with consumption, Eva is killed by the dysfunctions of society. She does not have the strength to survive in a cruel world, and the more she learns of slavery's injustices, the weaker she becomes. Ultimately she chooses not to participate in the system and removes herself from it permanently. This choice coincides with Stowe's belief that earthly existence meant only a tormented separation from God. Stowe presents Eva's death as a kind of rebirth: when Eva departs earth for heaven, she "passe[s] from death unto life."<sup>30</sup>

While Eva's death receives the most attention, she is not the only child victim of a cruel world. Infanticide recurs in Stowe's story; it is committed three times by black women, in three different ways. Early in the novel the slave trader Haley recounts the experience of an unnamed slave who refused to relinquish her child to his new owner: "Come to get him away from the gal, she was jest like a tiger. . . . What should she do but ups on a cotton-bale, like a cat[,] . . . till she saw 'twan't no use; and 'she jest turns round, and pitches head first, young un and all, into the river,—went down plump, and never ris."<sup>31</sup> Prue's owner resents the time Prue spends with her baby and away from her. Increasingly jealous, the owner first refuses to let Prue keep the baby with her at night, then demands that Prue sleep with her instead, and finally forces Prue to put the baby "away off in a little kind o' garret," where "it cried itself to death, one night."<sup>32</sup>

Cassy's existence is so miserable that she decides to kill her child: "I had made up my mind,—yes, I had. I would never again let a child live to grow up! I took the little fellow in my arms, when he was two weeks old, and kissed him, and cried over him; and then I gave him laudanum, and held him close to my bosom, while he slept to death."<sup>33</sup>

Prue is forced to neglect her child, but Haley's slave and Cassy kill for preemptive reasons. In either case, Stowe describes the action but only implies the desperation that motivated it. Instead, she uses infanticide to generate reader sympathy for enslaved mothers and horror against a system that brutalizes families. Importantly, Stowe does not attempt to direct horror against black mothers who kill their own children—she works actively against this response—but rather, fuses mother and child into a single entity, and the fact, or prospect, of unnatural separation renders each death believable, if

no less horrifying. Whereas Eva's death is a protracted passage from "death unto life," seems at least partly self-willed, and is witnessed and mourned by many, these three unnamed babies die in just a few sentences, under horrible circumstances, with no mention of death as a more desirable spiritual rebirth.

In her reworking of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Walker echoes some of Stowe's narrative but without the sentimental strategy. Similarly, there are three black babies whose lives are at stake in this tableau: two might die from neglect (their birth and hunger are ignored), and one—who is either pinned by, or perilously close to, the tip of Legree's saber—might die from malice or negligent misplacement of a weapon. However, instead of dying, horrifically but believably, at the hands of their mothers, these children are at risk of dying accidentally with no witnesses. And while slavery is everywhere in this image, it is not sufficient to explain these children's deaths. With Stowe's sentimental aims removed, we are left only with the undercontextualized evidence of black children's vulnerability—and a reminder of the different mythologies that attend their deaths.

### SEVERING TIES

Eva St. Clare is one of the most emotionally available characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and she is also the weakest. Characterizing Eva in equal but opposite terms, Walker's silhouetted version is easily the most dangerous: Legree may have a sword, but Eva too has a weapon, along with two legs and a great deal of momentum. With flowing hair, pointy features, hoop skirts, and ribbons, Eva is frozen in midstride, arms outstretched, an ax clenched just above her head (fig. 9). Her tossing skirts merge with a tree stump—probably the chopping block from which she plucked her weapon. She is caught as she runs toward a little boy who faces her, naked, holding a bucketlike object. Behind her, with a tiny headscarf and rounded facial features, is Topsy, wielding a sharp, pointed stick.

Stowe constructed Eva and Topsy to be symmetrically opposite characters. About the same age, they mirror each other in intent and personality. "There stood the two children, representatives of the two extremes of society. The fair, high-bred child, with her golden head, her deep eyes, her spiritual, noble brow, and prince-like movements; and her black, keen, subtle, cringing, yet acute neighbor. They stood the representatives of their races. The Saxon, born of ages of cultivation, command, education, physical and moral eminence; the Afric, born of ages of oppression, submission, ignorance, toil, and vice!"<sup>34</sup> A portrait of Eva and Topsy from an 1879 edition maps this physiognomic description (fig. 10). The similar height and build of the characters makes it easy for viewers to conduct an itemized, point-by-point comparison while reading Stowe's checklist. Eva's forehead rounds where Topsy's slopes; Topsy's full mouth and wide eyes contrast with Eva's small mouth and deep-set eyes. In illustration and text alike, Eva's white color and "Saxon" behavior are rendered legible through the explicit contrast with Topsy's black skin and "African" behavior.



FIGURE 9

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

Stowe uses Eva's declaration of love for Topsy, her willingness to physically touch Topsy, and ultimately her death as tools that work collectively to convert Topsy from "African" to "Saxon" behavior. Topsy works hard after Eva dies to be "better," or less disobedient, and by the end of the novel she is a beloved, baptized member of a Christian church who ultimately becomes a missionary to Africa.

Walker follows Stowe's initiative enough to create recognizable characters, and she too encourages comparisons between the two girls by giving them the same size and approximate age. But Walker breaks with pictorial tradition by refusing to place Eva and Topsy face to face. Rather than model their physiognomic virtue and vice, Walker's Topsy and Eva are locked in a vicious cycle of cruelty in which Topsy chases Eva with a sharp stake and Eva forgoes "moral eminence" for the possibility of maiming with an ax. Further, Walker shows that Eva is neither princelike, nor tragic; instead, Eva is simply untenable. Stowe's Eva claims that slavery's evils cause her pain—they "sink into her heart"—yet her existence depends on them. Her model of coherence—her white femininity—requires slavery. Walker notes, "The other aspect of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that was of interest to me was how much more it had to do with little Eva, than the slaves who are kind of filling out the scene, insofar as she's the one who an audience, and who Harriet Beecher Stowe, has to cry over. So the central figure in *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* is Eva on the chopping block."<sup>35</sup> Eva's visual prominence in Walker's installation



FIGURE 10

Illustration for Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (Boston: Houghton, Osgood, 1879), 288.

makes her function within the mechanics of Stowe's sentimental story explicit: it is the death of a white girl that galvanizes readers' antislavery sentiments, rather than the tragically circumscribed lives of the slaves who surround her.

Eva's death requires what Linda Williams refers to as "interracial witness[ing]"—the presence of an audience who recognizes suffering and sacrifice across racial lines.<sup>36</sup> This exchange is recursive; as Williams points out, slaves gathered around Eva's bed weep for her impending death, and then she weeps for their enslavement. Ultimately, Stowe's "use of tears to cross racial barriers" creates opportunities for readers to experience racialized sympathy and "emotional intimacy."<sup>37</sup> Walker's silhouettes acknowledge the importance of witnessing by deliberately interrupting it. Eva is considered by a lone little boy whose emotional state is unknowable; meanwhile, Topsy is clearly engaged in something more aggressive, and less benevolent, than witnessing. Further, Topsy is stubbornly unrepentant and refuses to be converted, which forestalls Eva's inevitable progression toward death. Without a witness, Eva cannot die. Blocked from her destiny, and stalled in her narrative trajectory, Eva reveals herself as unstable and dependent on others' behavior for

a sense of self. In Stowe's version, Eva asks for scissors to cut off locks of her hair, which she gives to her gathered, crying family and slaves as keepsakes. In Walker's version, Eva has an ax rather than scissors; when she tries to chop off her hair, she will surely leave a more gruesome memento. As Walker notes, "I have her here, poised to chop off her head, and meanwhile, things are spiraling downhill around her."<sup>38</sup>

Illustrations of Tom and Eva are striking for the consistency with which Tom and Eva are physically touching, often in intimate situations. Whether Eva is reading to Tom with her hand on his leg, writing his letter home while sitting between his legs on his chair, or—as in this illustration from an 1897 edition—Tom is carrying the dying Eva on a pillow down to their favorite spot by the lake, illustrations of Tom and Eva consistently put them in close, physical contact (fig. 11). Stowe uses Eva's father, St. Clare, who watches Eva place her hand on Topsy's shoulder, to explain this interracial touching: "St. Clare, at this instant, dropped the curtain. 'It puts me in mind of mother,' he said to Miss Ophelia. 'It is true what she told me; if we want to give sight to the blind, we must be willing to do as Christ did,—call them to us, and *put our hands on them*.'"<sup>39</sup> Marcus Wood points out that this level of physical intimacy was exciting to readers precisely because it was so far removed from their lived experiences: "This . . . was charming, thrilling, peculiar and sentimental, and above all completely divorced from Victorian domestic life and sexuality. Tom's de-sexualisation is paradoxically determined by the readiness with which the illustrators of the day flung him and Eva together."<sup>40</sup>

Hortense Spillers agrees with the "thrilling" quality of Tom and Eva's relationship, but offers a different explanation for why it was permissible. Spillers argues that Tom and Eva are both deeply sexualized characters whose literary pairing renders them representative of that "dyadic taboo . . . the 'black man' and the 'white woman.'"<sup>41</sup> She reads Eva's active participation in the negotiations for Tom's purchase as revelatory of white women's repressed sexuality. When Eva says to her father, "You have money enough, I know. I want him," she is voicing the desire that, for Anglo-American women, had been "silenced, cut out, banished, 'killed' off." Eva represents "the symptoms of a disturbed female sexuality that American women of Stowe's era could neither articulate nor cancel." In short, Spillers argues, Stowe uses Eva and her prepubescent innocence of sexuality to filter the message and make it palatable for "polite readers, who wanted women but not sex."<sup>42</sup>

Likewise, Spillers points out that Tom—who is specifically captivated by Eva's white-skinned, blonde-haired, and blue-eyed physicality (and who, despite being imprisoned, has an abundance of toys in his pockets with which to seduce this "angel . . . stepped out of his New Testament"<sup>43</sup>)—is also a vector for redirected sexuality: "In fact, Tom must remain under cover, in the dark. Doing so, he not only satisfies his culture's, this fiction's, need to estrange his sexuality by rendering it "exotic" and unspeakable, but he also rewards his observer's fear that he has "one." Negation becomes here an alternative route to confirmation."<sup>44</sup> Spillers's argument articulates what many pictorial representations of Tom and Eva's relationship suggest: it is not accidental that they depict a black man and a white woman as a physically intimate couple. This tension is part of what makes





FIGURE 11

Illustration by Gaillard for Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Onkel Toms stuga: En skildring af de förtrycktes lif* (Brooklyn, NY: Elias Johnson, 1897), 469, Swedish edition.

Tom and Eva recognizable in spite of the radically different illustration styles and traditions employed, sometimes within the same novel.

It is, perhaps, the inability to locate this familiar love story that proves most problematic for viewers of *The End of Uncle Tom*. Walker disrupts the textual coupling of Eva and Tom three times. First, she places a number of characters between them to prevent any Christian touching or asexual wanting or captivity. Next, she sets them facing away from each other. Not only will Eva and Tom not touch, but also they will not see; they will not be engaged in the other's story. Finally, viewers knowledgeable about such public antimiscegenation spectacles as lynchings and D. W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation* will realize that the real danger for Tom is represented by Eva's ax. The dangerously wielded blade promises an awkward embrace at best; at worst it threatens bodily harm.





FIGURE 12

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995.  
Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

### TROUBLING SEXUALITY

Three black women, probably enslaved, have slipped away from the field to take a break from picking cotton, which tumbles from a carefully balanced, overflowing basket (fig. 12). The three, naked from the waist up, are using this stolen moment to engage in a triangle of mutual exchange. All are either nursing or being nursed—the only one left out is the baby girl. As clear as the characters and setting are, the precise nature of this exchange is troublingly mysterious: is it about reclaiming stolen time, stolen energy, stolen bodies? The image signifies nurturance and parenting, but it also suggests sexuality and neglect.

This detail, which anchors the leftmost side of *The End of Uncle Tom*, has received considerable critical attention. Scholars have used numerous approaches in its interpretation, including psychoanalytic theory, the representation of mammy figures, and the

abuse of black women's bodies.<sup>45</sup> It has not, however, been read closely alongside *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yet this trio, like other figural groups in the installation, both references Stowe's novel and blocks readers from using its narrative to explain the unusual activity taking place on the wall.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* includes three light-skinned black women whose literary beings are defined, in part, through their troubled familial relationships and through their extreme desirability. Stowe introduces Eliza through an itemized list of features. She is a "young quadroon woman," about twenty-five years old, with a "rich, full, dark eye . . . long lashes . . . ripples of silky black hair," a "finely moulded shape," and a quick, becoming blush that surfaces when Haley, the slave trader, examines these parts in "bold and undisguised admiration."<sup>46</sup> At first Eliza is, like Tom, uninterested in escaping, even when her husband runs away, and she uses piety to explain her explicit preference for a peaceful life with her owners. Eliza's beauty and sexuality may be appreciated by others—the narrative and the illustrations encourage the reader to do so—but she expresses only the chaste desires of motherhood and wifely duty. When she discovers that her small son is to be sold, however, the news galvanizes a complete and radical personality change.

Cassy, the first mistress of Legree, is also striking, and Stowe introduces her with a physical description: "a woman, tall and slenderly formed, with remarkably delicate hands and feet[,] . . . between thirty-five and forty"; a face that "could never be forgotten"; a high forehead; "eyebrows marked with beautiful clearness"; a "straight, well-formed nose"; a "finely-cut mouth"; a "graceful[ly] contour[ed] . . . head and neck."<sup>47</sup> Cassy is immediately defined in sexual terms: Stowe explains that she has been raped by Legree for the past five years. Cassy's relationship to her children is deeply troubled: two were sold, and she killed another with her own hands.

Emmeline, the third of these women, is "a young girl of fifteen." She is "a quadroon, as may be seen from her fairer complexion." She has "soft, dark eyes, with long . . . lashes," and her hair "is of a luxuriant brown." She "is dressed with great neatness" and has "white, delicate hands."<sup>48</sup> When introduced, Emmeline is a child-daughter, but after she is sold and separated from her mother, she is quickly and violently transformed into Legree's sexual prisoner and Cassy's rival. Eventually she slips into the role of Cassy's surrogate daughter while continuing to suffer as co-mistress to Legree.

In the novel all three women must undergo radical transformations in order to escape. Cassy and Emmeline execute a daring and comedic flight from Legree by turning into ghosts for a period of several weeks while they live in the garret and wait for an opportune moment to slip out of the house. They go so far as to appear disguised as specters to Legree and the other slaves. Eliza, meanwhile, undergoes an equally dramatic transformation, passing as a white man just long enough to slip across the Canadian border, where guards are on the lookout for runaway slaves. Eliza's son Harry does the same, slipping into the guise of a little white girl. Before the novel ends, however, all three are reabsorbed into a patriarchal, heteronormative family unit, and all three go to great lengths to reassert their black identity. Eliza and George, her husband, are reunited. Fate

reveals that Eliza was Cassy's daughter, who had been sold into slavery, and they re-form their family. Emmeline becomes Cassy's adopted daughter, and there is even a hint that she will be paired with Cassy's long lost son when he too is reunited with the family. And all, following George's fervent political desire, move to Africa.

Walker intervenes by rendering Stowe's narrative strategy explicit. Her silhouette represents three young, seminaked black women who—with their arched backs and slender bodies—refocus viewers' attention on Stowe's use of sexual desirability as a tool in the process of eliciting viewer empathy. Eliza, Cassy, and Emmeline are meant to elicit desire—unlike other black women in the story such as Chloe, Prue, Lucy, or the St. Clare Mammy—by way of their beautiful, sexualized bodies. They are also meant to elicit empathy by way of their tragic stories and strong self-identification as mothers, wives, and daughters. The beauty and sensuality of Eliza, Cassy, and Emmeline are available to the novel's readers and viewers in ways that they are not accessible to the characters themselves; however, any guilt that might come from appreciating their literary or visual bodies may be offset by the reader's empathetic understanding of their unfortunate circumstances. Walker makes this trade-off explicit by giving her characters the same awareness of their own beauty and hypersexualized bodies that viewers have. The women act out Stowe's fantasy of voyeuristic sensual availability, but by defying the narrative, they block viewers' attempts to empathize with their circumstances, which remain opaque.

At the same time, Walker also puts familial tragedy on display. In the novel, one woman is a motherless child, another is a childless mother, and the third a mother in danger of losing her child. The silhouette alludes to all three of these outcomes at once, since the baby girl, balanced precariously on one woman's knee, will at least go hungry—but may well slip away entirely. Instead of using desirability to elicit empathy for these characters' tragic circumstances, Walker juxtaposes desire and tragedy uncomfortably and, ultimately, raises questions about the coexistence of sexual and maternal identities—in her work, and in Stowe's.

In a 1997 interview, Walker was asked about the metaphorical implications of the nursing women. She replied, "My constant need or, in general, a constant need to suckle from history, as though history could be seen as a seemingly endless supply of mother's milk represented by the big black mammy of old. For myself I have this constant battle—this fear of weaning. It's really a battle that I apply to the black community as well, because all of our progress is predicated on having a very tactile link to a brutal past."<sup>49</sup> If the adult women understand who they are in the present by staying connected with a racist and violent past, then it is the baby girl who is truly in limbo. In Walker's *The End of Uncle Tom*, children outnumber adults by a ratio of eight to seven. While Stowe's use of children is largely sacrificial—they are either killed or threatened in order to show the unnaturalness of slavery—Walker uses children to pose visually rhetorical questions about the future. Neglected, this infant is cut off from her own history—but might that allow her to imagine a future that is not defined in terms of race and gender? There is great pain and great potential in this situation: though the loneliness of



FIGURE 13

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995.

Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

being without family is appalling, severing ties with the past might be liberating.

### IMAGINING HOME

Domestic spaces, as others have noted, frame much of the action in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Beginning with Tom's cabin and the Shelby plantation, and continuing through the properties of St. Clare and Legree, Mr. and Mrs. Bird, John Van Trompe, Rachel Halliday, and finally George and Eliza's home in Montreal, much of the important verbal and physical action that powers the novel occurs in someone's home. Furthermore, it is in the spaces between homes that much of the violence is transacted: Eliza's flight across the river, the shootout between George and the trader Haley, Lucy's suicide, St. Clare's stabbing, and Tom's beating and his eventual death. The exception is the interior of Legree's home, where Cassy and Emmeline are both raped, and where a black woman was imprisoned and possibly tortured. It is significant that Legree's home is described in terms that are deliberately not "homey," and his exception proves the rule. The concept of "home" serves a variety of symbolic functions. Linda Williams points out that in addition to representing safety and reunion, interior spaces enable and shelter interracial society: "From the very beginning the special virtue of Uncle Tom's cabin (both novel and home) lies in its representation of interracial sympathy: a humble black man is taught to read scripture by his white master's son."<sup>50</sup>

Walker constructs a specific and antagonistic relationship between her characters and their homes—one that goes against Stowe's own theorization of home.<sup>51</sup> Two structures anchor the background of *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (figs. 13 and 14). On the left is a large two-story house with windows and two projections that might be chimneys. The house is set just to the side of a meandering river, and a large, perfectly formed tree leans close, as if to shelter the house from the elements. It is bordered on one side by an out-of-place palm tree and a tiny hut, and on the other by an ambiguous area that might be a planted field. The landscape around this home is devoid of human presence. The homestead to the right is of significantly more modest proportions. A small hut with a window, a porch, and a smoking chimney hugs



FIGURE 14

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

the base of a tree. This image contains human figures, and they are engaged in very earthly activities. A figure in a skirt watches from the porch as another figure in pants sprints—arms outstretched—toward an outhouse.

The miniature scale of the two properties renders distance a central, if unnamed, character in this installation. The characters in the foreground are far from their homes. They are not displaced—they can see their way back—but they have chosen to perform their various activities rather far away. The distancing also points out the myth of spatial separation: the houses may tell a familiar plantation story of whites and blacks occupying separate spheres, but the bodies in the foreground commingle and coexist in close proximity. The white bodies that are missing from the larger house show up in the field. The urgently visible black bodies in the smaller house suggest biological necessity, naturalize spectatorship, and echo the scatological theme that is carried out so blatantly in the foreground.

Williams identifies an anxiety within Stowe's visual construction of "home" that is generated by the question of how the two races "so melodramatically entwined within the novel in their mutual sorrows shall live together when the sorrows of slavery have passed."<sup>52</sup> Walker capitalizes on this anxiety by setting her version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within viewing distance of—but deliberately separated from—the domestic spaces that give so much comfort in Stowe's novel. Walker's characters show the same potential for interracial society; but because they are denied the sentimental familiarity of Stowe's settings, they also reveal the desires that power the author's narrative strategy. Walker suggests what domestic space might look like in the wake of slavery, revealing what Stowe could not write: a futuristic United States, extrapolated from the novel's present, in which free blacks and whites live together. Rather than consider how this might unfold, Stowe imbued the patriarch of her intact black family with a desire to move to Africa.



FIGURE 15

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995. Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

Each group in *The End of Uncle Tom* simultaneously references and challenges the idea of a traditional family unit. Tom, tied and beaten, gives birth while a half-woman observes; Legree rapes his child-mistress and kills their baby; Topsy and Eva are left to raise themselves and to co-mother the little boy who looks on; the trio of nursing women excludes men and heterosexual activity, ignoring both the origins and presence of the baby girl. The exception is the meandering toddler who marks both time and linear progress with piles of excrement (fig. 15). This child has no family. She is, however, the only character who has found a way to migrate; the others are fixed. She is the only one who makes noise, defying the mute property of the image. With her tambourine, steady march, rhythmic defecation, and single, oversized boot, she is up to something rather different than the other characters.

This toddler's connection to Stowe's novel is less clear than that of the silhouettes of Tom and Legree; however, Walker has offered a few interpretive clues to her role. The figure is drawn from "a mythological image of that person who has been caged or the animal that's been caged and it's flinging excrement at viewers in the zoo. . . . That's the last thing you've got, it's the one thing you can make physically; when you can't make it anymore, that might be the end."<sup>53</sup> Regarding the single boot, "it's something that she's got, something that's hers, one shoe, a little bit of self-control, a little bit of agency."<sup>54</sup> The child refuses to map herself onto a recognizable character and yet, in doing so, resonates with the narratively intrusive reinterpretations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offered by myriad artists.

*Uncle Tom's Cabin* is remarkable for the frequency with which the same artists who restage it also change basic elements of its narrative structure—from extratextual illustrations to the elimination or radical reworking of stock characters and contexts in television and film versions—in order to accommodate evolving notions about the appropriate





FIGURE 16

Kara Walker, detail from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, 1995.  
Cut paper on wall, installation dimensions variable, approximately 156 × 420 inches (396.2 × 1066.8 cm).

representation of race. The extratextual child who asserts her being through graphic displays of self-possession may well interrupt viewers' attempts to suspend disbelief and may cause them to remember *Uncle Tom's Cabin* through these illustrations. In doing so, the child reenacts the creative reworking of the story—but, importantly, without any attempt to justify it. In the historiography of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the child makes explicitly strange what others have attempted to naturalize: the urgency with which artists take up this story, only to rework it from the inside out. Her smallness, and her singular mobility, may represent the contradictory capacity of classic stories to expand and contract over time without seeming to lose their recognizability.

Two women appear from behind an ornamental gash of white, an erasing presence that blends benignly into the wall (fig. 16). They might represent the two women who bracket the beginning and ending of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Chloe and Mrs. Shelby. The woman to the left has the rounded features and headscarf of Walker's black characters. Leaning forward, one arm raised and finger pointed accusingly, she is looking at something or someone and wants the observed to know that she is watching. A small black girl, tucked under her skirts, gazes on the scene before her, one girlish braid echoing her protector's accusing gesture. The woman on the right has the small pointed features of Walker's white characters. Her back to the shadow play, she raises one arm as though to ward off a blow.

These women have been arranged differently when *The End of Uncle Tom* has been installed in different locations. Here, they are back to back, and the black woman on the left seems to be interrogating Uncle Tom while the white woman to the right reacts to something just beyond the boundaries of this installation. In another configuration they are separated: the black woman retains her placement, while the white woman is reversed and placed just to the left of the nursing trio of women. This second arrangement gives the impression that the black woman is engaged in the action, and that the white woman leans away from it, warding it away with her upraised arm. Importantly, in both configurations, the figures emerge from the “erasing” whiteness of the wall.

The two shadows have stepped out from behind an apparently empty swath of white wall, and their appearance is the only way that viewers discover that the arabesque of “nothingness” is in fact a significant presence. The whiteness of the wall has no form without something against which it can be contrasted. The emergence of the two women, frozen in midcreation, implies not only that all the characters have appeared in this manner but also that the “nothingness” had to give birth to the characters in order to make itself visible. A visual double-entendre, the emerging women tease viewers with dual possibilities: either they have partly escaped from an erasing whiteness, or they are in fact half-creatures—creatures who might seem whole from the front, but who are revealed as partial in silhouette.

In some ways, these women seem the furthest removed from the self-contained fictional world of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Pointing toward it, or warding it away, they suggest the seamlessness with which this story and these characters might blend into other stories and characters—an effect that is even stronger when *The End of Uncle Tom* fills just one wall of a multiwall installation, as has been the case in past exhibitions. At the same time, this diversion from Stowe's narrative makes a compelling point. In the absence of names, characters, desires, or backstories with which to identify these women, viewers look to the evidence at hand: two women; one black and one white, one accusatory and one defensive. And this is enough to suggest what kinds of roles these women might play in the southern antebellum wallscape that stretches out before them. In the absence of other clues to these characters' circumstances, the presence of race, and racial contrast, is enough to continue the story.

. . .

Kara Walker notes that *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* reflects her desire to continue the story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within a landscape drawn from literary depictions of the antebellum South. That the story takes place in heaven, according to the extended title, suggests in a literal sense that its actions follow on from Eva's death. More allegorically (also following from the extended title), perhaps the actions follow the death of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a single-author work and its rebirth as a cultural phenomenon—a creative genre that continues to inspire in spite of, or perhaps because of, its internal conflicts. If the tableau, set in heaven, is representative of

the novel's afterlife in myriad nonliterary forms, then the work asks the viewer to adopt a kind of omniscient, or at least multidimensional, view in order to see both the characters' literary origins and the kinds of trajectories those origins initiated.

Walker's commitment to "continuing the story" means, in this case, more than retelling; it means continuing *on*—expanding the story, making it something greater than the original, and showing some of the startling potentialities embedded in familiar characters. Close attention to the intersection of both works bears this out. Walker's installation reveals a deep and sustained engagement with the novel; however, her images also reveal an engagement with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in an expanded sense—a sense that includes the novel, the late twentieth-century criticism of the novel, and its histories of reception and reinvention. Attentive looking reveals that the apparent disjuncture between Stowe's novel and Walker's installation may in fact be a portrait of the varied uses to which the story has been put over time as characters migrate from their literary origins while remaining entrapped by them. Indeed, it may be helpful to consider *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as both a single novel and a much larger field of creative activity—a genre—in which many artists have worked.

Walker contributes to this genre by illustrating the cultural phenomenon in which the novel is embedded, and by intervening in its normal functions—by seducing viewers into engaging with a seemingly familiar story, while simultaneously working to interrupt the willing suspension of disbelief necessary to make the story coherent. Illustrating a genre offers a way of theorizing this work that accounts for the ways in which Walker's tableau simultaneously roots itself in a fictional scenario and departs from it. When viewers engage with Walker's work, they not only recognize specific characters and relationships but also encounter condensations of the public, collective phantasms they have inspired—phantasms that continue to shape the cultural imaginary.

Using the silhouette as an illustrative tool is a highly effective, strategic choice, one that simultaneously eliminates psychological context and merges disparate versions of the same story. Silhouettes render Walker's characters impenetrable to viewers. They seem familiar but engage in activity that defies the narrative structure of Stowe's novel. They don't behave as they are supposed to—and further, they resist viewers' efforts to imagine their motivations. Evoking, then interrupting, the narrative makes it possible to see what the suspension of disbelief normally hides: that empathetic projection is essential to the coherence of Stowe's narrative.

Why is this kind of intervention necessary? The characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are not inherently dangerous, but empathetic participation in racialized, sexualized violence threatens to uphold racist ways of seeing individuals and consuming stories. Walker's intervention interrogates how and why viewers think it appropriate to understand the subjective experiences of raced and gendered individuals and to find their violated and sexually available bodies entertaining. Marianne Noble suggests that the strategies of sadomasochistic pleasure that made *Uncle Tom's Cabin* so popular could be regarded as "violat[ing] all human decency and compassion" and "perpetuat[ing] racist stereotypes," but that they

must also be regarded as the techniques that “awakened abolitionist passions in many citizens who had grown accustomed to rationalizing slavery.”<sup>55</sup> I extend her analysis to encompass not only Stowe’s novel but also the genre it inspired, which remains active today. “Sympathy” Noble argues, “is a dangerous form of political thought, tending to objectify the other and re-create that other in one’s own image. But as history demonstrates, a *lack* of sympathy is even more dangerous.”<sup>56</sup> Walker’s project, as demonstrated in *The End of Uncle Tom*, shows us that the mechanisms that generate this ambivalent sympathy—or empathy—are at the very heart of the danger Noble describes and of an American storytelling industry.