

Controlling Women's Bodies: the Black and Veiled Female Body in Western Visual Culture. A Comparative View

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Abstract

This article sets out to investigate the black and veiled female body within particular regimes of power and visibility. The two types of bodies are addressed as cultural artifacts, products of timely norms and cultural and political imperatives. The article builds on a theoretical framework centered on the notion of embodiment and the role played by the human body in the regulation of social interactions. Simultaneously, a critical commentary is given relative to the use and misuse of body image, projections, representations and reproductions of the female body.

Following the theoretical layout proposed, the article proposes an interrogation into artistic practice, in order to determine to what extent it can produce social critical commentary and eventually change.

Key Words: embodiment, black female body, power relations, Islamic veil, regimes of visibility.

Introduction

This article addresses various constructions of the female body as they emerge in contemporary Western cultural space and proposes a critical account of the cultural practices that contribute to its formation. The analysis focuses on two distinct forms in which the female body is shaped within this cultural and conceptual space – the black female body in the modern and contemporary American socio-cultural layout, and the veiled (Muslim) female body, in Western European space. Despite the apparent incongruity of these two elements, a comparative view might bring to light a series of similarities in connection with processes of cultural inscription, fragmentation, deconstruction and re-signification of the racialized female body. All these practices are necessary, as they animate hetero-normative social structures and infuse the hetero-social practices of gendering within (Western) society, in the effort of regulating difference and the role it plays in the shaping of otherness. It is socially imperative to construct roles, images and models for and about women that are recognizable and can function complementary with other social roles within the matrix of given power relations. These phenomena appropriate the female body, altering its totality by means of epistemic violence and cultural aggression. It is the aim of this article to identify and analyze instances where female bodies enter these dimensions of violent inscription, becoming socio-cultural constructs that serve a particular cultural scheme. We identify a potential site of resistance in artistic practice. Visual art allows a wide array of investigation and critical interrogation.

Embodiment. Questions of Identity and Materiality

The process of observing and labeling women's bodies as female, physiologically distinct from masculine bodies, implies a series of assumptions, stereotypes and cultural habits that engage the feminine corporeality in a dimension dependent upon social reading, intentionality and fragmentation. These interactions have a liminal nature, as they regard various instances of simultaneity, difference, intentionality or spatiality of the body in relation to the world. Consequences and implications of these practices affect subjectivities they shape self-perceptions and alter the general vectors of knowledge production. In this perspective, the notion of embodiment gathers ideas and practices related to the existence of individuals as bodily entities in a world they experience starting from their bodies. In the past century, social studies and particular strains of philosophy (like phenomenology) came to see the human body as a mode of consciousness, a starting point in the creation of a view of the world, and the ultimate space for the manifestation of individuals as active elements within their environment.

While making the argument that embodiment is a fundamental paradigm in the study of humanity, Thomas Csordas defines embodiment as a postulate resting on the core assumption of “the body [being] not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture, or in other words, the existential ground of culture”¹. From the perspective of a double function of the body – as object and subject in a socio-cultural environment – embodiment appears to refer to the very shift between the two categories. Waskul and Vannini touch this idea in *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body* (2006), where the sense of self and the wider social dispositions are related to human embodied experience: “embodiment refers quite precisely to the process by which the object-body is actively experienced, produced, sustained, and/or transformed as a subject-body”². This view is an obvious break with the Cartesian understanding of the human whole divided between mind and body. The reality of the human being is now corporeality the main viewpoint towards the world is a bodily one, a highly conscious presence capable of experiencing culture, the self, and the others. Waskul and Vannini tackle the matter of bodily being in the world from an interactionist standpoint, much in the tradition of American pragmatism, considering the body as “more than a mere skeleton wrapped in muscles and stuffed with organs; the body is also an enormous vessel of meaning of utmost significance to both personhood and society.”³ The acknowledgement of the body’s dispositions towards itself and the others depends on the recognition of such dispositions in the bodies of others.

As Csordas writes, the purpose and function of a body are shared, present in the experience of other people, maintaining cycles of interactions: “embodiment is a matter of shared, mutually implicating, and never completely anonymous flesh”⁴. This interactional account of bodily experience may be underlying the formation and perpetuation of institutionalized representations within a social environment. The apprehension of gender structures, for instance, is symptomatic of the shared bodily experience; female individuals recognize their own bodily structures (defined often by sexual organs) in the bodies of others, becoming inclined to reproduce in their being the display of gender generally associated with female bodies. Body image and the presence of an

¹ Thomas Csordas, “Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology”, *Ethos* 18:1 (1990), 5-47.

² Dennis D. Waskul and P. Vannini, *Body/Embodiment: Symbolic Interaction and the Sociology of the Body*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006), p.3.

³ Waskul, Vannini, *op. cit.*

⁴ T. Csordas, *op. cit.* p. 137.

exterior Other are basic starting points in the development of more complex social, cultural, and political hierarchies. In a critique of disembodied practices of social actors, Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott maintain that social interactions rest upon bodily negotiations, as “we recognize others through their bodies, we categorize them by age, gender, ethnicity”⁵. This process identifies and validates an interesting double function of the use of body image – it is a tool in underlying both sameness and difference.

Seeing and Believing: Performativity and the reclaiming of the interpellated body

The notion of visibility plays an essential role in the emergence of the female body as a locus of producing and projecting difference. Cultural dichotomies at work in contemporaneity follow a rather long Western tradition of visual primacy, as a tool in developing and maintaining a trustworthy “objectivity of observation”⁶. Robyn Wiegman proposes in *American Anatomies* (1995) a critical reading of such objective accounts of reality, a critique that would paradoxically bring out the failure of visual categories (as race and gender are, in part) to “represent, mimetically, the observable body”⁷. Instead, she argues, the “discursive production” of race, among other dimensions, will become clear, infusing some sort of cultural skepticism towards established categories⁸.

Besides gender, race and ethnicity are categories of existence marked by dimensions of visibility and structural changes occurred at the level of perception. As a historian of culture and human interactions, Michel Foucault analyzed visibility, with its various facets (invisibility, surveillance, hyper-visibility) as a means to understanding the wider order of producing knowledge and organizing society. In this framework, the emergence of race as a tool in the categorization of individuals is closely related to the general disposition of Western culture to manage difference and

⁵ Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, “Putting the Body’s Feet on the Ground. Towards a Sociological Reconceptualization of Gender and Sexual Embodiment”, *Constructing Gendered Bodies*. Ed. Kathryn Backett-Milburn and Linda McKie. (London: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 9-24.

⁶ Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 9.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

regulate identity, employing elements of the visible. The existence of gender and race as viable categories of social life in western society is dependent upon the mechanisms of the visible and the various fields of vision it inspires. Social seeing defines and regulates, institutes normativity and classifies transgression, all on the institutionalized assumption of the body being the primary locus of being. Relative to the necessity of cultural predispositions and pre-set structures of social meaning, Judith Butler argues in *Bodies that Matter* (2011) that the materiality of the body, the flesh or corporeality, is associated with reproduction, but also linked to “origination and causality”⁹. As Butler notes, the intelligibility of bodies is subjected to a particular rationality and power flux, which lead to a subjective reading of materiality¹⁰. In other words, identity and subjectivity depend on cultural scripts, which interpellate bodies in the process, rendering them meaningful relative to a particular social ethos. Althusser’s notion of “interpellation” brings new light to the nature and structure of the racialized female body, especially when connected with Butler’s concept of “performativity”. Individuals are “hailed” into becoming sexed, gendered or raced, on account of an already existing schema of meaning production: notions like black and white, man and woman are infused with a binary logic, which regulates difference by recruiting individuals and re-drafting their bodily presence according to a structure of subjectivity deemed reasonable. Individuals with female sexual organs are likely to be *hailed* into becoming women and adopting the social dispositions set for their roles. Individuals with female sexual organs and dark skin tones are likely to undergo a split in subjectivity, as their bodies are visually prone to extensive reading of historical notions that evade their individuality. Likewise, a veiled body in a western public space will be primarily defined by the piece of clothing as an extension of the female body it covers. Since the body is imagined as the essential locus of being, the veiled body will become inseparably intertwined with the imagined subjectivity corresponding to it. The wearing of the Muslim scarf (referred to by the generic term “veil”) may be empty of religious symbolism; it may be used as an accessory, following social habit. Because of the complexity of individual choices and relationship to the act of veiling, it is difficult to define the veil as one consistent cultural or counter-cultural element. However, in a western field of vision, the intentionality of the act of veiling is irrelevant, as the western conceptions perform a divorcing of individual experience and general projections of a cultural product.

⁹ Kaila Adia Story, *op. cit.* p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

The naturalizations of bodily predispositions and corporeal elements under the primacy of visual are contested by Judith Butler, who coins the notion of “performativity”, an umbrella concept to foster the stylization of gender, ritualization, as a medium of cultural inscription, anticipation, as a driving force for appropriation of norms¹¹. Performativity thus counters the existence of a “natural body”, pre-existent to its social and cultural inscription. Between interpellation and performativity, the female body image is caught between webs of habitual social seeing, which alter the projected and appropriated understanding of the female body, leading women’s subjectivity in a state of tension with its own coordinates. The construction, distribution and control of “female-ness”¹² pre-determine the existence of such feature as essential. This article argues that, within a postcolonial cultural ethos, western societies produce such pseudo-essential notions of identity starting from a mechanism of recognition and reproduction that is ultimately designed within a field of vision. In other words, to cite Frantz Fanon, “what is most visible” is essentialized as marker of difference¹³.

The unsubstantiated naturalization of the visual and the primacy attributed to visual indicators of identity generate a field of cultural aggression that is projected at the level of bodily presence and corporeal dispositions: phenol-typical attributes, in the case of black women, or traditional clothing, in the case of Muslim women become notions of ontological value. Under the imposition of necessary visible markers of identity and the naturalization of embodied experience as manifest identity, the lines between having a body and being a subject are blurred.

Stuart Hall discusses the cultural signification and reproduction of difference in *What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?* (1992), where he underlines the “West’s fascination with the bodies of black men and women of other ethnicities” and the overall postmodern infrastructure that allows a “licensing of the gaze”¹⁴. The recognition of others as exterior to one’s own body and the recognition of the other as different, based on body image, are symptomatic of prevalence of the visual, as a sense-making dimension, providing individuals with manageable tools for

¹¹ Sara Salih, *Judith Butler*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).

¹² Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women. Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*. London and New York: Routledge. 1993. pp. 123-124

¹³ Frantz Fanon, “Algeria Unveiled”, *Monthly Review Press*, New York, 1965.

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, “What is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Black Popular Culture*. Ed. Gina Dent. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), pp. 21-33.

categorization and understanding. Differences of sex, race, culture, or ethnicity are inscribed with visual codes, culturally agreed upon, and projected on the most accessible surface – the body. Merleau-Ponty tackles the relation between the act of seeing and various lived experiences of individuals, emphasizing the quality of vision to constitute what is seen. Alia Al-Saji takes the point further in her article *The Racialization of Muslim Veils: a Philosophical Analysis*, where she argues that “the intentional structure of seeing and its reliance on habit”¹⁵ is what institutes difference, beyond the mere act of rendering things visible. Difference, instituted through the complex mechanism of the gaze, is infused by “sedimented habits of seeing”¹⁶, which direct, regulate and maintain social predispositions. Race, violently extended to be an ontological category, is thus generated in the act of seeing, it is essentially a part of the general habitual social disposition of the seeing subject, rather than a natural feature of the body observed. Consequently, Al-Saji writes, “invisibility and visibility are not properties of the object, but are constituted relative to the position of the gaze in a visual field”¹⁷. Gender or race *interpellations* have specific dimensions according to the social milieu in which they occur. However, Al-Saji argues, they work towards a consistent “othering” of individuals visually marked as different. Just as the white subject constitutes the black subject through a process of abjection (Fanon), the non-Islamic subject constitutes the Islamic subject by applying the same traits of abjection, which further a naturalized logic of dichotomous embodied experience of the Self: to *have* a body identified as black is to *be* black. Correlatively, the veiled female body will be used as an indicator of identity, according to naturalized perceptions of the veil being a mark of gender oppression; a veiled woman will *be* an undifferentiated victim of gender oppression. This practice of constructing and defining social groups and individuals at an ontological level starting from mere visual traits of their corporeality is necessarily imbued with elements of social “habit,” which relies primarily on a visual register.

The Body as Political Site: Difference and Power Structures

¹⁵ Alia Al-Saji, “The Racialization of Muslim Veils: A philosophical Analysis,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 36(8), 875-902; 2010.

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ *Idem.*

In this layout characterized by complex regimes of visibility and various mechanisms of appropriating and regulating subjectivities, an essential role is played by the body. The body is a political site, insofar as it marks points of difference and sameness among individuals and allows for correlative regulations of these categories. In the generic understanding of a political process as one that emerges out of structures of power, and works towards the subsequent reinforcement of such structures, the body develops an architecture of signs and markers of difference, “accounted for the distribution of material, spatial, temporal resources” and a necessary (in the late 19th, early 20th centuries) classification of population¹⁸. However, the body is not a self-sufficient reality, but it is included in a larger flux of producing and projecting political power and maintaining cultural prominence. In this scenario, the black body is attached a series of axiological features, designed to control the projection and interpretation of images of black bodies. The primacy of the skin as source of identity resurfaces, laying the basis for what Wiegman calls “epidermal hierarchies,” as a means of applying discipline on the surface of bodies and organizing the social environment. Fanon’s “fact of blackness” attests to the same kind of epidermal priority in establishing selfhood: a “symbolic over determination of skin” is at work in the attempt to manage difference¹⁹. The history of individuals identified as blacks in the United States of America is symptomatic of this kind of ontological violence, which naturalized black skin as a site of inferiority, and designated whiteness as “a political space, not a biological ‘race’”²⁰. Once again, the otherness of the non-white body is marked and politically employed in strategies of reinforcing social and cultural *status quo*.

As Merleau-Ponty notes, “the body is the place where appropriations of space, objects and instruments occurs”, a primary receptacle of ideological scripts²¹. The role of difference as a mechanism of ideology is of importance, as it is difference and its institutionalized regimes of visibility that organize settings of democratic life. The (racialized) female body is used in constructing and delineating difference, being subjected to a process of ontological reduction – aggression manifested at a semiotic level, where meaning is attached to fragments of embodied experience, such as sexual organs. At this point, mere experiences of the body degenerate into

¹⁸ Ronald L. Jackson III, *Scripting the Black masculine Body. Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. (New York: University of New York Press, 2006), p.15.

¹⁹ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, (London: Pluto Press, 1986), pp.109-111.

²⁰ R. Wiegman, *op. cit.* p. 37, 216.

²¹ M. Merleau-Ponty, *op. cit.* p. 154.

representations of the body (Merleau-Ponty) – elements of biology are used to design cultural difference and naturalize it into otherness. A telling example is the infamous phenomenon of the Hottentot Venus, discussed by Janell Hobson in *The "Batty" Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body*. The Hottentot Venus is the grotesque persona constructed for Sarah Baartman, a south-African woman whose body was exhibited in a so-called freak show in the 19th century Europe. Hobson discusses the process through which Baartman's body became an object upon which European fantasies, fears and desires were projected. Her fragmented body – mainly her protruding buttocks and genitalia – became a "colonized body," an example of sexual and racial alterity, the absolute Other, who bears in her body elements of a remote, exotic, savage society. Difference – sexual and racial – was thus ingrained in the anatomy of the Other, within an accessible field of vision, where social gaze could control and regulate knowledge. Sarah Baartman's was an individual body, produced and reproduced, fragmented and dismembered, controlled according to habits of seeing at work in a particular cultural time and space. Baartman's physiological experience and bodily structure entered, when meeting the mainstream signifying gaze, a regime of violent re-signification, where bodily dispositions were re-drafted and understood as layers of subjectivity. Such practices are maintained, Hobson claims, in contemporary visual culture, as female black bodies are included in specific categories of beauty, on account of historical echoes of the female body labeled "grotesque, obscene, strange, lascivious"²².

Cover and Uncover the Other: the Muslim Female Body

In quite a similar way, power relations and violent regimes of visibility impact the image of veiled women in Western cultural spaces. As discussed so far, the veiled female body is a powerful social text, imbued with signs and symbols that echo a particular colonial imagery associated with the Islamic Orient. Homa Hoodfar makes this observation in *The Veil in Their Minds and on our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Image of Muslim Women*. Relative to the construction of the Islamic veil in western minds, Hoodfar writes: "By the 19th century the focus of representation of the Muslim Orient had changed from the male barbarian, constructed over centuries during the Crusades, to the 'uncivilized' ignorant male whose masculinity relies on the mistreatment of women. In this manner, images of Muslim women were used as a building block for the

²² Janell Hobson, *The "Batty" Politic: Toward an Aesthetic of the Black Female Body*. *Hypatia*, 18:4 (87-105), 2003.

construction of the Orient's new imagery, an imagery which has been intrinsically linked to the hegemony of western imperialism"²³. This narrative drafted for the Muslim Other relies, in contemporary Western society, on the perpetuation of the image of oppressed Muslim women. In colonial times, the middle-eastern woman was typically depicted as frivolous, sexual and dangerous. Edward W. Said points out that, women from the Middle East were often represented as belly dancers, temptresses, prostitutes, or silenced women in a harem²⁴. Their bodies, just like the Orient, were open to be conquered and dominated. In contemporaneity, the image of the Muslim woman underwent a process of radical change, mostly because they became social agents in western societies, and were no longer perceived as distant, exotic Others or merely fictive characters. The physical presence of Muslim women in western societies collides with the static, rigid misconceptions of a (still colonial) western gaze.

Muslim women are turned into victims through an unsubstantiated process of naturalization of gender oppression on their bodies. The veiled body is de-subjectified, women's agency is, in Al-Saji's words, mutilated, and female bodies are appropriated into a re-signification of their very corporeality: they are symbols of victimhood, voicelessness, and coercion. As a pre-requisite of racialization of the veiled body, the act of veiling is made hyper-visible, over-determined, as a symbol of gender oppression. If, however, the western, white, freed woman, reflects herself in the image of the Muslim Other, the question is: what counters in the image of the western woman for the Islamic veil? The presence of the veil as an extension of the identity of the Other will function as a reinforcement of western values that are seen to be under threat. This is one of several ways in which the image of the Islamic veil has been separated from its meaning. It is a practice of cultural aggression, a steady attempt to regularize the ever-present boundaries between the West and its imaginary (necessarily portrayed as under-civilized) counterparts.

Reflected Identities

²³ Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and On our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Image of Muslim Women." *RFR/DRF* 22: 3/4

²⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books. 2003. pp. 308-309.

Both the female black body and the female veiled body are cultural artifacts, mental constructions that serve particular functions in the process of regulating difference and defining alterity. The black and veiled bodies stand for silenced subjectivities and are used to maintain and reinforce imaginary borders between the West and the racial Other. In this process, following a Foucauldian frame of thought, black female bodies are imagined under the established power relations at work in society. Moreover, black and veiled female bodies are constructed on a binary logic of existence: victim and aggressor, over-sexualized and asexual, freedom and oppression. These categories limit agency and reduce identity to a set of modes of social existence, which need to be accessible in a field of vision, prior to their recognition and acceptance. In this sense, Hoodfar observes how individual lived experience of Muslim women are likely to be irrelevant in the context of a naturalized image of veiled bodies and a pre-set habit of social seeing: “The static colonial image of the oppressed veiled Muslim woman often contrasts with women’s lived experience of veiling. To deny this is also to deny Muslim women their agency”²⁵.

The Black Female Body: artistic interrogations and visualizations by Kara Walker

The following section proposes a close examination of a selection of visual cultural products, which, when analyzed within the cycle of production – distribution – consumption, act as endemic features of a larger discursive practice in which the female black-body is regulated, controlled and re-signified in various ways. The art works selected belong to Kara Walker, a contemporary African American artist who investigates largely the antebellum American Southern imagery. She is best known for her larger-than-life tableaux containing black cut-outs silhouettes of figures representative of the chattel slavery society of mid-19th century. Walker interrogates given structures of knowledge, while addressing issues like racism, sexism, power relations and oppression in a mixture of reality and fiction, which makes her art both intriguing and revealing. Walker’s artistic take on gender relations and sexuality produces a consistent body of work, which, in a frame of postmodern thought and cultural production, seeks to embody desires and aspirations

²⁵ Homa Hoodfar, *op. cit.* p. 5.

of certain social and cultural groups that have been (and still are) marginalized. Walker constructs grotesque scenarios and turns her characters in paroxysmal versions of their abject Selves using irony and parody as instruments to dig into the nature of contemporary experience and underline simulatory processes, which lay the basis for stereotypes.

Walker's artistic oeuvre creates a counter-discourse of race, gender and identity by deconstructing classic oppositions in race and gender ordering: her silhouettes are only black, regardless of their actual role in the panoramic scene. Another deconstructive artistic attitude is clear in the intentional complication of the process of labeling individuals as either victims or aggressors. It is our argument that Kara Walker makes a stand for the general post-structuralist attitude against the decision to represent individuals as bodies. Walker confronts the consequent objectification resulted from this cultural practice and uses figures and body shapes to stand for absent, yet active subjectivities. Figures of black women are present in her works, as receptacles for counter-discursive content and key elements in deconstructing stereotypes and questioning misconceptions. In relation to the social time and space (chattel slavery system in the American South), Walker includes stereotypes in an attempt to underline the almost exclusive materiality of women's (slaves) bodies. Her panoramic representations of a partly enchanting, partly demonic social layout contain clear traces of practices the artists criticizes; various inscriptions upon female black bodies are recalled in most of her works, as a brutal reminder of the cultural mistreatment of black women, through different signs attached to their bodies: hyper-sexuality, lasciviousness, oppression. Walker uses feminine figures in order to re-draft their agency; she empowers her female figures by placing them in new relations towards other figures or the environment. Most of her female figures act and react in an empowered manner, seemingly taking back control over their own body movement and reversing established power relations.

Figure 1: Kara Walker

World's Exposition, 1997

Cut paper on wall



Installation dimensions variable; approximately 120 x 192 inches (304.8 x 487.7 cm)

Walker's scenarios seem to unravel, following a Bakhtinian frame of thought, recordings of a society defined by grotesque, deviance and an overall collapse of moral values into the materiality of abjection. In this perspective, most female figures are constructed on a pattern of the grotesque body, unfinished, always in tension with its own extensions. Female black bodies are identified according to classic stereotypical imagery (bodily predispositions) and represented with over-sized body parts, amputated limbs and self-inflicted violence, in a paradoxical attempt to re-affirm subjectivity (Fig 1). Walker brings forth and critiques the moral degradation that eventually led to a material degradation, appropriating in the process the female body as an object, a surface of projection (of fears, desires, power relations). Pregnancy, violence, or death defines an ever-creating body, holder of a heightened sense of self. The carnivalesque tone of most of Walker's works illustrates a tension between pleasure and pain, while opening the space for critical judgment. Overall, Walker acknowledges and recalls a particular practice of knowledge production, specific to the historical time and space of the Antebellum American South; in this layout, black bodies were defined as deviation from a western, white norm of bodily presence, which inspired the social and cultural trauma of slavery, and led to the moral and psychological incarceration of individuals.

Walker's bodies echo the prejudicial frame of thought that considered the non-white body as deviant – a necessary step in the practice of othering. Much like the Hottentot Venus in Europe, the female slave body underwent a steady and inescapable process of inscription and signification, according to the cultural and political imperatives of the time. Black female body (along with the male counterparts) were refused subjectivity, thus citizenship, in a system that required them be regarded as mere instruments. Deviance and abjection are used to fill the space between figures and to link their movements. In Julia Kristeva's perspective, the abject is constituted by what we throw away in order to survive and maintain a consistent corporeal existence. In this sense, Walker includes feces, bodily fluids, blood, amputated limbs and corpses in order to empower her figures: these elements reference self-awareness, awareness of the Other and a mindful attitude towards the limits of the body. Elements of abjection in relation to the figures of the female black body reference both the aggressive stereotypes that Walkers feels compelled to acknowledge and combat, and the relation of the interior with the exterior, a relation that her female figures are able to control and regulate. Female figures are thus empowered, presented as capable of violence, in control of their own bodies, expressing manifest sexual desires; through these artistic choices, Walker attempts to re-organize the division of power inside a system based on conceptual dichotomies: men and women; white and black; master and slave. Walker's characters evade this prescribed social norm and work towards a dystopian visualization of a reversed master-slave dialectic, in which the line between victims and aggressors is blurred. Embodiment plays a central role, since it allows for a visualization of a strong discourse of empowerment, in a space of critical and subversive reading of history. Ramifications and extensions of the body act as markers of subjectivity, thus allowing female figures to move towards self-determination.

Walker's works of art echo and comment on a specific, assumed to have ended, period in American history, but her artistic practice appears to be deeply rooted in the identification of present-day stereotypical frames of mind, which might be the result of ideas and unsubstantiated conceptions characteristic to past times. In this sense, Walker's medium is very telling: her all-black silhouettes, placed against white walls challenge social seeing, including the viewer in a gallery or museum in a web of production and re-signification of signs and texts. The austere tone of her works opens a space for viewer participation – the reading of the scenes requires a set of pre-given notions and assumption, which, Walker seems to underline, are not always free of prejudice. How do viewers fill in the missing elements in her works? How are we to tell between white and black female bodies? The answer could bring out the process of naturalization we mentioned before – knowledge about specific groups (here – black females and their bodies) is

drafted and reproduced in a regime predisposed to a particular way of imagining and seeing, a phenomenon which eventually appropriates individuals and turns their bodies into commodities. Essentially, Walker takes an anti-racist and anti-sexist stand, which expands to include past and present possible alterations of the image of black women.

In order to analyze some of these aspects, we will select a number of Kara Walker's works and will point to a series of visual elements that are visually enriched to become signs of racial and gender stereotyping, while also functioning as tools in reversing these stereotypes. A striking feature of Walker's feminine figures is their freedom to move – their bodies interact with other figures (black male bodies, figures of masters or white women) and produce narratives of liberation, transgression and, essentially, empowerment.

One fundamental relationship is drawn between black female shapes and masculine masters' bodies. The detail of *World's Exposition* (Fig 1.) contains three white male figures, all in a state of movement and interaction with the rest of the tableaux. In the foreground, a black woman is beheading a white man, holding an ample body position. The male body appears to have recently lost an arm, which is thrown away. The gradual dismemberment of the white male figure references an on-going process of violence applied in a setting of reversed roles: the stereotypical victimized black woman becomes the aggressor, in full awareness of her body and movements: her position resembles an artist making a sculpture, which suggests authority and control.

In the same scene, another male figure that could represent a master is depicted as suffering from a recently inflicted act of violence. Although it is not clear who inflicted the pain, the figure suggests loss of authority and power.

A third male figure identified as a master is found in the background, constructing a pile of excrement. He is also lacking authority or power and is placed at the end of an abjection process started by a black woman, who seems oblivious of the consequences of her acts and simply satisfies some of her basic needs. The scene is built as a mixture of stereotypes (like hybridity – a concept visualized by the black woman in the tree) and critical takes on the master-slave and black-white power dialectic.

Figure 2: Kara Walker

The Means to an End—A Shadow Drama in Five Acts, 1995

Suite of 5 prints

Aquatint and etching on light cream Somerset Satin wove paper

Approximately 34.875 x 23.375 inches (88.6 x 59.4 cm) each

Edition of 2

Publisher: Landfall Press, Inc.



Another particular re-construction of the relationship between the black female body and the white male body is depicted in *A Means to an End... A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*. The breastfeeding detail (Fig. 2) shows a white boy in a position of dependence and powerlessness. He depends on the black woman to find satisfaction of a basic human need – hunger. The black woman is consequently placed in a position of power and authority, her body movements suggesting intent and self-control.



Figure 3: Kara Walker

Consume, 1998

Cut paper on wall

69 x 32 inches

175.3 x 81.3 cm

Breastfeeding is the central motif of another work – *Consume*, 1998. (Fig. 3)

In this scene, Walker proposes a distorted process of breastfeeding, which references abjection and elements of subversive imagery on sexuality. Essentially, the piece is a commentary on perverted forms of dependency, in which the female black body is appropriated and re-signified according to prejudices and misconceptions. The objects attached to her body reference stereotypes – oversized shoes, offered maybe by her master, which embody the promise of freedom. She is wearing what it appears to be a banana skirt – symbol of a deeply rooted stereotypes founded on the racist notion of hybridity and sub-humanity of black individuals. The title of the piece suggests a critical position of the artist – Walker underlines the steady process of commodification of black women, which become images to be consumed and disposed of at will; in the piece, the black woman seems to be consuming herself, in a gesture that might suggests empowerment and resistance.

In her attempt to propose a new dialect of power between black and white, Kara Walker brings her black female silhouettes into contact with white female shapes. A detail of *Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!* shows a predominance of white figures (Fig. 4).

Figure 4: Kara Walker

Look Away! Look Away! Look Away!, 1995

Cut paper on wall

Installation dimensions variable; approximately 156 x 420 inches (396.2 x 1,066.8 cm)



The scene shows a black man rebelling against what could be his master. The master holds a whip, an object that projects power; he seems ready to use violence, but appears to be unable to do so. The white woman seems disturbed, but receives no (maybe awaited) help from the black woman (presumably a slave), who holds a sharp phallic object, resembling the one held by the master. Somehow discordant with the narrative of the scene, a white girl severs her own hand, but receives no help or attention. The only black feminine body in this scene is passive, showing no

emotional reaction to neither of the violent acts that take place. She seems, however, highly self-aware and holds her arms ready to act, maybe in self-defense.

The selected works are endemic of Kara Walker's artistic oeuvre – she places liminal figures in the center of particular displays of power, making them move and react with control and awareness. By using the image of the black female in ways that might produce shock, Walker makes sure that stereotypes engraved in common memory are challenged, brought forth and thought upon, as a necessary step before their (desired) dissolution. Kara Walker's art is, thus, highly political and critical, as it interrogates established hierarchies and challenges the way women's bodies may be controlled and regulated in contemporaneity.

Artistic representations of Muslim female bodies. Questions of veiling and unveiling

This section proposes an analytical account of visual works of art that address the issue of the veiled female body. Given that the veil is often used as a political instrument in various anti-Islamic discourses, the veiled female body becomes consequently caught in the process of inscription and signification: gender, sexuality and family relations are re-worked on the basis of a particular cultivation of the Muslim veil as a symbol of gender oppression. The structure of visibility in most Western cultures allows the veil to become a hyper-visible object, over-determined and flooded with meanings produced and regulated following a specific ethos. In this perspective, resisting these aggressive scripts requires a plethora of consistent counter-discursive practices that must aim at deconstructing and re-defining the meaning of the veil, in such a manner as to permit the veiled female body to exit control and political regulation. We argue that visual arts may present the necessary accessibility for such an endeavor, and can offer the sufficient instruments for (politically) voicing some of these concerns. We will select three emergent artists who, among other tropes, employ in their art the veil, and interrogate the relationship between its use and female subjectivity. In terms of disseminating their works, all three artists have the selected piece available on a platform that brings together Muslim women and their voices²⁶.

The art works selected are photographs, self-portraits of the artists, who use their body image in a counter-discursive take on the various inscriptions they receive relative to their

²⁶ Available online at <http://muslima.imow.org/>

corporeality^{27/28/29}. All works share some similarities: they are self-portraits – an artistic choice that suggests self-awareness and acute artistic intention. The artists take upon themselves to embody a cultural trauma and visualize elements of common memory that are subsequently opened up for criticism. The aesthetic architecture of a self-portrait implies self-exposure, autonomy of bodily presentation, and control over what enters the field of vision). All three photographic works are suits of photographs, a choice which suggests a desired complexity on the part of the viewer – they construct a narrative that requires the reader to apply certain keys in decoding. Fragmentation is a common feature present in the photographs – the female veiled body is not depicted in full, however, the fact that it is veiled becomes clear, which points to the naturalization of stereotypes. All three artists underline the difficulty of defining identities. The series of portraits represent, in fact, anti-portraits, featured in the apparent refusal of the subject to be appropriated, contained within the frame of the picture. The constant attempt to escape containment forces the viewer to acknowledge the existence of another space, out of immediate sight, but real, nevertheless. This is an allegory relating to the historical reductionist practices applied to veiled female bodies, imagined as finite, defined by their physicality and appearance and reduced to immanence. The artists restore fragments of transcendence to the archetypal figure of the veiled woman, allowing mobility and free passage out of any aggressive gaze. All three artists are openly critical about one-sided views on Muslim women, often circulated in the Western social space. They include re-workings of the image of veiled women, juggling notions like invisibility and hyper-visibility, autonomy and submission, control and powerlessness – oppositions that, essentially, create the field of tension in which the Muslim female body exists in today's Western society.

Mouna Jemal Siala's *The Fate* (Fig 5.) references an aesthetic of repetition and reproduction, proposing 15 self-portraits in what becomes a narrative of veiling and unveiling. The play between visibility and invisibility is at work here, suggesting the existence of different layers of social or religious imperatives relative to the wearing of a veil. The main visual metaphor is, clearly, the act of veiling, extending the strong visual potency to include movement, body position and general self-awareness of the subject.

²⁷ Mouna Jemal Siala, <http://muslima.imow.org/gallery/fate>, last accessed 18.12.2013

²⁸ Marwa Adel <http://muslima.imow.org/gallery/attempt>, last accessed 18.12.2013

²⁹ Feriel Bendjana <http://muslima.imow.org/content/we-they-and-i> last accessed 18.12.2013

Figure 5: *The Fate*, Mouna Jemal Siala

Digital Copy: <http://muslima.imow.org/>



The pose is fragmented, appearing guarded against an external looking subject, but also defiant of potential gazes. The fragment of the body presented forces the viewer to keep focus on the upper body and facial expressions, hinting at potential prejudices manifest in the act of seeing. The subject is suspended between repetition and difference, between the need for consistency, identity and desire for progress – the figures portrayed are not identical; the posing subject is in a shifting relationship with herself: she can move, but is apparently unable to leave the frame entirely; she seeks anonymity, but is bound to visibility and exposure, on the basis of an over-determination of her appearance (the veil). The suite of photographs depicts a gradual covering of the face; the subject seems in control of the covering, as there is no other agent present in the scene. Her movements are ample, and maintain a steady level of freedom until the entire covering of the face. Her bodily consistency is not altered by the veil, just as her identity is not necessarily modified as her face is covered. This series of self-portraits unravels a critical take on social practice, as it comments on the inescapable feature of the veil as a marker of difference. The process of veiling is here a one-way route, from having the face completely revealed, to having it entirely covered. The artist includes no un-veiling routine, which stresses the idea that Muslim women are at all times, either covered or uncovered, defined in relation to a present or absent veil. There seems to be little

if any space outside this binary representation, which is, evidently, an act of cultural aggression and reduction of agency.

Marwa Adel proposes a visualization of the attempt to escape conceptual containment and social inscription. In her *An Attempt* (Fig 6) she constructs a visual narrative of escape and entrapment, not making it clear which may prevail.

Figure 6: *An Attempt*, Marwa Adel



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employs the aesthetic of the veil, underlining at all times the double nature of the image of the veiled body: the veil is a vessel of meaning, identity for women who choose to control their appearance, but is also a site of projection of misconceptions and prejudices regarding Muslim women's gender relations, sexuality and social status. Adel visualizes stereotypical notions surrounding the veil, in a clearly stated attempt to escape socio-cultural tension. The interplay between visibility and invisibility is evident, referencing the defining power of the (western) gaze: she seems able to rip off the clothing and escape the perceived entrapment, but chooses not to, maybe to underline that it is only an illusion of coercion, one produced and multiplied within a specifically western field of vision.

Feriel Bendjama employs her own veiled body in a piece of photographic work that is essentially a commentary on the same issue of the Muslim veil and its various projections in the western social space. In *We, They, And I* (Fig 7), Bendjama explores the content and vectors of expectations, fears and desires in relation to the veiled body.

Figure 7: *We, They, and I*, Ferial Bendjana

Digital Copy: <http://muslima.imow.org/>



Her figures depict three different aspects that attempt simultaneously to define or categorize a veiled female body. In Bendjana's own words, "These 12 self-portraits show at least three different perspectives on the Islamic head scarf. In the photographs we see a woman with the headscarf. On the one hand you see the headscarf from the desired perspective of Muslims, while on the other you see it from the clichéd perspective of non-Muslims. The women with the red headscarf represent the many facets of a Muslima, which usually do not conform to the usual stereotypes of a Muslim woman"³⁰. The piece points directly at the over-determination of the veiled female body, its forceful appropriation in different and sometimes antithetic discourses which eventually hinder women's agency and cripple subjectivity.

Conclusion

³⁰ Quote available online at <http://muslima.imow.org/content/we-they-and-i>, last accessed 18.12.2013

This article was set out to explore the black female body and the veiled female body as cultural artifacts, products of sedimented habits of social seeing. Caught in a field of vision that attempt the perpetual othering of these two socio-cultural entities, the black and veiled female body have common features, in their cultural existence: despite being designed in different layouts, spatially and chronologically, they undergo similar processes of construction, inscription and fragmentation. The over-exposed and hyper-sexualized body of the black female (emerged during the slavery system and maintained long after the Emancipation) seems to counter the image of the veiled woman, hidden, inaccessible to white male gaze. However, both types of body undergo objectification and are used in a process of cultural consumption of images. The comparative view on these two cultural artifacts proposes critical interrogations regarding the notion of body exposure, the meaning of its immediately accessible exteriority, and the projection in a field of visibility dominated by power relations expressed in the dichotomy of the seeing subject (white, male) and the seen object (female, black).

The working concept of “Western gaze” has been understood here under the categories of “male dominance” and “white”. The main assumption is that the essential and most dominant gaze that the black and veiled female body-face is Western. However, there is a variety of other ways of seeing and objectifying gazes that these two types of bodies might come into contact with: the black male and Muslim male, other black women or other Muslim women. The multiplicity of social interactions in which the female body plays a central role points to the complexity of this cultural product, and it can be further analyzed in detail.

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Other Resources

International Museum of Women “Muslima” <http://muslima.imow.org>

Kara Walker homepage <http://learn.walkerart.org/karawalker>