

# The Art of Therapy

## Who are We?

### Updating Personal and Collective Memories

#### *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*

#### An Art Therapist's Look at Kara Walker's Retrospective Exhibit

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*"It's interesting that as soon as you start telling the story of racism you start reliving the story. You keep creating a monster that swallows you. But as long as there is a Dafur, as long as there are people saying, hey you don't belong here to other it only seems realistic to continue investigating the terrain of racism"* (text wall message, Hammer Museum, Walker, 2008).

Collective and autobiographical memories of social injustice, racial trauma, and liberty speak out from Kara Walker's first retrospective exhibit, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love*. The exhibit, currently showing at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, is a visual call for freedom of expression and courage in the face of adversity. Walker, a 1997 recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship for exceptional creativity, is on the faculty at Columbia University in New York. She received her MFA from Rhode Island School of Design and her BFA from Atlanta College of Art.

Kara Walker's arousing ink drawings, engaging pencil sketches, and confrontational murals of paper cutout black and white figures are explicit reminders of slavery practices and cultural traumas. Walker's swirling life-size Victorian style silhouettes are vivid pictures of the silenced memories of oppression, active discrimination, sexual exploitation, and physical violence characterized by slavery. Her art provides a new context for understanding the history of African American oppression as it was perpetuated for more than 240 years in America. Particularly in the

South, slaves' lives were in constant physical danger. In addition to murder, discrimination, and racial abuse, it was not unusual for enslaved black women to be raped by their owners. Any children that resulted from such rapes became slaves as well, taking on the status of their mothers. This history of oppression and discrimination continues to inform the conscious and unconscious collective memories of African Americans. As Walker transports us into the past, she shows the participant-observer how art expressions can help make implicit-unconscious memories explicit-conscious, and, by doing so, facilitate the integration of the individual and the collective self. It is thought that meaningful experiences adjust the representation of perceptual and conceptual knowledge: "Memory is the way the brain is affected by experience and subsequently alters its future responses" (Siegel, 1999, p. 24). Our memories, our very selves, change through meaningful, episodic here-and-now experiences. More specifically, neuroimaging shows that people have a greater memory capacity for emotionally disturbing stimuli than they do for neutral stimuli (Baddeley & Andrade, 2000). Because Walker's work is quite unsettling, it has the potential to

leave a tremendous impact on our memories-ourselves. Thus, Walker's art updates and changes our felt sense and known understanding of past and present experiences of being an African American.

*"And my project, it's been about many things, but I think, and I sometimes forget to mention this, but the second longing is about trying to examine what it is to be an African American woman artist, so it's not just an examination of race relations in America today. I mean, that's a part of it. It's a part of being an African American woman artist. It's about how do you make representations of your world, given what you've been given?"* (Walker, 2003).

## Explicit and Implicit Histories

The history of the South is explicitly documented in factual records and factually-based novels and movies. Similar to historical accounts, explicit memories are specific to what, when, where, and with whom. Semantic memory is the memory of facts and a form of explicit memory. Explicit memories are conscious and declarative (Siegel, 1999). Such memories represent the conscious organization of memory via linguistic organization. Although historical documentation is analogous to explicit memory, many of the collective traumatic experiences of the South are undeclared, implicit, nonverbal memories. The antebellum South of the pre-Civil War era was a time when issues pertaining to slavery were overlooked. To this day, idealized and romanticized terms such as "Old South" continue to ignore the atrocities committed against slaves by their masters, which, when undeclared, keep these memories away from the public eye. Free from a sense of time, space and self-awareness, implicit memories organize experience automatically. Like riding a bike, habitual scribbling or knitting, implicit memories, also called procedural knowledge, are a reflection of what we unconsciously know about ourselves and/or what we can do automatically without consciousness. That is why minorities, often blamed as "having a chip on their shoulders," are rightfully much more sensitive to reminders of racism. They may automatically react to the hidden, vague, racial messages behind overt, seemingly benign incidents (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). Such implicit, visceral memories

start to develop prenatally and are functional at birth (for reviews see Fernandez et. al., 1999; Macrae, et al., 2004; Rosenbaum, et. al., 2005; Siegel, 1999; Tulving et al., 1994).

Traumatic memories are often implicit. Encoded in non-verbal situational memory rather than in verbal memory, traumatic memories carry visceral, bodily sensations of fear, anxiety, anger, and rage (Brewin et al., 1996; Brewin, 2001). This situational, accessible memory system is primarily non-verbal, and represents fragmented visual-spatial sensory motor information that is subcortically encoded during trauma (Hellowell & Brewin, 2002). The recall of somatic, perceptual, behavioral, and emotional felt memories does not require words or verbalization. Implicitly recalled traumatic memories can be re-traumatizing as they may intrude on a person's everyday life without warning. As trauma-based schemas organize a person's reactions, the unconscious recall of upsetting emotions can lead to self-destructive behaviors, alterations of perception and of consciousness, chronic relational distrust, a continuum of dissociative disorders, and an overall sense of de-realization (Ford, 1999; Herman, 1992; van Der Kolk, 2002; van der Kolk, McFarlane & Weisaeth, 1996).

## Making the Implicit Explicit

The publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a story about the antebellum South, has been explicitly engraved in public memory as a positive contribution to the end of slavery in America. The story tells of the trials of a faithful slave, Uncle Tom, who is betrayed by his masters but never loses faith in Christianity, and who is instrumental in saving others. Walker's mural *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* attacks the underlying message in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that victims play a role in the dynamics of their abuse. The mural is an explicit exposé of the novel's prejudicial use of stereotypical black characters and a Christian agenda. Walker's art underscores that, given what we now know of the hidden realities of the beatings, killings, and sexual atrocities associated with the time of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, a debate on morality was not needed as much as an aggressive attack on slavery. Walker's art argues that Stowe failed to provide this attack.



**The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven, 1995 (detail).** Cut paper on wall. 15 x 35 ft. (4.6 x 10.7 m). Collection Jeffrey Deitch, New York.

In *The End of Uncle Tom*, Walker depicts the difficult dynamics of victim and perpetrator as intertwined and forever tangled. Walker demolishes the “turn the other cheek” icon of Uncle Tom and the self-sacrificing image of Eva, a young girl whom Tom saves from drowning in the river. Walker accomplishes this by emasculating the character of Uncle Tom, who is depicted in her mural as a man who is giving birth to a child (on the ground) while he is praying to God. In the midsection, a person commonly interpreted as the character of Eva swings a hatchet at a child, with piles of feces surrounding her. In the narrative, as Eva dies, she shares her image of heaven with others, and so does Walker; as if frozen in time, disturbing silhouette images reveal the abusive powers and effects of exploitative and distorted love-hate relationships. On the left, three slave women nurse at each other’s breasts. It is an image of women so desperately hungry that they suckle their own babies’ milk, which brings up ghostly memories of the abuse of black wet nurses, forced to feed their masters’ babies before their own. On the right, an amputee, perhaps a representation of Uncle Tom, stabs one child and is either attempting to consume another child, is being somehow served by her, and/or is giving birth to a child. It is a picture of hell, where victims perpetuate violence on each other.

The synthesized images of victim/slave/perpetrator, child/female/male, and love/hate represent the kind of perceptual, sensory, and emotional memory fragmentation associated with repeated trauma. The silhouettes blending together to form an ambiguous mass are familiar amalgams showing up in many of Walker’s works. They are timeless to my art therapist’s mind. The silhouettes represent what has happened in the past, and what continues to happen in the present as collective implicit memories are denied. Survivors of child abuse report that the worst thing that happened to them was that when they turned around to tell their story of abuse to loved ones, they were not believed -- and thus their implicit sense of self was denied. It is this double trauma of abuse, compounded by betrayal, that is responsible for the confusing and terrifying unshared implicit bodily memories of sexual and physical abuse, and for the trajectory of self-destruction (Ulman, 1996) that so often follows. On the collective level, this “unclaimed discourse of the unspeakable continues to impact the ability of many European Americans and many African Americans to confront the terrible impression that the legacy of slavery continues to have on our individual and collective psyches” (Dubois Shaw, 2004, p. 7). The shadowy amalgams of Walker’s art are a perfect way to represent such murky yet vivid memories, and to

raise the question of how the legacy of slavery continues to impact current society.

Walker "...mutilates the constructed national memory and fabricated myth of self-sacrificing white liberators perpetuated by such characters, and harshly criticizes submissive faith in, and dependence upon, such martyr myths" (Vergne, 2007, p.17). But Walker not only destroys a myth, she also updates collective memories by providing a novel context of courage. Throughout the exhibit, she tells and shows the unspeakable (Dubois Shaw, 2004) with artistic complexity and excellence, which are sources of personal and social pride. The shift from unspeakable core emotions -- anger, fear, joy -- to more complex and articulated social emotions/cognitions -- authorship, ownership -- represents a shift from central brain functioning, associated with the arousal of the amygdala, to more integrated function that includes cortical influences of the prefrontal cortex and the temporal medial lobes (Barrett, Mesquita, Oschner & Gross, 2007). The amygdala, a structure in the central brain responsible for alarm responses, is also associated with encoding of implicit memories. The activation of cortical areas is necessary for making the implicit explicit and for dampening fear responses.

Walker's titles and written work displayed on the exhibition walls contribute to further integration, as the visual-situational memories become available for verbal processing and story telling. Explicit memory, also called declarative memory, involves an awareness of the remembering. It is mediated by the hippocampus and is moved into long-term memory by cortical consolidation. This is the process in the brain that creates a lasting memory of a particular event (for an excellent review of human memory neuroscience, see Gabrieli, 1998).

The activation of an extended neural network of connections that represent old written, oral, and visual testimonies is woven into new memories. From a psychological perspective, the difference between these old memories and new ones is that the new memories are explicit and conscious. It is a cohesive disclosure that helps mitigate traumatic memories, thereby releasing current and future generations from imprisonment in their history.

## Autobiographical Memory

Throughout Walker's exhibit, life-size, panoramic tableaus pull the viewer into the scene. We have a direct experience of the art, and the overtly sexualized and violent content forces us to confront our own biases, fears, shame, and guilt. In addition, the art medium, the pasted cut outs and text on the walls, feel easily accessible. I got a felt sense of process art, as though I was actually watching Walker create in the moment. Walker's exhibit is a personal vivid experience, an episodic memory, which changes our autobiographical memories.

Autobiographical memories refer to memories of our self, our experiences, and our history over time. Autobiographical memories connect the sense of a person's self to his/her past, present, and future. For example, in *Darkytown Rebellion* (on the next page), the shadow of the observer's physical self interacts with the depicted scenes. Green, yellow, and red light is projected onto the ceiling, walls, and onto the floor of the mural, which depicts characters inflicting violence on one another. Because the light projector is set at a distance between the observer and the mural, the shadow of the observer's body mixes in with historical realism and the incredible art space, forcing the observer to face his/her potential, and possibly historical, role in the scene.



**Darkytown Rebellion, 2001.** Cut paper and projection on wall. 14 x 37 ft. (4.3 x 11.3 m). Collection Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg. See clip on <http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/walker/clip2.html>.

As we come closer to the tableau, we become smaller, almost the same size as the silhouettes themselves. However, if we choose to quickly move away from the scene, our shadow looms larger and seems to further threaten the nightmarish cut-paper figures. Thus, we become active, implicated participants as we experience being a two-dimensional silhouette in the theater of our mind. Such changes in size, enhanced foci, and exaggeration arouse strong emotions and captivate attention. Thus, the art forms an episodic, meaningful memory.

*“I didn’t want a completely passive viewer. Art means too much to me. To be able to articulate something visually is really an important thing. I wanted to make work where the viewer wouldn’t walk away; he would giggle nervously, get pulled into history, into fiction, into something totally demeaning and possibly very beautiful. I wanted to create something*

*that looks like you. It looks like a cartoon character, it’s a shadow, it’s a piece of paper, but it’s out of scale. It refers to your shadow, to some extent to purity, to the mirror”* (Walker, from the Gallery Guide, Whitney Museum, 2007, p.5).

Autobiographical memories are initially stored as *episodic* memories of experiences, and it is thought that over time, they are converted to semantic, or factual, memories. As autobiographical memories involve the activation of the right hippocampus and the right orbital frontal cortex, it is likely that the art, which is associated more with a right hemispheric function, contributes to this activation. Autobiographical memories also integrate facts with experiences of the self across time. Memory of facts, or *semantic* memory, is facilitated by words, and language functions. It is primarily associated with left hemispheric function, and is likely activated in this exhibit by Walker’s titles

and printed narratives. Walker's writings are exhibited on index cards and large posters. Her witty, humorous and blunt semantics force a study of the relationship between the images and what they represent, and directly challenge how and what we know about the antebellum South:

*"Nothing can come between a man and his ego except A woman, black, with History on her side, a million hungry ancestors on her shoulders salivating at the chance for a speedy blood letting"* (Typing machine print on index card, Walker, 2007, p. 61).

Word arrangements are a stand-in for the more complex experiences of actual remembering, and encapsulate color, sounds, smells, and bodily sensations as well as more complex word associations (Dryden, 2004). Walker's amalgams --

visuals, narrative discourses and art titles -- capture and convey actual lived experiences.

*Cut* (below) is such an amalgam. It is an explicit portrait of Walker's experiences as an African American artist. It is an autobiographical statement based on a photograph of the artist (photograph in Dubois Shaw, 2004, p.128). *Cut* is a heart-stopping image of a woman whose hands are about to fall away from her body, as the dark silhouette twists and turns. In empathic correspondence, I, the art therapist, have the sense that I'm helplessly watching a movie of a life being drained away and cannot do anything about it. The act of cutting as self-injury is associated with an adrenal high and a relief from pain. The cutting woman is leaping, floating in a graceful dance, as patterns of her blood stylistically decorate the wall and form a pool on the floor.



**Cut, 1998.** Cut paper on wall. 88x54 in. (223.5x137.2 cm). Collection Donna and Cargill MacMillan.

Walker's art, personality, and even personal life have received much criticism; older African American artists have expressed concerns that Walker's imagery is negative and that it betrays their efforts to change and erase African American racial stereotyping (for a review, see DuBois Shaw, 2004). Thus, *Cut* is a double-edged autobiographical reference to Walker's artist's tool, the X-Acto knife, which is a source of pride, longing, and pain. The autoethic image can be a reference for the events pertaining to the artist's past that have taken a psychological toll:

*"I would like to point out that Invisibility can be a form of power- CAN BE-didn't say i don't put words in my mouth. Of course this doesn't play well in an art institution which is all about vision, seeing, looking, Tangibility, and for folks who feel they are not seen, to see visual art that doesn't gratify, this, small, pleasure-look . . ." (Typing machine print on index card, Walker, 2007, p. 76).*

Autoethic memories are a representation of conscious memories, described as subjective mental time-travel, which results in retrieval of episodic memories. By contrast, noetic memories are semantic memories of facts that do not include self-recollection processing (Wheeler, Stuss, & Tulving, 1997), but do assist in the retrieval of self-memories (Nyberg, 2000). It is, therefore, likely that seeing Walker's autoethic representations of African American semantic memories intensifies the observer's recollection of times when he or she has felt similarly. The artist/author and the observer/participant thus meet together on the same page.

## Learning

As I, the art therapist, step in and out of Kara Walker's tableaux, I am compelled to ask myself: Where am I in this picture? While viscerally experiencing the art, I am consciously reflecting on my own Jewish-Israeli memories and experiences. I recollect and re-examine my own biases and prejudices; my memories of my own differences;

the times when I have wronged others; and a remembrance of my teaching about diversity. Art therapists have emphasized that experiencing and changing inequality, privilege, and color-blind racial attitudes all happen on a visceral level, and that the making of a conscious and culturally responsible therapist needs to include a similar immediate change (Talwar, Iyer & Doby-Copeland, 2004). This kind of salient and emotionally arousing learning can activate short-term memory processes immediately. Short-term memory, also called primary or working memory, can hold a small amount of information for about 20-30 seconds -- as if in a quick sketchbook.

I first saw one of Kara Walker's art works at the Whitney Museum in New York some years ago. I don't remember the title of the specific piece, but I can recall seeing myself seeing the work, and I can still feel the impact it had on me as I took in the image of a saber pointing at a small black boy's bottom. Indeed, neuroimaging has shown that retrieving traces of memories involves retrieving sensory and perceptual processes (Nyberg, 2000). Short-term memories are converted into long-term memories through rehearsal and meaningful associations, and autoethic experiences can increase the significance of events and help consolidate long-term memory. The excitation and long-term potentiation of the neurons lead to synaptic growth and to the synthesis of new proteins resulting in neural structural changes (Bailey, Kandel & Kausik, 2004). While the retrieval of long-term memories may require some promoting from sensory and/or non-declarative memory, they can last for years. Specifically, the vividness of imagery identified by factors such as meaningfulness, activity, bizarreness, and familiarity have been shown to be implicated in both working memory and in long-term memory (Baddeley & Andrade, 2000). Walker's vivid artwork has the potential to activate generational and/or collective memories that are associated with personal experience. Her reworking of American history, of movies, such as *Gone with the Wind*, and of stories such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, has reportedly activated long-term emotional memory, resulting in outcry, confusion, anger, and rage (DuBois Shaw, 2004; Walker, 2007).

## Integration

As I revisit my own memory of experiencing Kara Walker's art, and as I see more of her art and read and write about her work, the explicit meaning of the experience percolates through my sense of self. I feel changed by the exhibit in ways that I have yet to explore and figure out. As a privileged, female, first-generation Jewish-Israeli art therapist in America, I begin to wonder about how aspects of my own history haunt me in the form of spoken and unspoken narratives of my family and I wonder about the impact of my country of origin's slogans and myths. I worry about blind spots in seeing and writing about certain complexities that I can only begin to approach. Alternatively, as Paulette Theresa, my faculty colleague, eloquently pointed out, I may be experiencing an honest angst, a result of knowing my privileged position (personal communication). As an art therapist, I always worry of taking unwarranted liberties with psychological interpretations. There is always the risk of misdiagnosis, of over-generalizing about the symbolic meaning of art, and of talking too much about the art instead of letting the art speak on its own.

Critics and supporters of Kara Walker's art have wondered about the positive attention she has received from major museums: "Does the eager interest of today's white viewers in Walker (my own included) merely update and revitalize the means by which black popular culture has traditionally been both acknowledged and dispossessed by the powers that be?" (Wagner, 2007, p. 92). As a psychologist, it makes sense to me that African Americans and European Americans will respond differently to the art. The reminders of racial trauma embedded in the art may pose a real threat for survivors of racial trauma and may trigger posttraumatic stress reactions for African Americans. Unfortunately, the lack of recognition of racial oppression prevents the necessary understanding of such responses. This issue is long overdue. For example, the DSM definition of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder lacks criteria for oppression-based trauma; political and financial gate-keeping continue to prevent the acknowledgment of race

incident based traumas (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005).

*"Only education, prevention, intervention, and justice can work against the insidious and tenacious nature of racial oppression, victim blaming, and pathologizing. As scholars and researchers, psychologists can become distracted by debates over labels and linguistics while the traumatic experiences of racism are themselves sorely neglected"* (Bryant-Davis, 2007, p. 137).

The significance of Walker's work transcends the geographical boundaries of North America. Her work provides a path for further insight and discovery that shows artists, art therapists, and psychologists how combining autoethic and semantic art forms and narratives can help acknowledge and recognize the experiences of survivors of other holocausts.

Walker's work has been compared to that of other social action artists who have mounted visual and semantic protests against inhumane treatment of people. Picasso's large scale painting (*Guernica: Testimony of War*); Goya's 80 copper tinted prints (*The Disasters of War*); the animations of William Kentridge (*Felix In Exile*); and the color lithographs of Enrique Chagoya (*Illegal Alien's Guide to Critical Theory*) all insist on showing "the unspeakable" (Dubois Shaw, 2004). Like Kentridge and Chagoya's art, Walker's art is autoethic, in that it includes her self and her experiences. Unlike many artists, Walker uses art processes and media that are easily available, and the immediacy of her media is reminiscent of the collage cut outs art therapists already use. Her use of high face value words and large-scale murals are clinical lessons that art therapists can immediately embrace and apply.

Lastly, lest the reader accuse me of generalizing and comparing traumas, I emphasize that not all traumas and holocausts are the same. Nor am I in any way diminishing the artistic quality of Walker's fine art. I do not know of a better way for art therapists to engage in the difficult dialogues the work arouses and develop the



competencies essential for becoming culturally responsive than to see, experience, and write about

*My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love.*

**Kara Walker, *My Complement, My Enemy, My Oppressor, My Love* a Retrospective Exhibit can be seen at the Hammer from March 2-June 8, 2008. The Hammer Museum of Art is located at 10899 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90024. 310.443.700.**

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*Coming soon, for all those interested in the convergence of art therapy and neuroscience...*

***Art Therapy and Clinical Neuroscience***

Editors: Noah Hass-Cohen and Richard Carr

Foreword by Frances F. Kaplan

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“This is an impressive accomplishment... Hass-Cohen and Carr and their contributors have blazed a trail for us to follow. Helping professionals who use art would be wise to put on their hiking boots and begin the journey.”

– *from the Foreword by Frances F. Kaplan*

*Art Therapy and Clinical Neuroscience* addresses recent developments in clinical neuroscience and their impact on the theory and practice of art therapy. The book introduces neuroscientific language and concepts in an accessible way and explores the complex relationships between art, creativity, and interpersonal neurobiology. Rooted in art therapy contexts and cases, the book covers key areas such as the stress response, attachment theory, gender differences, memory, the visual system and Complex-Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. The book culminates with a unique framework for applying relational neuroscience to art therapy practice and intervention. This groundbreaking book is essential reading for art therapists, expressive arts therapists, counselors, mental health practitioners and students.

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## Who are We? Updating Personal and Collective Memories

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## Mindfulness for Real Parents

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