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THE STICKINESS OF INSTAGRAM
DIGITAL LABOR AND POSTSLAVERY LEGACIES IN KARA WALKER'S "A SUBTLETY"

Sarah Brophy

From May 10 to July 6, 2014, the African American artist Kara Walker's "A Subtlety, or The Marvelous Sugar Baby" existed as a temporary, site-specific installation at the Domino Sugar Factory in Brooklyn, New York (Figure 1). A maximalist sculpture of polystyrene foam coated in thirty tons of bleached white sugar donated by the Domino Sugar Corporation, standing thirty-five feet tall, stretching seventy-five long, and featuring a face resembling the artist's own, Walker's sphinx-shaped nude was sexualized in ways that evoked "Hottentot," "Jezebel," and "mammy" stereotypes. It symbolized the slave system and the sugar industry's massive appropriation and mystification of black women's labor, including but not limited to sexual, domestic, and caring labor. While Walker's sugar sphinx has been extensively photographed and written about, equally significant were the fifteen five-foot tall figures of laboring boys—some made of molasses and resin, others of hard candy—who surrounded her, carrying baskets and field produce. In another ugly image of exploited labor, their decomposition in the heat led Walker to heap up the broken bits of their bodies in the baskets of the few boys who continued to stand (Figure 2). "A Subtlety" thus offered a dazzling iconography of the ongoing legacies of the slavery economy and the continuing effacement—the whitewashing—of its brutality.

This article explores and assesses the pivotal roles of self-inscription, mediation, and audience participation for Walker's project. I focus on the popularity and impact of the hashtag #karawalkerdomino, which saw six thousand user-generated images posted on social media platforms (primarily on Instagram but also on Twitter and Facebook) during the first two days of the exhibition (Ovation Staff)—a number that

Figure 1. Installation View of “A Subtlety.” Copyright Andrew Burton/Getty Images.

Figure 2. Installation View of “A Subtlety.” Copyright Andrew Burton/Getty Images.

eventually rose to more than twenty-five thousand posts (Creative Time). "A Subtlety" directly solicited the making and sharing of vernacular digital photographic images by visitors, a strategy informed by twenty-first-century social media outreach trends in the museum sector (Kaufman) and by relational aesthetics, that participatory, audience-oriented mobilization of the avant-garde that has been a mainstay of art world institutions since the mid-1990s (Balzer 66–67). Through physical signs instructing visitors "not to touch the artwork" but instead to upload images on social media, #karawalkerdomino was built into the exhibition from the outset. Anticipated to be equipped with smart devices, visitors were invited, as the website reiterates, to "help build the Digital Sugar Baby, an interactive 3D version of Kara Walker's marvelous artwork! . . . This living tribute to Kara's work will evolve over the course of the exhibition. Visit this site each week to see its progress" (Creative Time). The implied premise was that no single shot could encompass an installation built on such an enormous scale, and so visitors' image-making would produce a composite whole from myriad points of view. The result was not only a digital version of the installation but also a successful promotional gambit directing traffic to the website and associated media accounts.

The curated online exhibition of "A Subtlety" hosted on the website of the nonprofit arts organization Creative Time, produced by the digital entrepreneurs of its subcontractor Makeable, drew together 17,315 of the Instagram contributions, together with 1,788 from Twitter and 83 from Facebook (Creative Time). Highlighting what Walker has sardonically termed the exhibition's "ridiculously romantic angles" (qtd in Sutton), the selections that constitute the official 3D curated exhibition of "A Subtlety" emphasize the sublimity of the sphinx figure and a largely reverential attitude on the part of the audience. Produced through technological, cultural, and cognitive "filtering" processes that conspicuously "remov[e] unwanted content or impurities" (Walker Rettberg 22), this version of the exhibition's online archive is accompanied by a more disturbing obverse, for the exhibition's main claim to fame was and continues to be the notoriety it gained through visitors' making and distributing offensive selfies. As substantively archived by the many screen caps included in articles published by online magazines such as *Artnet News*, *Gawker*, and *Disrupting Dinner Parties*, hundreds if not thousands of visitors to the show at the refinery

posted pictures in which they portrayed themselves as licking, pinching, or penetrating the sphinx figure, often with triumphant smiles on their faces (Munro; Nailong and Shakarshy; Watts). The outpouring of racist postures and images prompted by "A Subtlety" went on to be widely interpreted by reviewers and bloggers as showing that American popular culture remains steeped in unresolved, disavowed racism deriving from antebellum and Jim Crow–era memories (Ionnes; King; Powers; Rosenberg; Watts).

By inviting digital photographic participation by visitors, "A Subtlety" did, I agree, work to expose the "racial unconscious" of self-imaging technologies, as Mark Reinhardt argues of this "photographic situation" (2017, 206–9). The wide distribution of these offensive images on social media platforms (Jerkins) provides an indictment of vernacular photography's historical and ongoing role in the reproduction of white happiness (Sheehan) or of whiteness as a modality of happiness that "sticks" to racialized objects and scenes (Ahmed 2010). Put another way, "A Subtlety" served as a set or studio for the further enactment of Walker's established repertoire of what Christina Sharpe has termed "monstrous intimacies," showing their "long reach into the present" (2010, 153–55). Yet, as Sharpe notes in her critique of the 2014 installation, Walker's stance of authorial "detachment" is accompanied by a troubling lacuna around the matter of "everyday brutalities" as they are endured and struggled against "in the wake" of slavery (2016, 98–99).

Incisive though Walker's inbuilt self-reflexive critique of racialized and racist image-making and distribution may be, the 2014 exhibition's crowdsourcing strategy cannot, I argue, be understood only through a postmodern framework that highlights the artist's intentional and wily use, as some critics have observed, of the power of pastiche to confront American racial amnesia about slavery's ongoing brutal legacies (Herman); nor, conversely, can it be lauded for its reciprocal, empathic gestures of inclusion, as others have contended (Ionnes). Instead, the exhibition's troubling elicitation of visitor vernacular photography requires a theory and an analysis of immaterial labor. "A Subtlety"'s recruitment of audience labor to extend the art project online through the self-representational activity of making and distributing visual images, tags, and comments generated a number of versions and a host of political possibilities and contradictions. An

array of critical media practices arose to counter the offensive posts, including curatorial commentaries and creative counterproduction, many of which can be read as an enactment or prefiguring of black solidarity, with an emphasis on black feminist resistance, and of possibilities for intergenerational healing. My analysis of the exhibition's afterlives (digital and material, affective and political) establishes not only that visitors' individual and collective online labor was crucial to elaborating the artwork's pastiche effects but also that there were two modes of immaterial labor at play: the vernacular repetition of racist presumption and racial illiteracy in images of play, power, and enjoyment exercised as triumph over black bodies and history and the digital-image making, commenting, and blogging activities of visitors who brought white racist presumption into view as the most consistently disgusting object of all. In turn, I show that audience protest—what I term the para-curatorial labor of intersectional feminist and queers of color "call-out" culture (Nakamura 2015)—both activated critical, historicized frameworks for remembering the violence, exploitation, and insurrection of the sugar economy and, simultaneously, generated considerable surplus value in the form of what the activist Nadia Williams identifies as a lingering "cool" memory (qtd in Shen Goodman) that benefited those positioned to accumulate reputational and financial rewards from the project. I conclude by reflecting on the multiple implications of "A Subtlety"'s productive excess not only for Kara Walker's art but also for black feminist art and politics and for the evolving, ambiguous entanglement of visual art projects and social media.

FROM CASTING SHADOWS TO CO-CREATING THEM: KARA WALKER'S ART PRACTICE IN CONTEXT

By placing "A Subtlety" in the context of Walker's celebrated and controversial body of work since the 1990s, we can glean a sharper sense of Walker's evolving strategies for insisting that a cultural genealogy of slavery in the Americas is, as Sharpe puts it, "constitutive of subjectivity" for all "post-slavery subjects" (Sharpe 2010, 159). Not only did the sphinx conjure haunting Morrisonian images of stolen milk (*Beloved* 1987, 70) and "mother hunger" (*A Mercy* 2008, 73), but the

monumental statue alluded to the circulation of these memories in public culture: as the artist notes in an interview, the large-scale sphinx sculpture revived plans for an unbuilt 1923 U.S. Senate-proposed monument to the nation's "mammies" (Walker qtd in Gopnik). In 2014, then, the grinning, triumphant self-portraits taken at "A Subtlety" stood as painful but perhaps not surprising evidence of white supremacy's long, sometimes visible, sometimes submerged, ongoing history of producing "happy" stances for itself in both civic culture and in vernacular forms like snapshot photography (Sheehan 149).[1]

It is a central tenet of my analysis that the digital dimension of the exhibition extended and significantly reworked the jarringly "grotesque" idiom (Carpio 163) that is Walker's acclaimed and controversial strategy for implicating viewers, the artist, and art institutions in the forms of past racial and sexual violence that continue to shape the present. Formally, the 2014 installation's eliciting of visitors' photographic practices recapitulates Walker's signature use since the mid-1990s of another vernacular visual genre: nineteenth-century American silhouette portraiture, with its connotations of middle-brow culture's aspirations to gentility and its sinister role in the racial "science" of creating phrenological profiles (Carpio 168). Walker's art practice blows up this polite, miniaturizing idiom to life-size proportions, and, reappropriating the Civil War "Cyclorama" that loomed large as a vehicle of public memory in the Atlanta of her youth, exhibits the resulting debris in large-scale, room-filling historical tableaux (Shaw 38). Consider, for instance, her first such mural: the 1994 spoof of *Gone with The Wind*, titled "Gone, An Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart." Here, as Reinhardt points out, the boundaries defining black and white roles on the plantation hierarchy at a supposedly beneficent Tara are confounded; instead of a consolatory, nostalgic narrative, "Gone" conveys the pain and pleasure of violent fragmentation. As the viewer "pans from left to right," it is revealed that hiding under the voluminous skirts of the southern belle, whose racial identity is rendered illegible, is an array of bodies and bodily acts anything but genteel: the belle is secretly a four-legged beast, implicated in a scene of theft, contortion, decapitation, levitation, birthing as defecation, fellatio, and rape (Reinhardt 2003, 111–14).[2] Glenda R. Carpio further suggests that Walker's murals feature "the quintessential effect of the

grotesque: they leave viewers somewhere between laughter, disgust, and astonishment. They synthesize the ludicrous and the horrible as Walker combs the slapstick and debasing humor of minstrelsy for the violence, scatology, and sensuality underwriting it" (163). Such a strategy of implication and unsettlement is consonant with contemporary black women artists' critical "engagement with hypervisibility," whereby, according to Nicole Fleetwood, their performative practices shatter the iconicity of the "excessive" black female body—that is, its status as a commodity fetish that "masks power relations," "systems of inequality," and "the consumption of difference" (111).

Subsequently, in a move that has been hailed as extending the confrontational and critical force of her work, in 2000's "Insurrection" and 2001's "Darkytown Rebellion" Walker began experimenting with projecting colored light onto her scenes (Carpio; Reinhardt 2003; Shaw; Sharpe). Reinhardt describes the effect of introducing the projectors: not only is it "impossible to pass through the room without at some point finding your shadow thrown among those glued to the wall" but "draw near enough to sort out the confusing details and you are yourself a life-size participant in a theater of insurrection, cast amid the projection's lurid colors, amputated legs, protruding bones, acts of stomping and clubbing, bodies that vomit up what should never be eaten" (2003, 119). In this scenario of distorted projections, the bodies and affects pressed into the service of making the antebellum racial hierarchies of plantation life seem "fun" and "natural" became unruly, nauseating, fragmenting.

Along with its tangible interest in challenging collective memory of slavery legacies on a public scale, then, Walker's work has tended to pivot on investigating the ugliest aspects of racialized subjectivity and on denying distance and immunity to maker, viewer, and institution alike.[3] From her long-standing self-inscriptions as the "Negress" or "Miss K. Walker" to the fully fledged artistic self-representations of "Cut" (1997), which shows the female artist floating, her wrists slit and bleeding ink or paint, Walker negotiates the "hypervisibility" of black women's bodies and especially the body of the black woman artist by producing a troubling "excess" of flesh, pleasure, and pain (Fleetwood 112). As Fleetwood underscores, "excess flesh" is a performative mode, and as such it "does not destabilize the dominant gaze or its system of visibility. Instead, it refracts the gaze back on

itself" (112). Refusing the binary of "negative or positive images," such a practice reveals the "visible seams" that characterize icons and at the same time flags the problem of "the invisibility of the black woman as producer" (113).[4]

Continuing in this gaze-refracting and self-reflexive vein, "A Subtlety" is, significantly, a celebrity artist's self-portrait. The sugar sphinx's morphology harkens back to the four-legged, bestial belle of "Gone," and during the exhibition's run Walker posed extensively with and as her monumental sculpture, drawing attention in the process to her modeling its facial features on her own and noting that "it was clear in the 17th century that sugar was equated with African bodies who were producing sugar. And since I'm a woman, I made her a woman" (qtd in Sutton). In anchoring the exhibition around a large-scale representation of a stereotyped female figure bearing her own face and in posing extensively with and as the sphinx, then, Walker registers a self-reflexive critique of the way her oppositional aesthetics, reputation for controversy, and identity as an African American woman artist are entangled in promotional dynamics and, more broadly, in the fetishization, consumption, pathologization, and abandonment of black women's bodies under racial capitalism (Balzer 86–87).

What is distinctive and differently troubling about "A Subtlety" is that Walker's critical visual self-inscription as a black woman artist was accompanied by the individual and collective making practices of audience members. Integrating a social media outreach strategy into the exhibition offered an opportunity for inquiring into and documenting the idea that audiences are being compelled to confront their implication in a disturbing racial imaginary. Asked about the offensive selfies that visitors to "A Subtlety" posted, Walker responded that "human behavior is so mucky and violent and messed up and inappropriate . . . [my work] draws on that . . . and pulls it out of an audience" (qtd in Miranda). In the same interview, Walker retroactively confessed to "spying" on her audience through CCTV cameras as well as through the social media uploads, making explicit the surveillance of visitor conduct (especially image-making practices) implicit in the exhibition (qtd in Miranda). The purposeful documentation of audience engagement pulls the rug out from under generalizations about the confrontational power of Walker's aesthetic, making newly

acute the problem that, as Carpio cautioned in her 2008 analysis, "Walker's audiences may rather quickly register the libidinal pleasure that she exposes in connection to 'black' imagery, without exploring the ironic ways she democratizes blackness and the urges that she exposes" (178). Prior to "A Subtlety," however, Walker's work had largely gained its power to confront through its "screen effect"—that is, without the "human body carrying the burden of representation" (Carpio 178), precisely without depending on "portraits of living bodies" (Reinhardt 2003, 119). In this essay, I inquire into the involvement of "living bodies" in Walker's sugar refinery show, paying special attention to their media practices and resulting media artifacts. If "A Subtlety" generated something in addition to the "libidinal pleasure" of consumption (Carpio 178)—other critical affects or possibly something more like an investigation of disavowal—then through whose labor, what kinds of labor, and with what consequences?

THEORIZING VISITOR SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICES, AFFECTIVE STICKINESS, AND ONGOING LABOR HISTORIES

Taking place in the summer leading up to outcry over the nonindictment of police officers for brutality in the deaths of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and of Eric Garner in Staten Island, can "A Subtlety"'s recreation of the plantation economy in the form of this participatory art exhibition be understood as contributing to the transformative aims and tactics of the Black Lives Matter movement? Some critics see Walker's work as complicit in white supremacy: in the 1990s, her grotesque shadow plays were resoundingly critiqued by artists such as Bettye Saar and Howardina Pindell as reinforcing "the subconscious plantation mentality and a form of controlling black art. . . . It is a form of betrayal to the slaves, particularly women and children" (Saar qtd in Reinhardt 2003, 119). But black feminist and humanist writings on geography suggest that revisiting and rematerializing the plantation can be (though it is not guaranteed to be) a path toward remembering slavery histories critically. In her essay "Plantation Futures," Katherine McKittrick delineates how revisiting the plantation is a fraught and "contradictory" move: "it simultaneously archives the violated black body as the origin of New World black

lives just as it places history in an almost air-tight continuum that traces a linear progress away from racist violence" (9). In order to trouble the narrative that the Americas have moved beyond slavery, McKittrick encourages us to consider the plantation as an industrial site predicated on the systematic exploitation of black life and labor and the arrogation of surveillant authority to white subjects; as a result, metropolitan sites, such as the sugary refinery and its environs, which have long drawn on the skills and availability of migratory workers, come into view as urban, contemporary extensions of the plantation (McKittrick 11). If, as McKittrick goes on to argue, a more just future "demands decolonial thinking" in relation to this "ugly and persistent blueprint" (3), then we might ask: what possibilities for radical or fugitive black human life does the design, material and digital, of Walker's "A Subtlety" mobilize, for what purposes, and for whom?

I propose that, in the process of being encouraged to contribute their digital labor in the form of social media posts, visitors to "A Subtlety" were implicitly tasked with producing and managing the subjective, intersubjective, political, and cultural meanings of the exhibition. To unpack the implications of this recruitment of audience labor for the work of postslavery memory, I draw together black feminisms and humanisms; critical research on selfies, digital photography, and platform affordances; the cultural politics of emotion; and a theorization of digital labor that highlights its inextricability from the racialized regimes of accumulation and dispossession endemic to capitalism. Considering the vernacular photography of Instagram in terms of ongoing racialized and gendered histories of exploited labor can, I argue, lead toward a more critically nuanced, if not easily hopeful or reparative, interpretation of this exhibition's relation to its audience.[5] The installation did not just look back from a distance at the plantation and the refinery. Rather, it repurposed the site as an artistic factory for mass image replication à la Warhol and, simultaneously, as a kind of social and digital factory where collective life, affect, exploitation, and alienation are being reproduced and further entangled. Communication scholars theorizing digital labor help us to see what is at stake in such convergences. Jennifer Pybus's research calls attention to "how and why we generate so much data" on social media platforms: while we might suspect that there is "an immense amount of

capital tied up in extracting the usable data from the affective archives we collectively produce," "our data profiles are . . . not just sites of surplus value, but important spaces for sociality, and hence subjectivization" (245, 236). The lived affects and sociality that users produce through their engagement with social networks thus cannot be disarticulated from racial formations. As Lisa Nakamura explains, "in contrast with the Internet's early claims to transform and eliminate both race and labor, digital communications technologies today racialize labor" ([2008] 2014, 48). These technologies persistently distribute arduous forms of digital labor—ranging from help-line staffing, to mining gaming "gold" and leveling up avatars, to mining precious metals required for touch screens—onto racialized bodies and communities and then arrogate the surplus value generated through this exploitation ([2008] 2014, 48–49).

Certainly, Walker's 2014 installation was cognizant of the question of labor, past and present. The elaborate faux-Enlightenment dedication in her title to "The unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet Tastes from the Cane Fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the Demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant" is an elliptical reference to a twenty-month-long strike in 1999–2000 on the part of Domino's multiracial workforce and therefore to the working-class community that has long labored at and lived around a site now slated for demolition and condo development (Yee; Creative Time). The title is an ironic tribute to the exploitive combination of skill and danger intrinsic to sugar refinery labor, especially the work of the boilerman, whose careful monitoring of high temperature was crucial to "civilizing sugar" (Stuart 164). So, while Walker's defense that her work merely channels the lurking ugliness of "human behavior" (qtd in Miranda) offers a psychologizing account of how and why visitors come to be ensnared by her postmodern version of a "tar baby,"[6] her comments about the Domino Sugar Factory characterize the refinery site as "a cathedral to industry, to taste, and to the sugar and slave trade" and positions it as "doing a large part of the work" (qtd in Creative Time). This second explanation prompts a materialist reading of the exhibition's logic. If the refinery site continues to be a space of production, then the smart-device-equipped visitors whose selfies and family photography supplement and promote the exhibition functioned as indispensable co-producers of the artwork.

They are also the witting and unwitting agents of an imagined uprising of what Stephano Harney and Fred Moten, writing in the black Marxist tradition, imagine as the irrepressible motion and solidarity of the "undercommons." It is possible to think of the assembled crowd at the Domino Plant as being, in a sense, called to "tear down" the edifices of racial capitalism from within, in collaboration with the artist (Harney and Moten 152). It is not coincidental that, as the long version of Walker's title hints in its reference to the "unpaid and overworked Artisans" of centuries past, many of the skilled slaves who traveled north during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the Caribbean to the cane fields, refineries, and waterfronts of what would become the United States brought with them insurrectionist skills and aspirations, becoming rebellion leaders (Baptist 51–63; Linebaugh and Rediker 198–203).[7] Do we see in "A Subtlety"'s digital archives evidence of artist-led insurrection or critical memory work? What was especially vexed about "A Subtlety" is that audience members' online autobiographical labor supplements (supports, but also differs from, even haunts) the skilled artisanship of the professional celebrity artist, whose monumental self-portrait is the exhibition's centerpiece. The vernacular remediations of the exhibition by audience members labored to enact what Sara Ahmed calls "the cultural politics of emotion" and were characterized in particular, I argue, by the unstable, contested "performativity of disgust" (2004, 82).

The centrality of unequally distributed affective labor to "A Subtlety" was crystallized in a blog post by Nicholas Powers, who documented his experience of yelling at the disrespectful photographing crowd when he visited the exhibition. Powers wonders about the problem of the exhibition reproducing the racism it purported to confront, questioning the ethics of colliding "black pain" and "white laughter" and naming the "work" of protesting as a burden placed on him as a visitor by curatorial absenteeism: "It felt great to confront the 'white gaze,' the entitled buffoonery of the visitors. But why did we have to? . . . Wasn't it the job of Walker or at least of Creative Time's staff to curate a racially charged artwork?" Following Powers, we can understand Walker's project as bringing into being—both revealing and prompting—a "toxic social environment" (Nakamura 2015, 106). As Nakamura puts it, "the hidden and often-stigmatised and dangerous labor performed by women of color, queer and trans people, and racial

minorities who call out, educate, protest, and design around toxic social environments in digital media" are "uncompensated by wages, paid instead by affective currencies, such as 'likes,' followers, and occasionally, acknowledgements or praise from the industry" (2015, 106). Conceptualized as enacting a form of distributed para-curatorial labor, what Walker has called her "protesting audience" comes into view as charged with the difficult work of experiencing, managing, filtering, and rerouting affect and sociality.

In what follows, I develop a more detailed response to Powers's critical provocation by exploring how visitor social media practices infused the contact zone of the exhibition with meaning, value, and affect—and specifically with what Ahmed identifies as the "stickiness"—the visceral push/pull, "the metonymic slide" but also the tendency to "cling"—of disgust (2004, 87). Literally and figuratively "sticky," the sphinx, her attendants, and the surround of the factory itself are constituted as "border objects," in Ahmed's Kristevan use of the term: they are at once intrinsic to and continuously expelled from postslavery subjectivity and sociality (2004, 97). As my analysis of the user-generated extensions of "A Subtlety" shows, the exhibition's vivid materialization of slavery's violence and exploitation propelled visitors to engage in a wide-ranging and contradictory set of media practices to manage these disturbing and persistent feelings of commingled violence, pleasure, sorrow, and culpability. Yet, despite visitors' various attempts at distancing, commensuration, and intervention, the violent sugar refinery/plantation memories and the "excess flesh" (Fleetwood 112) that Walker stages within the space continued to cling discomfitingly precisely because racialized memories and power relations are already internal to spectators' viewing, feeling, and media-making selves.

Launched in 2010, the photo-sharing platform Instagram quickly became the darling of celebrities, the museum world, and a broad, multiracial youth demographic, market-reach successes that prompted its acquisition by Facebook in 2012 (Kaufman; Duggan).[8] Design features of the platform significantly facilitated, shaped, and managed the manifestations of "disgust" that accumulated around "A Subtlety." These affordances include what Adam Levin has identified as Instagram's "recursive" relationship to inherited modes of self-portraiture, including Polaroids and silhouettes, its carnivalesque play with embodiment,

a suite of accessible digital editing tools such filters and frames, and a capacious tagging and commenting function. Because of their proliferation and their focus on producing and regarding the self, the digital self-portraits that are the mainstay of Instagram are often dismissed as narcissistic self-commodification: a symptom of late capitalism and postfeminism. A dominant critical position in the field of social media studies is that Instagram's logic is primarily self-promotional and "reinforces an existing hierarchy of fame, in which the iconography of glamour, luxury, wealth, good looks, and connections is reinscribed in a visual digital medium" (Marwick 141); relative to more "open" platforms including Tumblr and the now defunct Vine, it seems that Instagram's glamour-based "aesthetic formula decreases the salience of counter-discourses in selfies" (Duguay 9). However, critics working at the intersection of visual culture, autobiography, and feminist and critical race studies argue that the digital making and distribution of self-images is a politically powerful if ambiguous mode of self-representation precisely because it is "a serial, cumulative practice" that multiplies identity and interpretation (Walker Rettberg 36). With reference to young women of color who are coming of age as self-portraitists online today, Derek Conrad Murray sees in artists' selfie projects on Instagram a "representational contending" with devaluation and derision under late capitalism, assessing this work as characterized by "an instinct of self-preservation: a survivorship reflex" (512). Corroborating Murray's insight, Tracy Curtis makes a specific case for regarding young black women's uses of Instagram to document their lives as involving dynamics of "control" and "refusal": through practices of replication, the Instagram user "looks like multiple versions of herself; the collective group stares back at the reader, creating a contest as to whether she or the audience has more control" (192–94). Tapping into these technological, aesthetic, and political affordances, Kara Walker's social media outreach strategy for "A Subtlety" yielded user-generated content that brought ongoing white racist presumption and its reliance on visual tactics of domination into critical view, recirculating them as objects of disgust. In turn, digital compositions and alternative hashtags arose that worked hard to inscribe and insist on the creative persistence of black life and kin relations.

As I proceed with analyzing the accretion of visitor-generated media artifacts around "A Subtlety," let me be transparent about my methodology and ethical considerations. As Gillian Rose observes, there is currently no "selection of off-the-shelf software tools for analyzing digital visual materials using digital methods" (2016, 292–93). Even if user-friendly tools for computationally investigating digital-visual interfaces do become available, manual methods will, in my view, remain indispensable to the visual rhetorical, affective, and political emphases of my study, which seeks to attend to user practices of self-reflexivity and resistance. Between April 2015 and August 2016, I used Google's search engine to amass and analyze a collection of blog posts, art magazines, newspaper articles, and Web installation and promotional materials pertaining to the online life of "A Subtlety," and I also considered public Facebook group postings regarding the "We Are Here" activist response to the exhibition. Readers interested in viewing the "3D version" of "A Subtlety" may do so through Instagram itself, on the Creative Time site, or through any number of blog and news articles. Because the primary source research was conducted prior to the restrictions placed on the Instagram API in 2018, I was able to use Picodash to search and to help me analyze the large archive of Instagram posts tagged #karawalkerdomino; this tool made it possible to conduct date-restricted searches and to confirm which Instagram filters had been used. Along the way, screen caps were retained for several dozen of Instagram posts, including those I discuss later in this essay, and images have been interpreted in the context of the accounts from which they originated.

My approach to accessing, describing, and reproducing social media images is a blended one. The posts that I reference are from accounts designated "public" and can be understood as having the status of public artifacts through their use of #karawalkerdomino, often in tandem with other hashtags. Even so, I also take seriously the finding that a significant majority of individual Instagram users assume (incorrectly) they are operating with a degree of privacy despite their use of public settings and hashtags (boyd and Crawford; Highfield and Leaver). Therefore, except where there is evidence to suggest that an account is promotional or knowingly public-facing, images have been described but anonymized—that is, usernames withheld and

faces of account holders omitted—in a manner influenced by the model articulated by Tiidenberg and Baym (3–4).

THE POLITICS OF CROWDSOURCING I: SELF-IMPLICATING DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY

Beyond the official version of the digital installation, the most widely distributed subset of the vast, enduring postexhibition online archive of "A Subtlety" consists of Instagram self-portraits that show (mostly but not exclusively white) museum visitors posing in highly sexualized ways against the backdrop of parts of the sphinx: fingers pinching nipples, tongues or fingers lasciviously extended, smiling and laughing faces. As José Van Dijck and Wendy Hui Kyong Chun have each argued of memory in the digital era, vernacular digital photography seems ephemeral but paradoxically attains permanence through the "distributed storage" that results from its online circulation (Van Dijck 2008, 68). Both the original Instagram posts and the angry, sad, critical reactions to the disturbing selfies live on digitally through the critical work of countermemory performed by the analytical and angry personal essays of writers of color including, inter alia, Jamilah King's "The Overwhelming Whiteness of Black Art," Nicholas Powers's "Why I Yelled at the Kara Walker Exhibit," and Stephanie Watts's "The Audacity of No Chill in the Instagram Capital." There is an at once documentary and affective force to these interventions. Watts, for instance, describes turning to Instagram after visiting the exhibition, where she overheard a host of racial insults uttered by visitors, only to find the online outpouring worse. Enacting the role of informal activist-curator and using the discourse of woman of color feminism, she was therefore propelled to archive, through screen caps, the most disturbing trends within the user-generated images of the exhibition and to demand critical analysis of the offensive images and their implications.

Treading carefully with this heavy material, I will take up two examples of these disturbing selfies. One of the Instagram users screen capped by Cait Munro in her article for *Artnet News* posted a selfie that captured his left arm outstretched, with two fingers shown as if pressing and probing the sphinx's labia. This particular Instagram selfie is captioned, in a jocular, presumptuous phrase that puns on the

gustatory and the sexual, "Addicted to sugar." This gesture repeats what Andrea Stuart describes in her family history of Barbados, *Sugar in the Blood*, as the plantocrat's assumed property-owning right to conduct intrusive inspections, medical, erotic, or otherwise, of slave bodies (168; cf. Fleetwood, 118–20). Moreover, by posting this self-portrait in black and white, the user sharpens the sense of a shadow play against a screen, generating, in effect, yet one more of the series of plantation silhouettes for which Walker is famous. Ironically, it is the very device—the smartphone—that this user deploys to peer at the sphinx's anatomy that is ultimately surveying and fragmenting him. Reversing plantation logics, "A Subtlety" turns surveillance back onto the white Instagram user, and his disrespect is recirculated in the social network, the comments to his account as well as bloggers' responses, as the "disgust" that others feel in response to him. If, as Simone Browne suggests in her work on race and surveillance, the plantation regime depended on the arrogation of literacy to whites, who through the circulation of slave passes and wanted notices "became part of the apparatus . . . , the eyes and ears of face-to-face watching and regulation," then this system was always vulnerable to being "hacked" by slaves who acquired those skills (Browne 2012, 73), generating a countervisual dynamic of "dark sousveillance" (Browne 2015, 21). Reminiscent of the activities of "antebellum hackers" who amended or forged documents (Parenti qtd in Browne 2012, 73), "A Subtlety" turns surveillance back onto this Instagram user. His display of entitlement is refunctioned in the social network as disgust that others feel in response to him. A litany of objections from followers of his feed persists on Instagram, with one friend commenting, for example: "Disgusting, intellectually bereft, disrespectful, and just plain stupid. So sad that you disrespect the painful history of slavery like this." Throughout the time of writing, this picture and the responses have remained posted and publicly accessible on the user's account, suggesting that interpretation of the selfie as disgusting is "blocked," as Ahmed puts it, by "a history that comes before the encounter" (2004, 97). The user's pushback to one friend's comment that "white people haven't changed a bit" is to rule the naming of whiteness (as amnesiac or presumptuous) out of bounds: without apparent irony, he writes, "you just completely discredited yourself." The prompt to produce and share images in relation to Walker's installation thus

goes beyond exposing individual complicities but shows the very form of networked sociality that this platform engenders to be somewhat contested but also saturated (overdetermined, constrained) by a stubborn white shamelessness, insisting on a postracial frame for the commentary while also reinforcing what Ann Cvetkovich, quoting Cornel West in her discussion of depression as a public feeling profoundly shaped by racial histories, discusses as the "emotional color line" (116). Remembering that unbuilt Senate monument in which Walker found perverse inspiration, here we can think that a previous generation of white lawmakers' sticky memories of benefiting from the servitude of their black female caregivers take on public and material form and are re-stuck onto contemporary visitors recklessly taking up Walker's call to co-produce "A Subtlety" with her. A "persistent and ugly blueprint," indeed (McKittrick, 3).

Entitled white men were certainly not the only visitors to create and circulate offensive self-images and captions. That the exhibition played on the desires of a range of spectators, including LGBTQ audience members, is evident in the controversy that swirled around images posted by *Orange Is the New Black* star Lea DeLaria, known for her role on the women's prison TV drama as the tough-talking white dyke "Big Boo." @realleadelaria posted two images hashtagged #kara walkerdomino. The first shows DeLaria standing directly in front of the sphinx, arms crossed, with the caption "Sugar Tits." The second places her, looking much smaller now, beside and under the figure's vulva, accompanied by the comment "That's what I call looking into the face of god," with an additional nonce hashtag #theeffect ofgammaraysonmaninthemooncunt," emphasizing the effect of this visiting subject's fun and erotic feeling of being stunned and shrunken, Gulliver-like, by the looming site of the sphinx's pudendum (Figure 3). Not selfies in the restricted sense of the term, where the subject holds up the reverse-lens camera to capture her own image, these posed and composed images, taken by a companion and then tagged and circulated on Instagram, still belong to the culture of visual/verbal self-representation online. Bloggers Cordelia Nailong and Emma Sharkashy cite DeLaria's statement defending her actions, "which was deleted minutes later": "IT IS ALWAYS A FEMINIST STATEMENT WHEN A LESBIAN EXPRESSES HER SEXUALITY. PERIOD. And being an 'artist' myself I shall express that ANYWHERE I CAN." While the

removal of this particular statement suggests some belated compunction, it is still in tune with the shamelessness I described earlier. These posts received nearly four thousand likes each, with comments veering between appreciations of Big Boo's outrageously lascivious persona on one hand and remarks that her posts are "so sad," that she ought to feel "shame" and to show more "respect," on the other. Calling out DeLaria on the basis that she "essentially used Walker's piece to score queer celebrity points with her adoring fans" and that "disguis[ing]" her "entitlement" to consume "as sexual liberation is white supremacy," bloggers Nailong and Sharkashy stage a pedagogical intervention: they amplify the critical comments on the posts, preserve parts of the conversation that were taken down, and provide instructions to guide a potentially more respectful practice, suggesting that "there needed to be context behind the photos, or no photos at all." As it breaks down happiness into shame and disgust, this activity of publicly identifying the wrongness of DeLaria's posts becomes part of the exhibition, too, for it is these commenters who supply the labor that makes it possible to derive a lesson in history and in ethical conduct for white queers out of DeLaria's participation in the grotesquely comic minstrel set-up of Walker's show. No one in this

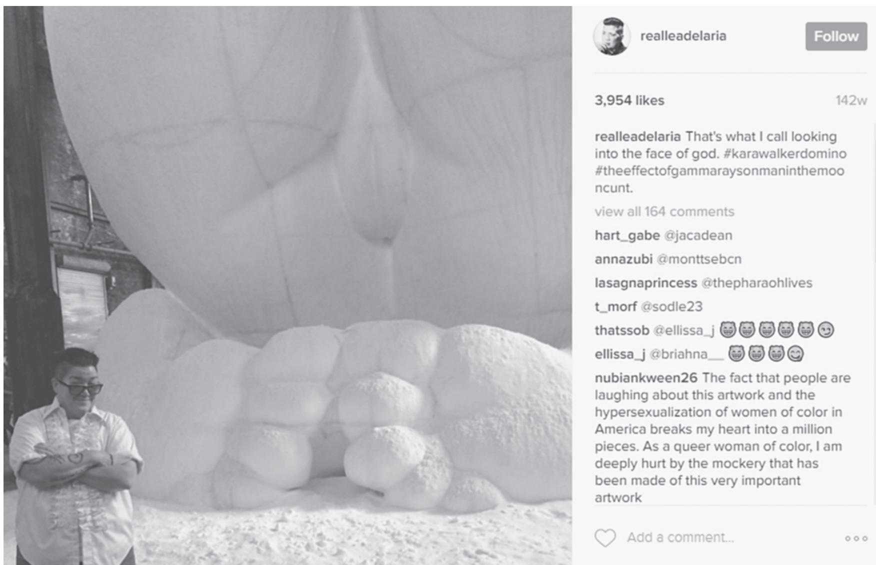

Figure 3. Instagram post tagged #karawalkerdomino by @realleadelaria. Author screenshot.

participatory scenario of entrapment and "call-out" escapes the logic of caricature.

THE POLITICS OF CROWDSOURCING II: FUGITIVE MEDIA PRACTICES?

As the examples just given make plain, Instagram's aesthetic and communicative affordances—and the uses to which they are put—are very far from postracial. Yet, the range of images that "A Subtlety" generated (and the differently curated "versions" of it that exist online) suggests that this platform may not quite be a dead end but may in fact be harnessed in the interests of "counterpublic conversations," despite the dominant reading of Instagram's aesthetics as hegemonic (Duguay 10). I note varying dynamics of stickiness in the proliferating self-with-sphinx and self-with-attendant images, some of which yield criticality, traces of resistant affective communities, and even, at times, motions of fugitivity: the ongoing, irrepressible forms of movement, planning, and collaboration through which unfree subjects seek, plan, and choreograph freedom (Harney and Moten; Moody). Indeed, as Alyssa Rosenberg commented in the *Washington Post*, "There is something subtler at work in the less-sexual shots that many visitors took with the statues." Her review goes on to highlight image-taking as an attempted but impossible commensuration practice: not only impossible but inevitably "corrupting," because approaching them to in order to see in more detail involves stepping into "the zone of the statues' ruin." Following Rosenberg's insight, I suggest that this is a space of proliferation, seriality, oscillation between distance and proximity, and varying dynamics of stickiness.

Writing about formulaic family and studio archives in diasporic contexts, Tina Campt observes that it is the "self-evidence" of vernacular compositions that "makes them register so profoundly as particularly compelling enunciations of self and community, (af)filiation and improvisation" (9). Certainly, what Campt calls "sensate photographic registers"—the haptic (touch) and the sonic (sound)—come significantly to the fore in a set of more assertive and creative self-images by women that significantly break with the dominant (sublime, offensive) patterns of #karawalkerdomino. Young black women and their

companions/relatives tended to pose as the sphinx, juxtaposing their own profiles with hers and thereby setting up a metonymic association whereby the sphinx is claimed as the self and also as a matrilineal object of respect and affection. Instagram-specific methods for altering photos are in play here. By selecting the filter called 1977 and putting a prominent Polaroid-like frame (on an angle) around the image, @earthwarrior, an artist, curator, and community activist who volunteered as a docent, saturated a picture of herself laying hands and cheek on the sphinx's flank in a warm pink tone, imbuing it with love, nostalgia, and an Afrocentric sensibility (marked by her ankh earrings); coming after a series of mournful images of the fragmented pieces of the attendant figures on the exhibition floor, as well as one with Walker, this self-portrait with sphinx makes a sensuous claim to communion and repair (Figure 4). A remarkable subset of users created collages featuring three or four smaller digital photos in a new relational ensemble that shifts the emphasis away from the exhibition as spectacle and into a familial register. In one example of collage, the commentary explains that the exhibition's significance lay in the occasion for mother and daughter to spend time together and for the mother's story of the great grandmother's time working at Domino after her arrival from one of the smaller Caribbean islands to surface. The user spliced together an image of mother as sphinx, mother and daughter together, the sphinx on her own, and one of the attendant figures in a comprehensive overview of what is tagged as "#my history." With reference to Campt's concept of the "synesthetic supplement," I suggest that, if the reverberating sounds conjured by the exhibition include the agony of the plantation regime for black bodies or the cruel jocularity of perpetrators past and present, then these relational self-portraits by black women register as carefully crafted improvisational alternatives. Enlisting kin collaboratively, these fragmented but holistic photos on Instagram move in close to sing an affirmative love song, a kind of low-frequency, insistent hum, to themselves and their maternal forebears (Campt 141). Importantly, as illustrated in the comments on the collage post, the necessary but "unwanted" work of callout culture continued to resurface. For, despite the poster's efforts to put into place a black feminist interpretive framework and to offer historical context, she had to contend with a follower who persisted in jocularly sexualizing the sphinx.

Figure 4. Instagram post tagged #karawalkerdomino by @theearthwarrior. Author screenshot.

If celebrity self-inscription and mediation were key to the exhibition's logic from the outset, these elements coalesced most famously in the visit of pop superstar and tastemaker Beyoncé, rapper-producer Jay-Z, and their daughter, Blue Ivy, to the show and their associated Instagram posts, including one with Beyoncé and Kara Walker. Beyoncé's Instagram post of her visit to the refinery was in tune with the diasporic aesthetic of reclamation I just described. Known for glamour and scantiness, she wore her "Sunday best" (Campt 163, 170) to the exhibition, with her small daughter in a matching below-the-knee floral dress (Figure 5). That the singer posed with her face averted and in the embrace of her family served to emphasize decorum, privacy, and empowerment. By contrast, the portrait of Beyoncé with Walker was taken on the other side of the sphinx, in front of the vulva, and in this way the sequence sutured the postures of respectability and reverence to a "pro-sex framework," effectively associating both singer and visual artist with the "insistence on 'living with contradictions'" that characterizes hip-hop feminism (Durham et al. qtd in Weidhose, 130). These pictures were then assembled and authenticated via a deliberately grainy, digital "vernacular" (rather than glamorous

promotional) collage. Intractable contradictions remain, though. For, if Walker's artistic self-inscriptions have long been premised on the friability of the grotesque, as I noted earlier, then the image of Beyoncé standing shoulder to shoulder with Walker converts this exhibition's disturbing aesthetics into an image of black feminist solidarity, while also advancing a postfeminist claim for understanding art and entertainment moguls' achievements as the climax of liberation. If the exhibition resurfaced "the historical laboring black body," then labor became reified and monumentalized again on social media and on the blogs and websites that recirculate Instagram images. Empowerment is conjoined to the bodies of exceptional (talented, successful, and prominent) cultural producers, who register as "the aestheticized body of leisure and wealth accumulation" ostensibly but perhaps not quite being satirized through the figure of the sphinx (Fleetwood 112).[9]

As the female artist-mogul is lionized, the collaborative labor of the visiting crowd becomes an essential source of circulation and buzz. Significantly, "A Subtlety" exemplified what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson flag as a crucial aspect of the virtual mediation of lives: the proliferation of paratexts, supporting material that glosses, contextualizes, adds to, or interprets an object or event (85–87). Officially, on

Figure 5. Instagram post tagged #karawalker by @beylite. Author screenshot.

the website, we have the crowdsourced but filtered digital archive of the sculpture, an artist's inspiration portfolio, and a dossier of creative and historical writings about the global sugar industry. These paratexts purported to mediate and manage by highlighting what the historian Elizabeth Abbot terms the "relentlessly sad and bad story" of the sugar industry as global and ongoing (qtd in Stuart 321).[10] What is remarkable, though, is the vast proliferation of unofficial supplements to the official framing of the show: not only interviews with the artist but countless blog, magazine, and newspaper commentaries and all those Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook posts. Evidently, there was a disjunction between the learning on offer in the exhibition space and the ample but buried resources posted on the website, one that commentators felt called to bridge by contributing their writing, screen capping, time, feelings, and thoughts—in other words, their labor. Many of the critical blogs and commentaries that I have already cited epitomize the "unwanted" but vital labor of "call out culture" (Nakamura 2015). In contrast with the white blogger Cait Munro's dispassionate and longer catalogue, Stephanye Watts's personal essay is organized around the narration of her embodied, affective response to what she saw at the exhibition and online: "And then everything hit me," "my eyes exploded," "my head was spinning." Like Powers, Watts was recruited through her affective response into acting as not only an ad hoc content moderator, whose narration recontextualizes the brutality and the laughter, but in effect also as a para-curator tasked with redirecting and deepening the difficult work of postslavery cultural memory.

Critically responding to intensities and recognizing the limits of individual, in-the-moment interventions to contest this scene of magnified white (photographic) privilege, over the course of "A Subtlety" the activist counter-hashtag #wearehere was used to assert the presence of descendants of slaves at the Domino site. This project worked through and beyond social media platforms, extending its reach by way of a stickering campaign, teach-ins, and collective visits (Shen Goodman). On ARC Magazine's website and a group Facebook page, a call to assembly was circulated: "The Kara Walker Experience: We Are Here will be gathering for people of color at Kara Walker's art installation in the Domino Sugar factory taking place on Sunday, June 22, 2014 at 2 pm. Invite your friends—and your friends' friends—so that

we can experience this space as the majority." Asserting independence from the official exhibition plans, the poster noted that "This event is organized collectively, and is unaffiliated with Kara Walker and Creative Time." After a turnout of more than a thousand people on June 22, many followed suit by organizing their own smaller groups in early July. For example, one group of black young adults posed for an Instagram picture outside the warehouse space, in a cobbled, grassy area with a view of the waterfront: tagging their collective portrait #wearehere #blackmillenials #karawalkerdomino, among others, they asserted being "here," at but beyond the refinery walls, free and together, having made it beyond the shadow of the sphinx. Adopting a more confrontational tone and looking beyond Instagram to publish his take in blog essay form, Malik Thompson, who attended the exhibition as part of a "Critical Exposure" youth summer photography institute, posed defiantly with two friends, all three "holding up the Black Power fist" in front of the sphinx in order to intervene in what he experienced as the "desecration" enacted by many photographing white people in the crowd (Figure 6) (Thompson). More formally coordinated public events continued to take place over the fall and winter months, inviting reflection on "We Are Here" activities and explicitly connecting its assertions of presence and critical countermemory to the work of Black Lives Matter activists (ARC Staff).

While the offline, collective acts of resistance that occurred in response to "A Subtlety" were both powerful enactments and prefigurations of solidarity, they too, despite their fugitive impetus and multifaceted tactics, were part of the media spectacle around the show and involved elements of incorporation and fetishization. It demands careful consideration that, in inviting public interaction on social media via *#karawalkerdomino*, Kara Walker and Creative Time anticipated, paralleled, and echoed the "ad hoc publics" (Bruns and Burgess) that the #karawalkerdomino and #wearehere hashtags brought into being. Early in the show's run, Creative Time recruited volunteer docents, some of whom had formerly worked at the factory. One prominent voice was that of long-time employee Robert Shelton, who, as Christina Sharpe observes in her critique of the exhibition's troubling tendency to submerge "brutality" (2016, 98–99), spoke poignantly of the ordeals that he and others faced while working for Domino. This docent testimony has its own palpable force but was not immune from being

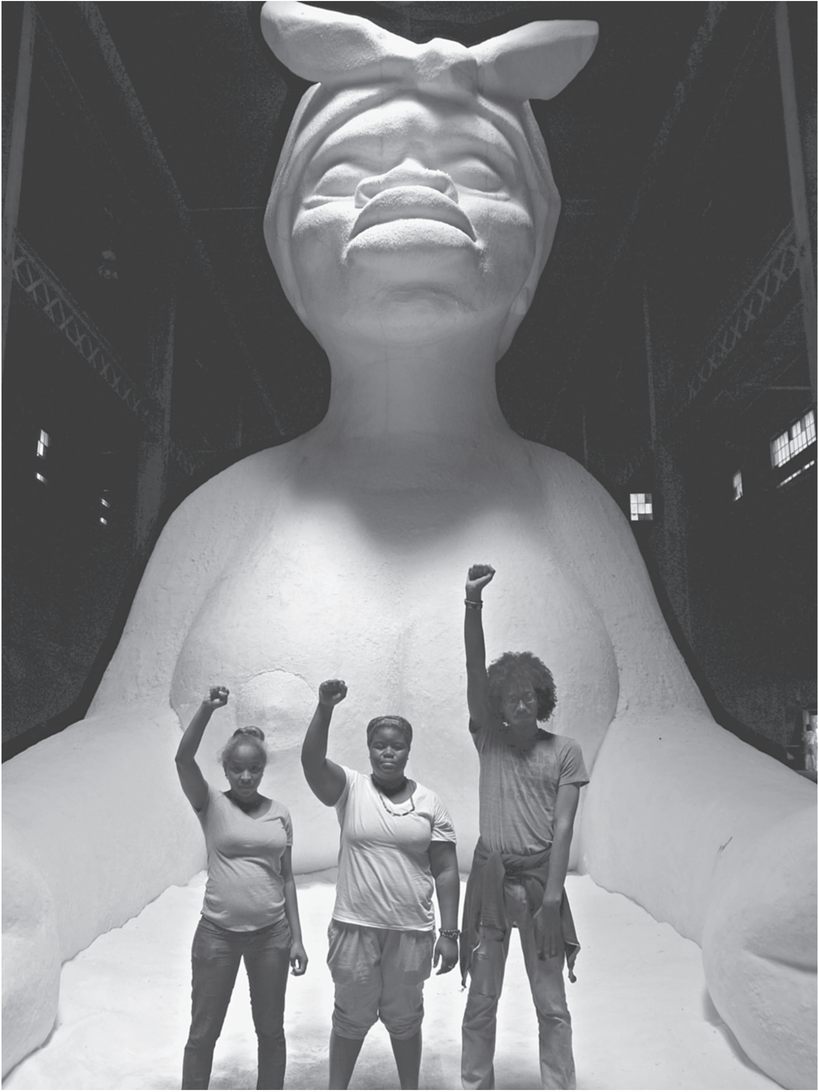

Figure 6. Malik Thompson pictured with friends Gina and Khadijah. Photograph by Tyler Grisby. Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-No Derivatives 4.0.

folded into the show's combined relational aesthetics and social media logic: the portraits and stories of unpaid docent-workers played a role in prompting media coverage that coincided with the idea of the exhibition as a tribute to artisans (Yee), including a subset of visitor Instagram posts featuring shots of visitors together with worker-docents. Note, too, that if some users were, in the end, pictured touching the sculpture, despite advertised prohibitions, as in the case of @theearth warrior (discussed earlier), then these reparative images are also, significantly, arranged and elicited by Walker and the team at Creative Time: the images of users touching the sculptures date to the last five minutes of the exhibition, a short interval to which Walker and her team had invited black family groups, asking them to lay hands on the installation prior to its dismantling, and that went on to provide the culminating sequence of her postproduction video, titled "An Audience" (Figure 7). Interpreted as a promotional paratext, this video is a gesture responding to the "protesting audience" (Walker qtd in Gopnik)—to their outrage about "A Subtlety's" mobilization of vernacular photography in relation to the inherited "plantation blueprint" (McKittrick 3).

We can infer that Walker's New York agent, Sikkema Jenkins, was well prepared to pick up promptly on the notoriety and nostalgia that

Figure 7. "An Audience." Copyright 2014 Kara Walker. Image courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

had accrued to "A Subtlety" via the social media firestorm. The gallery went on to mount a November 2014–January 2015 postproduction exhibition titled "Kara Walker: Afterword" that included two videos—"An Audience" (as described here) and "Rhapsody" (showing the final demolition)—together with works on paper and the "severed left fist of the sugar sphinx whose gesture recalls the Afro-Brazilian figa, a talisman of good luck, which in ancient times has alternated as a fertility symbol, a rude gesture, and a protector against harm" (Sikemma Jenkins). By preserving and featuring this hand gesture, the retrospective created an afterimage that is both a potent reminder and a "hypervisible" fetish of revolutionary agency (Fleetwood 111). While Walker's work may remind us in the first instance of overtly racist "collectibles,"[11] there is also, of course, a long history of commercializing abolitionist protest. Recall the paradoxical history of sugar boycotts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; the ceramics baron Josiah Wedgwood promoted the cause through his wares, which held out the possibility, especially to white women, that alternative consumption could be a mode of active ethical engagement (Sussman 2000, 127). Walker and her agent's decision to market a $700 "limited edition" ceramic "pitcher" featuring a cutout profile of the sphinx's head in black against a white background by "porcelain manufacturer Bernardaud in honor of the show" crystallizes the commercial entanglement of "A Subtlety"'s critical antislavery project (MOMA). The critical "power" of Walker's work "lessens" when it is "co-opted and commodified," argued Glenda Carpio in 2008 of a Christmas pop-up book that Walker had produced (187–90). With the intensification of *both* audience participation *and* commercialization in her plan for "A Subtlety," Walker embraced rather than eschewed these contradictions, and the artist and her promoters accumulated considerable cultural and economic power in the process.

RESURFACING, RESISTANCE, EFFACEMENT?

One of the "We Are Here" organizers, Nadia Williams, identified the underlying problem with the mobilization of "community" participation on and offline:

> the exhibition contributes to the erasure of history by reclaiming the Domino Factory as simply the site for the art show of the hour. It actually makes the erasure easier, because we're kind of talking about race and sugar, but we're not actually saying anything. So it seems like Two Trees [the condo developer] is doing its part to make a community contribution, but it's actually just getting people excited so that when high rises are built there's this faint memory—but it's connected to something cool instead of a painful history. (qtd in Shen Goodman)

Because of its stance of confronting and repairing the predations of ongoing white supremacy, the counterstrike by "We Are Here" is itself caught up in this dynamic of effacement via the "faint" memory of "something cool," the painfulness that many commentators wanted to insist upon eventually fading back out again. Such elision is overdetermined because critical countermemorial work was undertaken here in and through the contradictory logic of what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun terms the "enduring ephemeral." "A computer's memory can be rewritten," points out Chun, "because its surface constantly fades" (161). In this model of accretion and erasure, online memory work is enabled (through rewriting and resurfacing) but also inescapably vulnerable to being subsumed over time as attention comes to be directed to the most recent and/or most widely circulated visual artifacts.

Moreover, that the way out of this increasingly heated impasse and into a happier, less disgusted/disgusting narrative was through the further recruitment of black audience members' participatory labor in the final hours of the exhibition, as I described, suggests "A Subtlety"'s deep and not unknowing entrenchment in both relational aesthetics and racial capitalism. The liberating promise of digital "interactivity" is, as Nakamura argues, a "fetish," and the labor contributed by audience members on social media, and especially, in the example of "A Subtlety," the creative interventions crafted by black participants, is steeped in racialized dynamics of alienation and appropriation (Nakamura [2008] 2014, 44). Yet, as Nakamura has also observed, "the work [of call-out culture] itself matters partly because of who is performing it and why" (2015, 112). Drawing on Silvia Federici's argument that "the most anti-systematic struggles of the last century have not been fought only or primarily by waged workers," Nakamura posits that, even as it feeds back into "regimes of accumulation," "the labor of women of color feminists on social media has created a vital

and resurgent space for new styles of community" and for a new digital "labor consciousness" (2015, 112). In this vein, we could begin to imagine the destabilizations effected by Walker's work as "digitopian," in the radical sense proposed by the diasporic filmmaker John Akomfrah, who sees "the promise of the digital" enacted in black artistic acts of "unruly trespass" instantiated from "inside the belly of the photochemical beast" of a racializing and racist visual culture. Perhaps in Walker's practice, as in Akomfrah's transformative vision of black cinema, "rhetorics of disaffection" begin to "morph into a counter-hegemonic trace," within and despite the racial exclusions built into both analogue and digital imaging technologies and institutions from their inception (Akomfrah 23).

However, I maintain that it remains necessary to wrestle with the problem of immaterial labor's close mesh with the larger structures of racial capitalism, for the forms of aggression, disgust, and joy that circulated in response to Walker's gigantic sugar sphinx were enabled and shaped by the design properties of Instagram and other social media platforms themselves. Amplifying some of social media's many paradoxes—user engagement is driven by affect and sociality but also by capitalism, its logic is individualizing but collective, its archives ephemeral, permanent, erasable—Walker's "A Subtlety" invited forms of participation that were simultaneously messy, colliding, offensive, disgusting, haptic, and reparative. Let me suggest three potentially paradigm-shifting implications of my critical framing of the interactivity of Walker's exhibition. First, my analysis of the stickiness of "A Subtlety" pushes against the deracination of both tech praxis and Internet studies and underscores that addressing "the persistence of racism online" and "the deep roots of racial inequality in existing social structures that shape technoculture" is long overdue and urgently required (Daniels 711). Second, my emphasis on "A Subtlety"'s various versions and afterlives suggests that crowdsourcing content on a commercial social media platform needs to be conceptualized neither as banal nor as fulfilling the artist's parodic intent. Rather, attention must be paid to the accretion of images and commentaries; to the implication of multiple subjectivities and communities in the process, including their messy, distracted use of postdigital aesthetics; and to the distributed, enduring online archiving and remediation of such participatory encounters. Third and finally, this discussion suggests that the sphinx's

most vexing riddle is the question of determining where criticality and solidarity may be percolating in and against art projects, like Walker's, that are situated between conceptual art and celebrity capital accumulation, on one hand, and an embrace of vernacular interactivity, on the other.

The effects of "A Subtlety" are ambiguous, the practices and affects that have accumulated around it vexed and multilayered. The excessive, self-reflexive practices of renowned black feminist artists certainly come into view here as provocative, generative, and critical. In deploying pastiche to expose the visual, communicative, and affective dimensions of ongoing white supremacy and in issuing an implicit call to enact forms of resistance to such reenactments of domination, Walker has fomented "digitopian" (Akomfrah) insights that put pressure on Instagram's seemingly impermeable aesthetics of normativity, promotion, and consumption (Marwick; Duguay). But, by attending to the indispensable role of social media content providers and commentators, who are increasingly hailed to participate in artists' projects in a new mode of response that combines the functions of art and media criticism, political action, and self- and community authoring, I challenge the object of study and in the process add significant layers of interpretive, ethical, and political complication. Interactive performances/installations are sites of unresolved—and still open—struggle that must now be conceived in terms of the considerable range of subjectivities, relations, and contestations they bring into being and the digital technologies and platforms that mediate them. In turn, this case study suggests the importance of inquiring into how socially mediated artworks are transforming affective expectations regarding the unstable workings of sensuality/disgust, celebration/mockery, inclusion/exclusion, and memory/erasure, as site-specific art projects become more and more deliberately predicated on the intellectual, affective, and caring labor and the identity work of minority communities.

It remains galvanizing to imagine that, like the hold of the slave ship in Harney and Moten's theorizing, Walker's 2014 exhibition "gather[ed] dispossessed feelings in common," thereby instantiating a new form of collective agency from below that might do the work of "tearing shit down" (97–98, 152). Its manifestation of "digital ghosts" (Akomfrah 23) might be read as imaginatively undoing, from within,

the unspoken whiteness of so many contemporary art events and institutions (King). Nonetheless, although Walker's free-admission, public, digitally interactive installation may have flipped the exclusions of art institutions, made white entitlement an object of surveillance and disgust, and leveraged a critical countermemory of race with respect to both visual culture and labor history, it appears to have also reinforced the ongoing racialized distribution of labor and appropriation of value in the digital economy and, in turn, the logic of gentrification. Like the skilled refinery workers whom she references in "A Subtlety" but on a digitally mediated and affective plane, Walker skillfully raised the temperature in the refinery-turned-exhibition space—but in a way that seems to have gone on to serve capitalist rather than critical, political interests. By March 2015, the condo developer Two Trees finally agreed to increase the proportion of nonmarket-rate rental units after a drawn-out battle with New York City Hall (Anuta). In an Instagram post to #karawalkerdomino at the beginning of June 2016, "A Subtlety" resurfaced as the name of a custom rum cocktail offered by an area pop-up bar, the gentle clinking of the ice cubes in the sweet concoction conjuring what Williams had anticipated: a "faint" memory of something "cool" (qtd in Shen Goodman). As these pleasing and refreshing objects (the drink, the ceramic jug, the condo tower, the afterimage of the event as community building) pile up and assume more prominence over time in organizing memory and affect, the event of the show is banalized and detached from the broken, dripping bodies of the attendants, the overwhelming smell of burnt and evaporating molasses, and the searing anger and sorrow and the creative and critical social media practices of visitors who had to contend, in the sticky, melting space of exhibition on those hot summer days, with the vernacular replaying of white supremacy. Ephemeral in its material design, "A Subtlety" both endures and recedes online; it critically explodes but also deepens the imbrication of digital interactivity, vernacular photography on social media, and racial capitalism.

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Notes

1. Tracing the racist trope of the watermelon-induced smile in studio portraits and private snapshots dated to 1900–1910, Sheehan argues that "to smile broadly for the amateur camera in the first decades of the twentieth century was to engage in a form of racialized play that simultaneously recalled the violence of America's slaveholding past. Subsumed into an exaggerated expression of joy, in other words, were the miseries of enslaved, laboring black bodies" (152). The triumphant smiles and victorious gestures of visitors posing with the sphinx are not exactly or only ignorant of racial history, for they instantiate "snapshot minstrelsy" (149) practices of posing for and snapping pics that have been taught over time in American popular visual culture.

2. While it has been suggested that the "uncanny" doubling effects in Walker's work unearth and make visible the "unspeakable" violence that slave narratives, constrained by abolitionist sentimental discourse, could not represent (Shaw), other critics note that the dynamic goes beyond testifying to trauma, for, characterized by "volition" (Reinhardt 2003, 119) and "mischievous agency" (Carpio 175), Walker's disturbing cutout displays demand to be read as "figures of collective fantasy and phobia . . . in a sense the spectators' own shadows" (Reinhardt 2003, 119); their power lies in dramatizing "the way that our own 'overzealous' imaginations," steeped in popular culture's racial repertoires, "fill in the blanks" (Carpio 172).

3. After a controversial choice by the Detroit Institute of Art in the 1990s to shorten the run of a group exhibition that included her work after a joint decision not to include didactic material to guide spectators' responses, Walker defended her invocation of stereotypes on the basis that her aim is to "draw people into a racist setting to confront them on their own, our own, ways of seeing" (qtd in Reinhardt 2003, 120). What is important to glean from this statement, suggests Reinhardt, is Walker's self-implication in the "ways of seeing" that she is exposing and critiquing (2003, 120).

4. Fleetwood's genealogy of "excess flesh" encompasses the workings of embodied agency in photographic self-portraits by Renée Cox and other contemporary black women visual artists who signify on the legacy of Saartjie Baartman, who was exhibited across the globe in the nineteenth century as the "Hottentot Venus" (112).

5. To inquire into the reparative is to heed calls for material and moral reparation of the dispossessions wrought by slavery and antiblack racism (Coates). It is also, in Eve Kosofksy Sedgwick's sense, to attend to ongoing affective, creative processes of haunting, debt, and repair that individuals, families, communities, and artists undertake (Cvetkovich; Harney and Moten).

6. Multiple sources for envisioning comic entrapment that are referenced in Walker's inspiration portfolio include clips from both the Uncle Remus stories featuring the lure of the "tar baby" and Buster Keaton's "Can of Molasses" sketch; the more the target struggles against the sticky object, the more stuck (comically powerless and embarrassed) the subject becomes (Creative Time).

7. According to Edward E. Baptist, it was a "fraternity" of skilled enslaved workers, "*commandeurs* and sugar refiners" relocated from the burned colony of Saint-Domingue (later Haiti), who were the driving force behind the largest pre–Civil War uprising: Louisiana's German Coast slave rebellion of 1811 (57–58). The response of the planters was "swift and ruthless": these rebels were executed on their "home plantations," their severed heads displayed as a warning (63).

8. Commenting on the way that consulting with an Instagram expert has boosted both attendance and online traffic at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, the museum's "online community manager," Taylor Newby, observes that "among our social channels like Twitter and Facebook, the Instagram users are the most engaged, with many more people who were really active. It's helped us connect with a whole new audience, because across the board, they skew younger than our traditional visitors" (qtd in Kaufman).

9. Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade*, notable for its merging of contemporary sorrows and plantation memories, can be read as an extended, reparative reply to Walker's exhibition and is, similarly and differently, premised on celebrity-audience collaboration.

10. There are long-standing connections between the bloody fortunes made through degradation and endangerment in the households, cane fields, and onsite refineries of the Caribbean sugar islands, Louisiana, and Florida, on one hand, and the northern metropoles and their rich endowments to cultural institutions, including universities and art galleries, on the other, with the H. O. Havemeyer collection at the Met and the Tate collections in Britain as prominent cases in point (Stuart 308). Domino, which donated the sugar used in Walker's project, was a subsidiary of the British trading conglomerate Tate and Lyle from 1988 until 2001, when it was sold to the Florida-based multinational American Sugar Refining.

11. As Creative Time producer Nato Thompson mentions, Walker conceptualized the attendants as "scaled-up" versions of racist ceramic figures she found on Amazon.com (qtd in Rosenberg).

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