

Joan Copjec

Moses, the Egyptian and the Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South: Freud (with Kara Walker) on Race and History*

Nearly all the work of Kara Walker produced thus far — including *Gone: An Historical Romance Of A Civil War As It Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress And Her Heart* (1994); *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* (1995); *The Battle of Atlanta: Being the Narrative of a Negress in the Flames of Desire — A Reconstruction* (1995); *Presenting Negro Scenes Drawn Upon My Passage Through the South and Reconfigured for the Benefit of Enlightened Audiences Wherever Such May Be Found, By Myself, K.E. B. Walker, Colored* (1997) — I cite a few of the titles to give you some flavor of the work — nearly all the work employs the same technique: the adhesion of black paper cut-outs to white gallery walls. These cut-outs depict larger-than-life-sized human figures, amidst occasional tufts of landscape, set within snippets of narrative of the antebellum South. Composed of black paper, all the human figures are, technically, black, even though we are able to distinguish the diegetically white “folk” from the diegetically black on the basis of their stereotypical profiles, postures, and clothing. Glued to the walls, the figures become part of their flat surface rather than standing out in front of them as they would had they been mounted on canvas. Depth is subtracted also from the relations among the figures, who do not so much stand in front of or behind each other as they mingle and separate, protrude from and merge into one another.

*Joan Copjec’s article “Moses, the Egyptian and the Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South: Freud (with Kara Walker) on Race and History” is a part of her forthcoming *Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*, copyright © by MIT.

These flat, black figures recall a number of proto-photographic techniques: the shadow projection theaters of the nineteenth century, with their curiously weightless, atopic images; the cycloramas (enormously popular at the end of the nineteenth century, before cinema permanently displaced them) that dwarfed their spectators by enveloping them in exaggerated-scale reconstructions of historical events; and, not least of all, those black-paper silhouettes that preceded and partially overlapped the advent of photography and served as a quick, inexpensive means of preserving the likeness of one's loved ones. Walker's cut-outs, then, recall the antebellum South in the sorts of images available to people living at the time.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the work attempts to efface the distance that separates Walker from her figures. Signing her work "Miss K. Walker, a Free Negress of Noteworthy Talent,"¹ that is, in the style of the historical romances she recreates, and writing of herself as if she were one of the "nigger wenches" she portrays, Walker, while donning period costume, is nonetheless not trying to locate herself outside herself, in these figures from the old South. She is not, in short, identifying herself with them. When, for example, she relates the question that motivates her technique, "Could I possibly make the art work that should have been made by a woman like me before the turn of the *last* century? Using just the methods available to her coupled with a lofty ambition and a checkered past?"² we do not fail to hear in her phrasing — just as we see in the silhouettes themselves — the humorous distance that separates the "lofty ambition" and "checkered past" that belong to her from the turn-of-the-century figures to whom she anachronistically loans them. That is to say, Walker acknowledges the gulf that separates her from the antebellum past even as she ponders her relation to it. Young, middle-class, RISD-educated, mostly urban-dwelling, Kara Walker is a black artist, who has been abundantly honored by established art institutions. The life experiences of the figures she draws are completely alien to her and the inquiry in which

her work is engaged is that of figuring out how this largely alien past could still be said to form part of her own. This aesthetic inquiry thus approaches the problem of identity in a way contrary to the standard one. Ordinarily the question is asked how one group — Blacks, say — differ from others; Walker asks how, given the differences among them, its members can be counted as belonging to the same group.

The “plantation family romances,”³ as Walker calls her vignettes, have not been warmly received by everyone. In the black community, particularly, they remain controversial, with some Blacks agitating fiercely against the work, mounting letter-writing campaigns to protest against Walker’s exhibitions. The problem for these protesters is that rather than narratives confirming the dignity of the race or reflecting the actual achievements and steady integrity of a downtrodden but spirited people, rather than positive and uplifting images of defiant or self-sacrificing and virtuous black slaves, Walker’s nursery-rhyme raunchy vignettes offer a fulguration of uncouth “sex pickaninnies.”⁴ Hottentot harlots, sambos, mandigos, Uncle Tom’s, churls and scallywags of every sort engage nonchalantly in violent and licentious acts of parturition, sodomy, cannibalism, coprophany, as well as other acts we have no idea how to name. The charge made against Walker is both that her representations are sexually and racially derogatory and that they have no basis in fact, but simply recycle stereotypes found in that racist memorabilia or Americana that Walker, like many other Blacks, admits to collecting. What she calls her “inner plantation,” this criticism implies, has been implanted in her by white racists; she owes it to herself, and her race, not to recreate these fictions, but to exorcise them through a recovery of her actual, truthful and, by the way, glorious origins.

The first thing to note is that Freud, the inventor of the family romance whose plantation variation Walker wittily fabricates, made an equally scandalous gesture in the eyes of others of his race as well as historians who thought he had not shown sufficient respect for history, or for a certain notion of history. In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud laid out a theory of Jewish racial identity that, rather than celebrating Moses, the most cherished ancestor of the Jews, deprived them of him, in effect, by repositioning Jewish origins in a prior and unprovable source: an earlier, Egyptian Moses, who was a fanatic follower of the “Pharaonic” monotheism of Aten. Eventually murdered by the Semite tribe that he had attempted to indoctrinate into his religion, this first Moses returned centuries later to inspire the teachings of the Jewish prophets. Ernest Jones, agast, stupidly mused that Freud seemed not to have been enlightened by the theories of Darwin. This uncomprehending remark simply underscores that Freud’s poorly-named notion of “phylogenetic inheritance” (which means something like “an unconscious rather than ego transmission of the past”) would never become the stuff of positivist historians, who could easily admit the existence of orangutans, the big Gorillas in a group of apes, because these could be observed, but not the Egyptian Moses, who had no coordinates in actual experience.⁵ Freud’s theory of the origins of Jewish identity and of the survival of the Jews despite the harshest of circumstances, was erected on different historical tenets than those that hampered his empirically-minded biographer. For Jones and company, history must contain no unfillable gaps and must be materially documentable. Yet Freud insisted on the “historical truth” of his admittedly improbable and undocumentable story of the martyred and resurrected Egyptian Moses and contrasted it explicitly with the “material truth” of “objective” historians.⁶

Walker and Freud are alike, then, in eschewing identification with the traits of empirical (and, hopefully, noble) ancestors as the basis of racial identity and both begin their inquiry by wondering how the differences separating them from others of their race fail to disqualify them automatically from membership. In the Hebrew translation of *Totem and Taboo*, for example, (this book being a theoretical forerunner of *Moses and Monotheism*) Freud pointedly asks himself, “What is there left to you that is Jewish?,” after admitting his ignorance of Hebrew, his lack of religious conviction, and his detachment from Jewish nationalist ideals, that is, after admitting the absence in himself of what are traditionally considered the salient characteristics of Jewish identity.⁷ It is not difficult to recognize in Freud’s opening sally a quintessentially modern move. Peeling away or erasing all positive traits of Jewishness, he then asks what, if anything, survives their removal. The surprise is that he does not come up with the quintessentially modern answer, which would have been: a *tabula rasa*; a nobody who could be anybody; a flat, blank canvas, or screen, or page. From politics to aesthetics, the negative gesture that helped define modernism — erasure — was able to wipe the slate clean, all the way down to the material support itself, pure, pristine, and generalizable: humanity itself; Being as such; a neutral, Cartesian grid; the white walls of modern museums on which paintings of all historical periods could be equally well displayed; and so on. But when Freud tries it, he discovers that something resists his efforts at erasure, something refuses to be wiped away. Negating the features that ought to have been the tell-tale source of his Jewishness, he does arrive at a certain featureless “impersonality,” though this is not to say that he finds buried within himself that neutral, uninflected, untinged, dispassionate humanity modernism in general claimed to have discovered and encouraged us to expect. Freud surprises us, and most likely himself in the bargain, by

discovering that he is Jewish after all, that is, after all the positive traits of Jewishness have been rubbed away. Let us not forget that this discovery is made even as Freud continues to maintain that psychoanalysis is a science per se, not a Jewish science, and that one of the greatest contributions of the Jewish religion is monotheism, the belief in one God for all. So that while he remains convinced that science and religion have to address themselves to everyone, he does not end up believing that this necessity depended on or stemmed from the existence of a universal humanity in which everyone shared.

What happened in this case to interrupt the usual modern procedure? What resisted the negation, the erasure, by which Freud might have been expected to arrive at the clean slate of a neutral identity? Moses, the Egyptian; a fuliginous stain which not only Freud, but history and death itself proved incapable of rubbing out. This Egyptian appears to have been endowed with a kind of “immortal, irrepressible life” to which only the undead can in modern times lay claim.⁸ The artwork of Walker thwarts the modern gesture in a similar fashion, for it stains the white walls of the exhibition spaces in which she shows with antic and obscene ghosts who, long dead, refuse to die, with silhouettes that lost long ago the bodies to which they had been attached. The empty white halls of the gallery spaces are thereby converted into “barracks filled with stubborn back-looking ghosts still recovering...from the fever which had cured the disease” of their antebellum past.⁹

One must be careful not to mistake this indivisible and invincible remainder of the process of erasure — this “hard kernel” which Lacan would come to call the real — for some essence or quasi-transcendental a priori that manages to escape the contingent processes of history. Such is the error Derrida first made in his quarrel with Lacan over the reading of Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” and which Judith Butler has since elevated to the status of a mantra. It is time to dispatch with this silly misunderstanding. What motivates erasure as a privileged modern practice? What does it wish to accomplish? Erasure is intended precisely to foreground historical contingency, to demonstrate that the accretion of particular features by this or that subject, the cumulate deposits of ego identifications, is the result of historical circumstances that could have developed otherwise and that these particular features are therefore inessential. They could easily be stripped away, effaced, by subsequent or alternative circumstances. And yet this process of eradication, as practiced by modernists, culminates in the production of its own limit or exception. Despite its self-presentation, erasure encounters its *limit* when it reaches the empty page or blank slate, not evidence that the process has been fully accomplished. As long as this empty support — an uninflected, neutral humanity; Being as One, as uniform — remains behind, we can be sure that something has survived untouched by the processes of historical contingency. The notion of a universal humanity stands outside and domesticates history, making the latter the agent of merely minor variations on its already decided script.

We suggested earlier that the Egyptian Moses uncovered by Freud’s feature-effacing efforts represented a limit or exception to the process of erasure, an ineradicable stain. This characterization is at once accurate and totally misleading. While it remains true that neither Freud nor history nor death itself is

capable of putting an end to the eternal return of the first Moses, of repressing him finally, this is not because he resides outside the reach of history or limits the reign of radical contingency. On the contrary, that this Egyptian remainder insists in the history Freud devises of the Jewish race testifies to the fact that the father of psychoanalysis bore down more heavily than other modernists on his historical eraser, that he allowed nothing, no exception to escape eradication, that is, that he allowed nothing to escape being caught up in the process of history. Freud encounters the ghostly double of the Jewish Moses by eradicating the exception to erasure; everything, he effectively says, belongs to the domain of history, since history has no outside. For, if history has no outside — and on this point, at least, Freud seems to have been aided by his Jewish education, which taught him to disbelieve in a life after death or beyond the one that is historically lived — if history is without limit, then it must accommodate or be invaded by the infinite, the never-ending, by undying repetition, or the undead. This proposes something other than the simple truism that history is an ongoing process stretching indefinitely into the future; it proposes that history consists of something more than just the long “cortege of a ‘One dies,’” that is to say, more than the mere finitude of existence, of a coming into being and fading away.

Deleuze speculates that Foucault realized he had backed himself into a corner with the writing of *The History of Sexuality*, that he knew his thesis that relations of power have no outside had led to a dead end since the thesis made it impossible “to conceive a ‘power of truth’ which would no longer be the ‘truth of power,’ a truth that would release transversal lines of resistance and not integral lines of power.”¹⁰ In Deleuze’s reading, Foucault broke through this impasse in *The Uses of Pleasure* by reconceiving sexuality not simply as something that could be constructed by

power but as an interiorization of power's outside, or a folding back of the outside of power into its inside. You will note that the thesis, which is capital, that power has no outside is not damaged by this revision; it remains in tact. There is still no outside on the outside of power, though there is now an outside on the inside. Because Deleuze links this revision of the theory of sexuality to what he perceives as Foucault's continuing fascination with the double, we are encouraged to suspect that Foucault is motivated by a reasoning that reinforces that of Freud, who also associates the uncanny double — the Egyptian Moses, in the case we are considering — with an eradication of the outside.

What are the steps of this reasoning? Foucault launches his argument in *The History of Sexuality* by opposing immediately the “repressive hypothesis” on the grounds that, contrary to what that hypothesis claims, power says “no” or wields a negation that produces no beyond. That which is denied does not thereby fall outside the law or outside power but is rather part of power's own territory, what it makes. Though the law says “no” to sex, sex does not fall outside the law and does not have the power, then, to counter power. The problem, of course, is that power loses its meaning if there is nothing that is not power, if nothing opposes it. It seems that Foucault had given negation too slight a role to play and its relative default leaves power bereft of meaning and endowed with a counterfeit force. But how to revamp the role of negation without also reinstating an outside? As long as Foucault remains content with his negative formulation of what power's negation does — again: it does not produce an outside — the problem persists. To resolve the impasse he must positively assert what negation accomplishes: it negates or eradicates any beyond of power, it negates the existence of any outside. In this way, not only all that “repression” or negation makes, but also what it unmakes, or derealizes comes

into view. How to understand “what it unmakes”? If every exception to a beyond of power is eradicated, then power must partially unmake itself, derealize itself, for it there can be nothing outside power, no metadimension, then nothing grounds or guarantees power. The Foucault of *The History of Sexuality* refrains from confronting this point head on by arguing evasively that power guarantees itself. What must become more apparent to him later is that the absence of an exterior ground opens a space within power itself, a space empty of power or, in Deleuze’s idiom, a fold: a space of the outside-power.

One must be careful, however, not to allow this strong image of a hole, an empty space, or fold at the center of power to function as an obstacle to further thought. It makes some sense to conceive of a space with no positive content, since to fill it with something would be to reconstitute it as an actual outside, as the opposite of power, and thus destroy what this space is supposed to be: evidence of the absence of an outside. Yet, if it would be counterproductive and, more, incorrect to say that something comes along to *fill* this space, to *exist* there, it is also wrong to think of this space as an inert void. In fact, it is necessary to imagine it as teeming, as pouring out emptiness, swarming with emptiness. For, it is not that nothing occupies this space, but that that which abounds there does not exist. Lacan will therefore substitute for the word *exist*, the words *insist* or *repeat* and will persuade us, by edging Freud’s concept of the uncanny to the forefront of psychoanalytic theory, to conceive this space as inhabited by “what ought to have remained hidden but comes nevertheless to light,” that is to say, by ghosts, the undead.

Why should they have remained hidden? The standard reading is that the uncanny is the return of what was repressed, where the repressed is understood to inhabit a territory outside consciousness. The notion of repression underlying this idea is precisely the one Foucault tried to invalidate when he stood up against the “repressive hypothesis,” and it is indeed invalid as an explanation of the uncanny. The negation operative in Freud’s theory of the uncanny happens to be just the one Foucault liked to brandish at his enemies. You will remember that Freud very deliberately explains that the uncanny is not the opposite of the canny, not the inverse of the familiar or homely, which is to say that in coming to light it does not cross a border dividing the homely from some elsewhere. The crucial point to be underscored is that the uncanny, the ghosts of history, the undead, do not come from elsewhere, have no territory or homeland of their own. The uncanny is “homeless” not because it is a refugee from another place, but because there is no other place but the one — *this* one, the familiar, the homely — in which it appears. And this homely place cannot provide a place, a home for it. Why not? As was said, the demolition of the metadimension (here: the other place) causes *this* place to lose its ground, to undo itself. It is as if the removal of the external limit, which had served as the boundary between this place and the other one, had caused an internal limit to begin operating within the homely. That which the homely is not is not, then, excluded from it, but included within it. But this has the effect of altering the meaning of “what the homely is not” from the “foreign” or “unfamiliar” — which have positive and opposing definitions — to the “uncanny” — which has no positive definition and opposes the homely only by undoing, unrealizing it. While what the homely is not may be included within the homely it cannot have a proper place there; it must remain homeless, out of place, if it is not to collapse back into the homely. We can generalize from this to say that the devastation of the outside, of the metadimension, always produces an out-of-place or out-of-time — a disjointedness — within the only place and time that remains. With no proper place

and no proper existence (since it is only what is not), the uncanny can only make an appearance in the homely as a fundamentally “homeless object,” as a parasite or vampire that sucks familiarity from the familiar, force from power, a sense of contingency from history.¹² This is the legacy of that kind of negation Foucault correctly attributed in *The History of Sexuality* to the modern era: it produces not a separate and opposing power but a parasite that drains off some of power’s power to realize itself.

Let us pick up again the thread of our argument about history and racial identity. Freud, we said, scandalized historians and Jews alike by uncovering an Egyptian Moses to whom he attributed “historical truth.” This he did by erasing the historically contingent features of Jewishness, only to find at the end of the process an ineradicable, unbudgeable Moses, a parasitic double of the historically verifiable one. It is not, we argued, that this uncanny Moses evidences a limit to the historically contingent features that could be stripped away, some exception resisting erasure, he demonstrates rather that the lack of an outside, a dimension beyond the historical, produces a curious repetition, a return, since that which returns has no existence, home or, we will now add, identity of its own, but is in all these parasitic on the historical being onto which it piggybacks. What I earlier called a fuliginous stain could also be called, then, a temporal anamorphosis, for it causes these repetitions or anachronisms to appear within historical time.

Black Baroque

It has been commented that Freud left the woman, specifically the mother, out of the Jewish family romance; she is absent from the uncanny narrative he constructs in *Moses and Monotheism*. Walker could be seen to offer a useful vantage from which to view this complaint, for her plantation family romance positions the “Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South” in the place where Freud located the Egyptian Moses, as the “anonymous root” of racial identity.¹³ Asked in an interview to explain a particularly striking vignette from *The End of Uncle Tom and the Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* — “In the left side of one of the panels, there’s this incredible image of four women — girls and women — suckling each other. What was this meant as a metaphor for?” — Walker responded: “History. 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.”¹⁴ We can agree that this is not a very satisfying answer insofar as it appears merely to restate a popular cliché in which the mother is viewed as a superabundant source from which future generations draw and to which all lines of filiation lead back. What captures our attention, however, is the discrepancy between the cliché and the image it purports to explain. What makes Walker’s reply most unsatisfying is its failure to respond to the question posed to her: why are there *four* girls and women in this vignette rather than just the *one* superabundant mammy her answer implies? Why this duplication, this replication of women, suckling not their young (the descendants of the race whose source they are supposed by the cliché to be), but each other? While one small silhouette is clearly that of a child, the other three cannot be distinguished by age, and none can be isolated as *the* big black mammy. In this case, how can she be said to be represented in this vignette?

The discrepancy between image and reply shows Walker moving away in her artwork from the commonplace of the superabundant mother that prevails not only in psychoanalytic theory, but generally. Lacan, too, we note, breaks from the stereotypical image to conceptualize the mother, on the contrary, as a void, a hollow. For, whenever she is figured as a fully-supplied container, the mother represents a beyond or elsewhere, a paradise of pleasure, from which the subject has been banished and to which he or she longs to return. Eliminating every trace of an outside, or a metadimension, Lacan had also, in order to be consistent, to eliminate this mother-dimension. She is gone, then, from the historical romance he constructs, just as she is from Freud's. Her absence is not the result of an oversight, the failure of Freud or Lacan to pay the same attention to the mother as was paid to the father; it is rather the result of the radical erasure, without exception, of every outside of history.

Ironically, this voiding of the mother-function throws more light rather than less on the woman and feminine sexuality, particularly as they are theorized by Lacan. Freud made the point more than once that the boy differs from the girl in that he is more able, because of the threat of castration, to separate himself from the mother or, in Freud's bombastic phrase (could it have been mocking?), the boy is more successful in accomplishing "the great cultural achievement" of turning away from his mother. Lacan's formulas of sexuation allow us to draw from Freud's observation a conclusion unforeseen by other interpreters. If the boy separates himself more easily from the mother, it is in order to install her more insistently in a paradisiacal outside. That is,

the boy does not carry through to completion the imperative of erasure; he permits the mother to define a limit to the historical beyond which she dwells as exception. That the boy does maintain a residual beyond is attested to by the formation of what has sometimes been called a “maternal” superego, since it cruelly forces him into life-long obeisance to various forms of transcendence, all of which bear her trace.

But what of the girl? If the boy separates himself from the mother, she, because she cannot be threatened by castration, does not. Is this not the premise of the majority of feminist theory? Is it not what the phenomenon of the “female uncanny” or the “female Gothic” tells us through its disturbing tales of young, often orphaned and/or unlovely women who return to oddly ancient ancestral homes where they are haunted by the undead presence of their mothers or some maternal relative from whom they are incapable of breaking free? But while the critical literature on the “female Gothic” insists that these tales confirm the difficulty the girl has distancing herself from her mother, who thus haunts the daughter as a double, we are led to take a contrary position. The point of the difference between the boy and the girl does not rest on the fact that one gives up the mother while the other does not, but that one places her in a transcendent position while the other does not; that is, unlike the boy, the girl does not set up the mother in an ideal elsewhere. Freud, who repudiated the notion that woman had any significant access either to the morbid pain of moral accusation or to the joy of moral exaltation, in short, to moral transcendence, once went so far as to bemoan the stubborn materialism of one type of woman as susceptible to nothing but “the logic of soup with dumplings for argument.”¹⁵ Though this phrase is meant to be unflattering, the idea that woman, lacking a superegoic disposition to a transcendent beyond, live in an immanent, “soup-and-dumplings” world of historical contingency should not be dismissed as a mere insult. As we have been attempting to demonstrate, the difference

between a disposition toward transcendence and a disposition toward immanence does not break down in the commonplace way to a difference between a capacity for elevated thought and bold action versus a capacity for only uninspired thought and plodding action.

If the woman is not haunted by a mother from whom she supposedly has trouble turning away, by what is she haunted? Our discussion of *Moses and Monotheism* has taught us how to answer this question: because there is for the woman — who does not idealize the mother, does not distance her in an unreachable beyond — no limit or outside, she is haunted by a “fold” or “interiorization of the outside” which bears witness to the absence of the outside. It is possible, however, using the psychanalytic vocabulary appropriate to this context, to be more specific. The woman is not doubled by the mother, from whom she has definitively separated, but by a partial object (the object a, in Lacan’s idiom) left behind by the separation. Freud refers somewhere to the placenta as that object once shared by mother and child which is lost by their disunion; Lacan enlarges this reference to include the breast, gaze, voice, objects from which mother and child are both cut off in being cut off from each other. The idea that these objects are left behind, the remainders of a mythical time of the mother is no doubt due to the fact that they appear to be out of place among the mundane objects of the world, a kind of surplus for which there is no accounting. And if they are partial, or appear to have broken off from some whole, this is because they are themselves not wholly objects, not separate and independent, but parasitic, as we said. The woman is, then, parasitized by an object that prevents her from being all, that is from having a fully realized or whole being. This is not to say that some of her remains in reserve elsewhere, unable at this moment to reveal itself; her separation from the mother, since it does not entail an idealization of her, dissolves the possibility of an elsewhere. The being of the woman is multiple not because she is redoubled by another one, the mother, but

because she is decompleted by the addition of this surplus object that interrupts or blocks the formation of the whole, the One, of her being. The being of the woman is multiple because she is split from herself.

Listen to the description Deleuze offers of the double. It is, he says, “not a doubling of the One, but a redoubling of the Other. It is not a reproduction of the Same, but a repetition of the Different. It is not the emanation of an “I,” but something that places in immanence an always other or a Non-self. It is never the other who is a double in the doubling process, it is a self that lives me as the double of the other: I do not encounter myself on the outside, I find the other in me.”¹⁶ And now compare this description both to the vignette by Walker of the four suckling women and the following account by the Lacanian feminist, Michelle Montrelay, of feminine sexuality: “The woman’s relation to her body [is]...simultaneously narcissistic and erotic. For the woman enjoys her body as she would the body of another. Every occurrence of a sexual kind...happens to her as if it came from another (woman): every occurrence is the fascinating actualization...of that of the mother....In the self-love she bears herself, the woman cannot differentiate her own body from that which was “the first object.”¹⁷

The passage from Deleuze reinforces and helps to forestall a possible misreading of the one from Montrelay. There are not two one’s in the uncanny of feminine sexuality, the woman herself and the mother whom she could not abandon. The woman is not doubled by another just like her, by another one: the mother. Or simply: the mother is not the double of the woman, as we have already noted. Rather, the woman lives herself —or enjoys her body — as if it were not her own but another’s, as if she were the double of another. The woman does not encounter her mother in the uncanny experience of her own sexuality anymore than

Freud encounters a stranger on the train in the little vignette he offers in his essay on the uncanny of his own experience with seeing his double. This double turns out to be his own reflection in a mirror, although on this occasion that sense of familiarity which usually adheres to the sight of his own image seems to have been leached from it. He glowers at himself as if he were a stranger who had wandered into his compartment.

Anxiety accompanies these uncanny experiences, not fear, which has an object and whose arousal would have meant that the woman or Freud, in his robe and slippers, had indeed encountered some other person, someone outside her- or himself, the mother or a disoriented fellow traveller. Anxiety signals that the threat cannot be exteriorized, objectified, that it is instead internal, brought on by that limit which prevents one's coincidence with oneself. Critics who have studied the female Gothic argue that the inability to separate from her mother prevents the young woman from becoming a subject, from establishing her own autonomous identity. We would disagree, not only by repeating that it is not the mother but the object a which is the obstacle inhibiting the formation of a whole or complete being, but also by insisting that this very inhibition is what constitutes the woman as a subject. To be a woman is to be not-all, to be parasitized by an object that continuously unglues her from her own appearance, not by defining her as something other than her appearance, but by disrupting her appearance's resemblance to itself. Similarly, what aroused anxiety in Freud was not that his mirror image ceased for that split second to resemble him, but that it ceased to resemble other images of him. In that moment of pure warning it is safe to say that Freud did not encounter anyone, or more precisely, that he encountered no one who might guarantee or ground the phenomenal world for him and it was this which caused his image to falter, to begin to look different.

The image from *The End of Uncle Tom...* of the suckling women makes sense only against this background. Contrary to what Walker herself says, it plainly does not represent the big black mammy of the antebellum South or of history as such. Only the void left by the definitive loss of this mammy can account for the replication of the woman, or the splitting of the image from itself, and the depiction of this uncanny form of sexuality in which “the” woman is shown to enjoy her own body as the body of another. If this is not an image of one superabundant mammy, neither is it an image of four separate women. The vignette shows a woman parasitized by a surplus that fractures her, splits her from herself. And yet to invoke the “big black mammy” in this context, as Walker does, is not altogether wrong. For if the parasitic surplus that haunts history has no proper identity, then it can only appear in borrowed garments. And if it always seems to interrupt the march of history, to interfere in it by making the order of historical appearing appear to be something other than what it is, to introduce into history a temporal anamorphosis, as we said earlier, then it would be appropriate to see this surplus in the phenomenon of repetition and to picture it as the return of the big black mammy. This, as long as one keeps in mind that the mammy does not precede her return, does not wait in the wings of an elsewhere or an outside until being called to come back. Repetition is not the return of some preexisting thing, it is the reencountering of difference, of one’s difference from oneself. Lacan says that the real is that which always returns to the same place, the place where one fails to coincide with oneself. To speak of it as the *same* place and to describe the encounter as a return is to insist that the opening up of this difference of the subject from itself does not constitute a dispersal of the subject. It is to define the same as the returning of self-difference.

The Anonymous Root of Racial Identity

In his catalogue essay for the exhibition, *Voici: 100 ans d'art contemporain*, Thierry de Duve ushers in the art of the last century through the portal not of Manet's *Olympia*, which would have been the standard gesture, but through Manet's *Christ aux anges* (1864), a painting "never destined for any church" and thus a nonreligious painting, in which Christ is painted in a way that leaves him suspended, as if in a snapshot, between the status of an already-dead, and thus no longer God, and a not-yet resurrected, merely mortal man.¹⁸ De Duve's critical argument, the one that secures for this painting its inaugural position, is that it is not as God but as man that Christ will resurrect himself in the next moment. If this painting can signal the beginning of modern art it is because this art understood the event of Christ's death to have bequeathed to it the task of resurrecting life, creating new life from the nothing it inherited from its break with the past.

Freud, the theorist of modern life, seems to have agreed with the premise of Manet's painting: some resurrection of man is possible. Like Manet, Freud disbelieved in the finitude of man, arguing in his essay on the uncanny that while "the statement 'all men are mortal' is paraded in text-books of logic as an example of a general proposition, ...no human being really grasps it and our unconscious has as little use now as it ever had for the idea of its own mortality."¹⁹ This essay on the uncanny, one of his rare forays into the field of aesthetics, argues that we moderns energetically deny the power of death by inventing a double as insurance against our own extinction. The feeling of the uncanny, he speculates, results from the fact that once formed as assurance of immortality, this double later "reverses its aspect" and returns as a harbinger of death, as a spirit or ghost of the dead.

It is as if in writing *Moses and Monotheism* Freud were returning to and expanding this argument, which is too truncated here to make much sense. First, it is not as a “harbinger of death” or as a “spirit of the dead” but as *the undead* that this double reverses its aspect and returns. *Moses and Monotheism* clarifies this, as we saw, along with another confusion. There are it would appear two different ways of doubling oneself as insurance against extinction, but the only hint we receive of this in the uncanny essay is Freud’s admonition that moral anxiety is not the same as the one aroused by the feeling of the uncanny. Freud never explicitly elaborates a distinction between two forms of doubling, but by offering his theory of racial identity as an implicit critique of the racism fomented by Nazi ideology, he does most powerfully suggest a distinction.

Here is what we can gather from Freud’s theory in general and from the specific arguments he makes about racial identity in the *Moses* book. Modern man, refusing to accept the finitude that modern thought thrusts upon him, doubles himself through a notion of race that allows him to survive his own death. Henceforth he is not only an individual subject, but also a member of a racial group. The phenomenon of race (and of racism) that results is unlike anything that preceded it and not only because race has now to assume the role of heaven, of eternity, in safeguarding the subject’s immortality. Sunk in the middle to history, modern man cannot reliably sustain the old idea of eternity, which has then to be reassembled from scraps, or from one scrap, the only one that remains of the old idea. This is, we have already said it, the superego, the libidinally cathected idea that there is — if not a heaven — at least something that escapes the ravages of historical contingency. This idea is nothing more than the conviction that between our expectations and their realization there is always a shortfall, some compromise. Yet

despite its homely origins, this idea is what survives of eternity in the modern world and it lends to the notion of race an element of ideality which is the source of its profound violence and its disdain for every contingency that opposes it.

As evidence of this idealized and thus unparalleled violence was mounting, Freud pressed forward with the composition of his Moses book. He would have erased the notion of race altogether, but his theory would not let him. As we saw, the efforts at erasure, at driving out every exception where violence might take root, produced the uncanny form of doubling we have described.

Since Nazi racial ideology was founded on an idealization — of the difference between what history had so far accorded them and what they could expect in the future — it was bound to a problematic of identification, the ideal being something with which one identifies. This had consequences, as we know, for the conception of the Aryan body. The ideality at the core of this notion of racial identity could not have resulted at this point in a naive forgetting or leaving behind of the body in favor of the disembodied contemplation of the ideal tomorrow for which the subject, as member of the Aryan race, would be saved. It resulted rather in an idealization of the body itself, in the construction of the notion of a “machine body,” fit for use and even for useful pleasures, whose frailties could be disciplined by exercise. The Nazi’s thus encouraged identification with one’s body.

Freud removed his notion of race from this problematic of identification; he stripped it of ideality. In the process he uncovered an anonymous root of racial identity: the sexual drive. How so? The uncanny double he discovers does not spare the subject the pummelings of history, but hits him with an additional

sort of blow, as it were. Instead of functioning as a prosthesis, this parasitic double splits the subject from itself. This has already been said. But what we now want to point out is that this splitting or bi-partitioning of the subject is what allows the subject to have a relation to itself as other than itself, and this “having a relation to oneself as other than oneself,” this autoaffection of the subject, describes the trajectory of the drive or, in short, sexuality as such. Distancing himself from the problematic of racial identification, particularly identification with one’s body, Freud ends up endorsing the enjoyment of one’s body or enjoyment of the self. And he endorses this enjoyment, this autoaffection, because it — that is, the satisfaction of the drive — alone allows one, in the phrase used by Foucault in *The Use of Pleasure*, “to get free of oneself.”²⁰ This is the immortality, the resurrection, available to modern man: he can “rise above” himself to free himself from what fetters him to himself.

Freud identified himself as a Jew not because he shares any of the identifying traits of Jews, but because he believed the Jews had survived and would survive through enjoyment, by being able to overturn and break free of their past, their stultifying traditions. This is a notion of racial identity that challenges the very notion of identity by linking it to the eternal return of one’s difference from oneself. That is, it locates the “sameness” of racial identity in the repetition of difference.

Kara Walker’s silhouettes are filled with figures in the process of violently merging and protruding from each other. They swallow and secrete, tear at and torture each other. The question that needs to be asked of them is whether they represent several bodies or one parasitized body joyously trying to free itself from its own slavery to itself. I suggest that the latter description is more accurate. This is not to say that the silhouettes deny the fact of racial identity, but that they locate it, like Freud, in the erotics of the body rather than in the idealization of discontent.

Notes

1. Moses, the Egyptian and the Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South 1. Dan Cameron, "Kara Walker. Rubbing History the Wrong Way," *On Paper*, vol. 2 (Sept./Oct. 1997), p. 11.
2. Kara Walker, "The Emancipation Approximation," *Heart Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Spring 2000), p. 25.
3. Kara Walker, "The Big Black Mammy of the Antebellum South is the Embodiment of History," in *Kara Walker*, The Renaissance Society at The University of Chicago, Jan. 12 - Feb. 23, 1997, not paginated.
4. James Hannaham, "The Shadow Knows: An Hysterical Tragedy of One Young Negress and Her Art," *New Histories* (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1996), p. 177.
5. Jacques Lacan, *Le seminaire XVIII: L'envers de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil), p. 128.
6. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism, S.E.*, 23:129.
7. Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo, S.E.*, 13:xv.
8. These are the words Lacan uses to describe the pur life instinct from which we are sepatated but which is represented by the objects a. See, Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed. (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1977), pp. 197-198.
9. William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* p. 6.
10. Gilles Deleuze, "Foldings, or the Inside of Thought (Subjectivation)," in *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), p.95.
11. *Ibid*, p, 96
12. I borrow the description of the uncanny as a parasite from Jean-Claude Milner. See his essay, "The Doctrine of Science," in *Umbr(a) 1* (2000), special issue editor, Theresa Giron. This essay was translated by Oliver Feltham from Milner's *L'oeuvre claire: Lacan, la science, la philosophie* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).
13. Kara Walker uses this phrase in her interview with Jerry Saltz, "Kara Walker, Ill-Will and Desire," *Flash Art International*, no. 191 (Nov/Dec 1996), 84.
14. See Liz Armstrong's interview with Kara Walker in *No Place (Like Home)* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1997), p.108.
15. Sigmund Freud, "Observations on Transference Love," *SE*, 12:167.
16. Deleuze, p. 98.
17. Michelle Montrelay, "Inquiry into Femininity." *The Woman in Question*, ed. Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1990), p. 262.
18. Thierry de Duve, *Voici: 100 ans d'art contemporain* (Brussels: Ludion/Flamarion, 2000). De Duve also curated the exhibition which this catalogue accompanies.
19. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *SE*, 17:242.
20. Quoted in Deleuze, p. 96; found originally in Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), p. 8.