CENSORSHIP AND RECEPTION

The whole gamut of images of black people, whether by black people or not, are free rein in my mind. Each of my pieces picks and chooses willy-nilly from images that are fairly benign to fairly charged. They're acting out whatever they're acting out in the same plane; everybody's reduced to the same thing. They would fail in all respects of appealing to a die-hard racist. The audience has to deal with their own prejudices or fear or desires when they look at these images. So if anything, my work attempts to take those "pickaninny" images and put them up there and eradicate them.

—Kara Walker, quoted in Hilarie Sheets, "Cut It Out!" Artnews, April 2002

In July 1999 the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) was preparing to open an exhibition titled "Where the Girls Are: Prints by Women from the DIA's Collection," when a decision was made to pull a work by Walker from display. The print A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts (1995; figure 25) was deemed too controversial by the administration of the museum and its advisory group, the Friends of African and African American Art. The work consists of five connecting scenes set in a linear, rectangular format. In the first section is a half-clothed woman with
a naked boy hanging from her breast, followed by the small figure of a young girl riding a fox backwards, then a woman leaping across what has been described as a river using partially submerged heads for stepping stones; next, a head and hand rise from the water, and last, a corpulent man strangles an emaciated young girl.

While the figures of *A Means to an End* may be read within an American historical context of racialized sexual depravity, a disturbing encounter of masters/mistresses and their helpful/helpless slaves, they also fit within a Western art historical tradition that goes back to the late gothic Netherlandish painting of Hieronymous Bosch. In his most famous work, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (ca. 1500; plate 8), Bosch depicted a tumult of licentious behavior between white and black figures in a pastoral setting of sin and seduction. Details of black male figures swimming through water and mounting white women, people riding beasts and black women with fruit on their heads to symbolize their carnality, flowers sprouting from anuses, all echo in the scenes that make up Walker’s suite of prints. Further, the Garden’s large scale (it is 2 meters high, roughly 7 feet) and its tumultuous composition of cavorting characters is very similar in impact to *The End of Uncle Tom* and other silhouette wall installations made by Walker in the mid-1990s.

The grotesque phantasmagoria found in *A Means to an End* continues to demonstrate Walker’s interest in the carnivalesque. The figure of the girl astride the fox resurrects the stock character of the fool riding backwards on an ass. This conical pairing can be seen in carnival representations as early as *Balli di Stesania* by the seventeenth-century French caricaturist Jacques Callot. It is also found in slightly altered form as late as Henri de Toulouse Lautrec’s *Une Redoute a Moulin Rouge* from 1893, which pictures bare-breasted showgirls sitting atop donkeys and cattle and surrounded by clowns of various sorts.

“Just as carnival challenges the narrow authority of Lent, so carnivalesque imagery has acted as a corrective to each successive hegemony in the visual arts,” notes curator Timothy Hyman in the exhibition catalogue *Carnivalesque*. So it should not be surprising that the topsy-turvy nature of Walker’s work, the abject effrontery of it, led to its eventual censorship. The decision in Detroit to pull *A Means to an End* from “Where the Girls Are” was due to a long-standing conservatism in certain segments of the African American art world about the acceptability of controversial racial and sexual content. “The organization didn’t feel that this was an appropriate time for the display of the work,” said Samuel Thomas, chair of the Friends of African and African American Art. “It’s primarily because it’s controversial and there’s no clear art-historical position with respect to [Walker’s] work,” he explained.²

Today, conservative African American fear of negative racial imagery is particularly strong. “We believe that it is our responsibility to present controversial art in a way that helps our visitors to understand the work and the artist’s intent,” said Maurice Parrish, the DIA’s interim director. “In this instance, we determined that we could not present the work with the appropriate didactic material. Because we were concerned that we could not present it properly, we decided to exclude the piece from this particular exhibition.”³ This is in part because many African Americans are continuously aware of being judged in relation to preconceived racial prejudices, despite the gains of the civil rights movement.⁴

Cultural constructions of the African American image as hypersexual, lazy, and brutal subhuman creatures still permeate racial discourse in the United States, and Kara Walker’s representation in her work of these stereotypical signs of corrupt blackness coupled with images of perverted whiteness challenges the limits of what is tolerable to a community striving to overcome the impact of two centuries of negative imagery. Ironically, this overwhelming fear of sanctioning a potentially negative presentation of blackness on the part of the African American middle class has been a strong force fueling Walker’s meteoric success. This antagonism has served to disconnect the artist from certain reactionary elements of the African American art community while ensoncing her within the mainstream art world.

To understand why *A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts* was censored at the DIA we must examine the constituencies concerned with Walker’s work: the mainstream, white-dominated art world and the African American art community. By comparing the gendered reception of
Walker’s work with that of other controversial African American artists, I situate her artistic practice within these fundamentally different milieus of reception. By illuminating a limited number of key issues essential to the reactionary arguments against her work, I argue that confrontation with, rather than censorship of, the art’s unspeakable content is a difficult choice that the American art world must soon find the courage to make.

In the spring of 1993, a controversy similar to the one in Detroit erupted at the University of Missouri, Saint Louis (UMSL) over the display of a painting by African American artist Robert Colescott (b. 1925) in a public space on the school’s campus. The title of the work, Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck (1976; figure 26), a reinterpretation of Jan Van Eyck’s The Wedding of Arnolfini (1434; figure 27), referenced both an undependable type of birth control and a talent for musicality stereotypically held by African Americans. By employing his signature technique of loose and expressionistic brushwork, Colescott subverted the hard-edged clarity of form that made The Wedding of Arnolfini one of the most famous early oil paintings in Western art history. The palette of fluorescent pinks and greens further emphasized the act of reinterpretation. However, in Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck, the chief shift in content made by Colescott came with the replacement of the figure of the Flemish bride with a black-skinned, pink-lipped caricature of a black woman.

Colescott chose the Van Eyck painting for reinterpretation during an artistic phase when he was reworking many of the classics of academic art history because of its status as one of the first European oil paintings. It remains one of the germinal works of Western art history, a piece that most students of the discipline are taught to regard as key to the beginnings of modern artistic method and practice. Whole books, even careers have been devoted to the painting and its study. Colescott’s artistic method at one time consisted of inserting provocative racial and sexual imagery into iconic scenes. This was part of his investigation into, and the illumination of, the absence/presence of the African and African American subject/object in Western art history, and it was at the center of his personal effort to maintain a certain racial tension in the 1970s art world. The works he produced during this period are ironic and allegorical, satirical and sociological. They include versions of Emmanuel Leutze’s Washington Crossing the Delaware, which became George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook, and Vincent Van Gogh’s The Potato Eaters, which became Eat Den Taters. When made aware of the controversy surrounding Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck by a newspaper columnist, Colescott reacted wearily, “I get this all the time … what happens is this: some African Americans see my painting and get upset. Then the curators get nervous. We don’t want to upset black folks, because then we’d be racist, and we’re not racist even though we belong to a white club and live in a white neighborhood. So if a black person complains, we must take it down because we are good liberals. But it’s still censorship.”

Figure 26. Robert Colescott, Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck, 1976. Collection of Robert H. Orchard, St. Louis, Missouri.
Figure 27. Jan Van Eyck, The Wedding of Arnolfini, 1434. Oil on oak panel, 82 x 60 cm. National Gallery of London.
Over the six months following *Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck*’s initial display in the lobby of Lucas Hall at UMSL, a battle took place between the school’s administration and a small group of students, faculty, and staff who claimed to represent the university’s African American community. The majority of the protestors who made their voices heard through demonstrations, panel discussions, and the press justified their opposition on moral grounds and issues of taste. Many had reached the conclusion that the artist’s intervention into the content of the Van Eyck painting changed the story of the picture into a lewd and offensive parody. For some spectators, it was no longer a documentation of a wedding between social peers but instead depicted the interracial wedding of a white groom to a pregnant black bride. Others took a far dimmer view of it and saw it as the representation of a white slave master and his black mistress. “That painting lacked grace, poise, and dignity,” claimed Norman Seay, the director of the university’s Office for Equal Opportunity. “It reinforced for me the plantation ethic of the master in charge, violating the dignity of any female African-American he chose.”9 The image of miscegenation (a derogatory term generally defined as “the interbreeding of what are presumed to be distinct human races, especially marriage between white and nonwhite persons,” a label of sexual and social transgression in American society that arose just before the Civil War) that the painting offered was one that could not be tolerated by the painting’s opponents at UMSL.10

Some spectators found themselves confronted with their deepest fantasies, fears, and culturally constructed fictions. “My gut reaction to the painting was one of total outrage,” said Karl Beeler, assistant to the vice chancellor of student affairs at UMSL. “I felt shame because you would think in this day of so-called enlightenment that people would realize that these kinds of images still have a stinging effect.” But some African American community members at UMSL voiced complaints that were less focused on the actual painting at issue than on their feelings of disenfranchisement. They felt that they had enough negative images and realities confronting them when they were off campus. To these spectators it did not matter that the creator of the image was also African American; what was important to them was that a derogatory visual image of a black woman was being displayed in their learning environment. “I personally take this position [against the display of the work],” explained Nicholas Wren, the president of the Associated Black Collegians of UMSL. “Because as an African student, I should not have to look at the degradation of African woman [sic] with the implication of them being portrayed as ‘pregnant mammies.’”11 Spectators like Wren believed that the university should provide a sanctuary for its members from the routine racism they encounter on a daily basis. Confronted with racially transgressive imagery in the university, these members of the African American community attempted to gain control over this particular representation of blackness. Norman Seay advocated replacing *Natural Rhythm* with decidedly middlebrow fare. He suggested that “other subjects by African-American artists” would be preferable to the one chosen by Colescott. “Maybe a still life or portraits of African-American women in history,” he suggested. “We need pictures that are upbeat and positive.”12

A few months after the painting was removed from Lucas Hall a decision was made to reinstall it on campus in the main reference room of the Thomas Jefferson Library.13 *Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck* was hung above a small conference table where a comment book and a binder full of newspaper clippings relating to the controversy were placed. Spectators were urged to express themselves on the pages of the comment book, which was filled in a few days.

In a situation similar to the censoring of *A Means to an End: A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, the events in St. Louis surrounding the display of *Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck* demonstrate the limits of what constitutes acceptable free speech in segments of the middle-class African American community. When a comparable community in Detroit, the DIA’s Friends of African and African American Art, was confronted with a far more graphically vivid image of sexualized bodies in a racialized context, they reacted in a parallel manner.

In the censoring of *A Means to an End* the DIA adopted a type of hands-off curatorial method often used in the display of Walker’s work. However, here this laissez faire attitude was taken to a new extreme in which
the safety of omission was deemed preferable to the challenge of explanation. This bypassed the precedent set by Gary Garrels, former chief curator and curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, who organized Walker’s “An Outline: Upon My Many Masters” exhibition. Garrels, who was by that time already a veteran of several contemporary art museums and who is presently a curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, chose to fashion an exhibition brochure for this show out of a previously published interview with the artist that he then prefaced with a short introduction. When confronted with the challenging task of didactic explanation of particular pieces, he opted to let the artist and the art speak for themselves. The museum did, however, post a sign at the entrance of the gallery, warning parents and other visitors to beware of the violent and sexual nature of what they were about to encounter.

In Detroit this same type of removed attitude about the art landed the curatorial staff in a bind. “I don’t think the volatility of the piece was anticipated in preparation for the exhibition,” explained DIA curator Nancy Sojka. “There was concern expressed about showing it and it sort of mounted. We didn’t anticipate it would be so painfully felt.” In her interpretation of the situation, Sojka revealed the underlying problem as that of a museum that was out of touch and unprepared to address important concerns of a specific segment of its audience. All this implies that, while the “painful” nature of the work was one reason given not to display A Means to an End, the absence of a historian of contemporary art comfortable discussing issues of race and representation on the DIA staff was probably closer to the real reason the museum decided to pull the piece from view. Had there been someone who could authoritatively explain and defend the work’s presence to the Friends of African and African American Art, they may have been less threatened by the confrontational nature of the work. And though the acting director of the DIA at the time, Maurice Parrish, was African American, there was no culturally and critically sensitive curator on staff prepared to assume the task at hand.

It is important to note that the museum has since hired a curator to cover this important area. In autumn 2001 Valerie Mercer, formerly of the Studio Museum in Harlem, was appointed the curator for the General Motors Center for African American Art at the DIA. “The development of the General Motors Center for African American Art is a natural extension of the DIA’s commitment to African American art, and will provide a stimulating new dimension to our collections,” said Graham W. J. Beal, the new director of the DIA. “We intend to create a center of excellence in this area, which will prove to be an invaluable resource for scholars and collectors, as it will house a specialized library related to works by African American artists.”

Because there are so few informed curators available to bring a racially sensitive perspective to exhibition content and didactic text, many mainstream institutions have often turned to citizens groups to aid them in better serving the black community. These groups and committees are generally made up of trustees, local collectors, and academics from the surrounding area, on the whole a conservative pool to draw from. They are asked to offer their opinions on and support for the African American–related exhibitions and programming at the institution, but they are not staff members and therefore cannot affect planning and execution in the same way. In some instances, in the case of the Africana Arts Committee at the Saint Louis Art Museum, for example, one of the committee’s chief objectives is to increase the number of works by African and African American artists in the collection. This work is in line with the aims of both Du Bois and Locke, who eagerly sought opportunities for the display of African American art in a public context.

Once works by African American artists are accessioned into a museum’s collection it becomes the responsibility of the institution’s staff to place them on public view and to display them “properly.” It is a task that cannot be accomplished if the museum lacks qualified staff to do so and, as seen in the case of A Means to an End, one that is sometimes at odds with the middle-class sensibilities of committee members. Although the work was originally acquired by the DIA in 1995, it remains to be seen when and how it will be displayed, if ever. In a similar situation, shortly after the Natural Rhythm debate, the Saint Louis Art Museum acquired
a different painting by Colescott, titled *Christina’s Day Off*. The painting was placed in storage for several months until the curatorial staff felt that a satisfactory didactic panel, which had been vetted by the Africana Arts Committee and approved by the museum’s director, had been written to accompany the painting on display.18

In the case of *Christina’s Day Off*, didactics made the difference, yet explanatory texts are often not a part of current curatorial practice. Many curators who deal with contemporary artists do not feel that an interpretive stance is appropriate. This attitude is indicative of a liberal, avant garde art world that does not deign to assess work with content-driven or aesthetics-driven commentary. Unfortunately, it is a position that is at odds with the middle-class art-viewing public, whose expectations of what constitutes a satisfactory cultural experience are decidedly different. This situation will remain, due to the gulf between these significantly disparate museum audiences, represented by auxiliaries like the DIA’s Friends of African and African American Art, who have censored Walker’s work, and the SFMOMA’s Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, who have supported it.

In addition to facing censurorous attacks, Walker has had to endure the wrath of those critical of her success. In 1997, when she received the MacArthur Foundation’s “genius” grant, many senior African American artists were outraged that such a young woman (Walker was in fact the youngest artist ever to receive the award) should have been lauded with such a high honor. They felt that she had not paid her dues and that she did not realize the full impact of her work.19 That same year, Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955), an African American artist of a slightly older generation who examines the world of post–civil rights African America through the lens of commemoration and kitsch and the false promises of bourgeois society, also won a MacArthur award. And yet, perhaps due to his age or gender, or the fact that his work does not contain overtly sexual or violent content, the lauding of Marshall went virtually unchallenged compared to the reception that the younger artist’s work has met.

One person who does not see the postmodern irony of Walker’s work is the septuagenarian assemblage artist Betye Saar. Saar has been among the most vocal critics from the African American artistic community of Walker’s work and her success in the mainstream art world. In the summer of 1997, following Walker’s being awarded the MacArthur, Saar launched an extensive letter writing campaign to protest the collection and display of Walker’s work. Her entreaty began, “I am writing you, seeking your help to spread awareness about the negative images produced by the young African American artist, Kara Walker.” Further into the letter she questioned the “validity of a black person’s attempt to reclaim and reverse racist imagery through irony,” and warned the reader that “these images may be in your city next.” In an interview published the following year, Saar questioned the process by which Walker had achieved so much attention so fast: “How do young persons just a few years out of school get a show at a major museum? The whole arts establishment picked their work up and put it at the head of the class. This is the danger, not the artists themselves. This is like closet racism. It relieves them of the responsibility to show other artists. Here we are at the end of the millennium seeing work that is derogatory and racist.” And while Saar claimed, “I have nothing against Kara except that I think she is young and foolish,” she nonetheless compared Walker’s purveying of her images to a predominantly white art world with the activities of some Africans during the slave trade, saying, “Kara is selling us down the river.”20 Not surprisingly, Saar’s criticism of Walker’s work has been supported by other artists, including Thom Shaw, who commented that Walker’s “works are obviously targeted at whites. It’s ironic that they buy it. I do have a problem with some of the curators. One can make a substantial argument that they’re only showing whites. We’re still looked at as Sambos. So when you see them, bigger than life, frozen in time, it does, hurt.”21

In many ways, both Shaw’s and Saar’s peer-directed criticism falls within the critical tradition against which Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston first bristled during the Harlem Renaissance. Such an adversarial position echoes in Richard Wright’s 1937 review of Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: “Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in
the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: between laughter and tears."

Ironically, many of the elder critics, like Saar, who have been cautious about the nature of Walker's success were once the avant garde provocateurs of their own generation. Saar is best known for her own work in the area of stereotype repurposing. This area of her work with negative racial imagery is exemplified by the piece The Liberation of Aunt Jemima (1972, Berkeley Art Museum), in which a surrealist box frames a porcelain figure of the rotund kitchen mammy redefined as a revolutionary through the artist's addition of a clenched fist, the black power symbol, a shotgun, and a side arm. Saar's denunciation of Walker's work seemed to many an odd move on the part of an artist whose own production was, at least superficially if not philosophically, so closely related to what she was condemning. It is important to note that both Walker's and Saar's work is in fact part of a larger trend in late-twentieth-century art toward the figurative challenge of modes of cultural representation propelled by the work of nonblack artists such as Barbara Kruger and Jeff Koons, as well as by African Americans, including David Hammons, Carrie Mae Weems, and Glenn Ligon.

Saar's outrage, and that of like-minded art watchers, was soon given a forum by the symposium that was organized in February 1998 by the Harvard University Art Museums, the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, and the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke." The organizers brought together a wide range of academics, artists, dealers, and collectors to "address the current debate on the recycling of racist imagery, collecting and exhibiting black memorabilia, the use of black stereotypes in the work of contemporary American artists and representations of blackness in film and theater." The conference, while aiming to address a larger trend in visual culture, focused on Walker's work and was accompanied by an exhibition of her silhouettes titled Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audi-

ences Wherever Such May be Found By Myself, Missus K. E. B. Walker, Colored (1997).

Saar's objections to Walker's work continued into late 1999, when she contacted the Armand Hammer Museum as they were preparing to display Walker's exhibition "No mere words can Adequately reflect the Remorse this Negrress feels at having been Cast into such a lowly state by her former Masters and so it is with a Humble heart that she brings about their physical Ruin and earthly Demise." Unlike the DIA, the staff of the Armand Hammer, led by director Ann Philbin, embraced the controversy and worked hard to anticipate any questions from visitors or objections that might arise by composing extensive wall text. "If there is, in fact, a controversy," said Philbin, "I welcome the opportunity, as a curator at an academic museum, to make a full dialogue around this very important issue. Certainly the last thing we would do is remove the work and back down." In response to Saar's objections, Walker said later, "I think I had naively assumed that the work I was doing would raise a lot of questions, and that, within the black community in particular, it would foster a dialogue more than a diatribe. But I think the question of whether or not this work should be seen, which was raised in Betye Saar's letter was absurd. You look or you don't look. But I'll make it as long as I have to. The whole gamut of black people, whether by black people or not, are free rein in my mind." In a comparable situation that same year, Colescott came under fire for having been chosen to represent the United States at the Venice Bien-
nale. As the first African American to be given this honor, his selection was criticized by some conservative critics because of the provocative content of his work. As a result, the general opinion of the critics was that if a black artist was to be chosen, it should be one who represented African American artistic production in a more positive light.

Like Colescott, Walker has been condemned by her fellow African Americans of feeding the appetite that white American art consumers have for black flesh. At the same time, she has received praise from those whose appetites are satisfied by the visual feast of grotesques that she
purveys. Because black bodies have so often been seen only in the terms of parody, it is difficult for many African Americans to believe that de-
risive images can be repurposed in a beneficially subversive manner by artists. "I don’t understand these things," Colescott admitted when asked
about the negative reception of Walker’s work. "Kara’s work is, in a way, so conservative. You’ve really got to hunt for the little penises or whatever." 27

Because of her success, Walker has become a contested presence in many segments of the art-viewing African American community, while her image as a postmodern African American artist, as a rebel and a pro-

vocateur, holds a certain appeal for the European American art world because of its origins at their own cultural margins. "History is carried
like a pathology, a cyclical melodrama immersed in artifice and unable
to function without it," explained Walker in the catalogue that accom-
panied her 1995 exhibition at Bard College. "The historical romance
creates a will for abusive submission, exacerbated by contemporary ide-
ologies that revere victimhood. Everyone wants to play the nigger now.
There is more power in the role of the underdog, pop culture tells us.
Be scary and disenfranchised, and you’ll make great art." 28 In the role
of the disenfranchised “other,” Walker has been allowed to critique the
dominant culture virtually unfettered by its proponents, in part because
she does not spare her own community in the exercise. In this position
as a provocative and shameless “other,” she has been allowed into the
center. For critics like Saar, Walker inhabits a role comparable to that of
early-twentieth-century African American vaudeville performers in
blackface for both white and black audiences. Whether or not she is
complicit in selling out her race for fame and success, or if it is white art
consumers who are being duped out of their money, remain points of
contention. However, from her insider position Walker is allowed to say
not only what those in the center cannot say, but also what those who
remain at the margins have repressed.

In a special edition of the *International Review of African American Art*,
editor Juliet Bowles brought together several articles about controver-
sial African American art under the title “Stereotypes Subverted? Or
for Sale?” The *IRA* is one of the few periodicals solely devoted to critiqu-
ing this area of American art. A nonjuried publication, it has often pro-
duced theme issues containing a wide range of writing by both academics
and professionals from the African American art world. The lead article
in the “Stereotypes” issue is by Bowles herself and is titled “Extreme
Times Call for Extreme Heroes.” It is a freewheeling, provocative, and
broad discussion of the controversy surrounding recent work by Afri-
can American artists that use negative stereotypes of blacks; however,
it soon degenerates into a subtly veiled attack on Walker alone. Rather
than discussing the content of Walker’s art, which was described in a cur-
sory manner, Bowles compared the artist’s professional persona and per-
sonal life with that of the painter Michael Ray Charles. Charles, whose
“neo-coon” art was briefly mentioned as a similar artistic practice, was
described as a student of stereotype history with an interest in explor-
ing negative imagery rather than exploiting it. “Leading an upstanding
life as a professor of art at the University of Texas, Austin, Michael Ray
Charles only attracts criticism for his work and his defense of it,” wrote
Bowles, whereas “the controversial Kara Walker phenomenon . . . ex-
tends from her art to her entire persona.” The depth of Walker’s own
interest in the visual history of images of blacks was completely ignored.
Bowles chose instead to concentrate on comments that Walker had made
in the mainstream art press about her personal experiences with inter-
racial sexual relationships. These included a statement written by the
artist in an exhibition brochure in the guise of a separate persona. Ignor-
ing Walker’s own acknowledgment of her interest in the power of artistic
personae, Bowles quoted it in such a way as to imply that it was Walker
discussing her own ambition: “She had always yearned to create a new
identity for herself as the wife of a white man.” 29 This was then empha-
sized by the immediate mention of the artist’s having a white German-
born husband. The section was concluded with the comment, “Under-
neath all of the sassy impudence, behind the occasional brilliant flash of
insight, and within the worldly woman, there is a dejected girl.” Bowles
felt, however, that Walker’s future artistic production might somehow
be salvaged by the subsequent birth of the then-pregnant artist’s child,
is rooted in visceral feelings about black bodies and fueled by sexual myths of black women and men." An upstanding black family, in which the man is the head of the household and his wife the obedient subordinate, was a way to counteract "the dominant myths [that] draw black women and men either as threatening creatures who have sexual power over whites, or as harmless, desexed underlings of a white culture." Further, West asserts that black and white Americans are unable to talk about race without talking about sex.

Michele Wallace reveals the impact that these myths have had on the black bourgeoisie with her analysis of the crisis that was presented by the television image of Anita Hill publicly challenging the appointment of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court in 1991. She uses this example to highlight the fear in the African American middle class of the challenges presented by black feminism to traditional black male authority. Wallace identifies the threat that Hill presented to the black bourgeoisie as "a woman who had broken the unwritten law of gender." As a transgressive woman within the African American community, Hill found that her chief supporters came not from among her "sisters," but from the mainstream feminist community. Toni Morrison has observed that to many African American viewers, "as a black woman, [Hill] was contradiction itself, she was irrationality in the flesh... a black lady repeating dirty words." In the beginning of the 1990s Hill found herself, as Walker would at the end of the decade, disowned by some members of her race because she spoke the unspeakable.

By both inhabiting and purveying an interracial, post-Negritude encounter for her spectator, Walker is the "bad girl" who rejects the role that her community would have her assume. Her lack of solidarity with the aims of a specific segment of the African American middle class makes her a traitor to their cause of assimilationist integration. As James Hannaham has noted, she has become like das schrecklich Mädchen, the nasty girl, betraying the secrets of her people to the world. After a long history of self-degradation, humility and humiliation (a subject of further research in future texts) I have reached a splitting point, a break with my past... with my past twenty-three years of do-gooder subjec-
tivity, comfort and the Afro-suburban experience,” writes an anxious Walker of her middle-class origins. “It’s not good to break things, one of the commands . . . the unspoken ones of the middleclass African-American . . . akin to cosby’s [sic] show . . . Humble yourself and be strong . . . and you (my children) will never have to face the same fear your fore(fathers) braved. . . . You never suspected (ar) would raise itself beyond pain, beyond physical, social and political spheres and infiltrate the collective unconscious of your laborious fruit(s).”57 This transgression of “place” that Walker’s work and life enact is profoundly disturbing for cultural conservatives. Her carnivalesque vision of an abject world consumed by violence and perverse sexuality flies in the face of the self-repressed artistic culture of the black bourgeoisie represented by the Friends of African and African American Art in Detroit. At the same time, this eagerness to épater le bourgeoisie has made her a darling of the avant garde–obsessed mainstream art world and a slippery subject for some members of the African American art press to tackle.

The political impact of A Means to an End, as evidenced by its censorship, brings to mind the work of nineteenth-century French lithographer Honoré Daumier, whose popular lithographs skewered the social dysfunction of Louis-Phillipe’s post-Napoleonic Paris and eventually led to his imprisonment on the grounds that he was “rousing hatred and contempt for the King’s government.” Just as Daumier was able to turn the figure of Louis-Phillipe into Gargantua gorging himself on the scraps forced from his ragged proletariat, so too did Walker transform the elegant silhouettes of southern aristocracy into monstrous spectres destroying the culture in cycles of sadistic anarchy. In laying bare the historical myths of American culture, she has caught the attention of critics and of the cultural guardians. “It seems important to recall that Bakhtin’s vision [in Rabelais and His World] was of a victory of laughter over fear,” writes Hyman about the postmodern, carnivalesque disposition for transgression and the abject. “The nexus of imagery . . . upside-down, mask, grotesque—remains a perennial resource for artists of all media, by which the freedom of foolishness can be asserted for a new millennium.”58

This is the position in which we find the reception of Walker and her art today. Because of her ability to speak the unspeakable, her work has been the subject of debate nearly everywhere it has been shown. Although she continues to find widespread international acceptance and accolades from the mainstream art world, it was not until her 2004 exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem that she was invited to show at a museum of African American art or history. Walker remains a woman at the fringes, one who must find her own community. Like Langston Hughes, she will have to make her own way to the top of the mountain.