

Sugar Babies: Confections of American Childhood in Vik Muniz's *Sugar Children* and Kara Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby*

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“What did they live on?” said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking. “They lived on treacle,” said the Dormouse, after thinking a minute or two. “They couldn’t have done that, you know,” Alice gently remarked. “They’d have been ill.” “So they were,” said the Dormouse; “*very* ill.”

Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* at times contemplates the existential dilemma of subsisting exclusively on a treacle diet. The term “treacle” is a British idiom that refers to the dark brown syrupy molasses obtained from raw sugar during the refinement process.¹ Moreover, Carroll suggests an etiological exposure assessment of an exclusively treacle diet endangering one's wellness and resulting in great illness. Carroll uses Alice's great interest in eating and drinking (read: “Drink me.” “Eat me.”), as the operative expression of his fascination with saccharine and other sugared variants that sweeten the narrative leading to adventures into the absurd. Kara Walker's black-and-white cutout silhouettes are historical treatments of the absurd and the obstinately ridiculous yet terrifying predicaments of U.S. slavery and the plantation agroindustrial complex. Walker's *A Subtlety* is a kind of “Adventures in Sugarland”—an exploration of treacled bodies, labor practices, and the apo-

theosis of mother sugar as a raced, gendered, sphinxed goddess. While Vik Muniz's *Portraits of the Sugar Children* share a material and temporal affinity with Walker's work, Muniz emphasizes the inevitable void of the children's sugar futures. Together, these two artists' work in sugar offers a comparative analysis that goes beyond the material and temporal and ultimately addresses the contentious and violent histories of sugar and the vulnerability of children's bodies.

Walker's blockbuster installation at the Domino Sugar Factory, *A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby*, drew over 130,000 visitors from all over the world and was available for public viewing on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday for only a few weeks in the spring of 2014. The installation featured thirteen sculptures of young black boys made of resin and coated in molasses. Through time and heat, the sugary black bodies partially dissolved into sticky liquefied footpaths, leaving the sculptures in various states of dismemberment and disappearance. The official title for Walker's piece is the following:

At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Waker has confected:

A Subtlety

or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby*

an Homage 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

Walker's predilection for creating superfluous, romanticized titles is typical of her approach. She invokes a nineteenth-century aesthetic visually and literarily. For example, her 1997 installation of black-and-white silhouettes titled *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven* shares the embellished title inspired by Harriett Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Walker's nineteenth-century visual aesthetic is further explored within the industrial space of the refining plant.

The Domino Sugar Factory was built in 1927 on the East River in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. It was originally a storage facility that processed and whitened tons of sugar. The soon-to-be demolished factory had been shuttered for over a decade when it hosted its final installment of sugar profundity courtesy of Creative Time and Kara Walker. In their curatorial remarks, Creative Time emphasizes the racial and sexual connotations of the seventy-five-foot sugar sphinx whose kerchief-covered mammy-styled head emphasizes the stereotype of the desexualized black female domestic laborer, while the prominent hips and buttocks with exposed vulva emphasize the stereotype of the overly sexualized bodies of black women. To this latter assumption, I would like to add that the domestic labor represented by the mammy stereotype is a double bind of labor. The work of historian Deborah Gray White

reminds us of the distinctions experienced under racial slavery as two systems, one for men and one for women. The author critically analyzes black female slavery, investigating the psychological, relational, physical, racial, and sexualized nuances. White's exposition of the Jezebel/mammy mythologies imposed on enslaved black women and thereafter is addressed visually in Walker's sphinx sculpture.² The hypersexualized buttocks and vulva I believe also represent the forced sexual labors of enslaved black women to produce additional enslaved offspring/laborers as represented by the sugar and resin boy sculptures and to satisfy the sexual whims of those who fancied themselves their masters. The sphinx's body becomes an extension of the plantation machine as sexual machine. The sugared sphinx in situ resided in the same physical location of the sugar processing machinery at the Domino Sugar Factory. While the entire installation, including the embodiment of the figure as an Egyptian sphinx and the conundrums of interpretation that flavor this work, deserves discussion, this article focuses primarily on Walker's display of confectioned children.

Kara Walker's *Marvelous Sugar Baby* incorporated over thirty tons of sugar to accompany the sphinx. Walker confectioned sugar sculptures of young boys, some carrying baskets of rock candy and granulated sugar and others toting hands of bananas. I am interested in the elasticity and etherealness of the materiality of sugar and how it folds layers of meaning from our past and present: how the body and the bite melt, mold, and vanish. Walker's sugar-coated resin sculptures of young boys focuses our attention specifically on the edibility and vulnerability of young black children.

I examine the trope of "Eating the Other" as it relates specifically to sugar children in the visual arts and offer a glimpse as to how this trope of youthful edibility manifests also in literature. Specifically, this trope appears in the work of Vik Muniz's *Portraits of the Sugar Children* and subsequently relates to Walker's work by addressing shared aesthetics, materiality, and the black body as a consumable entity. This shared attunement to the materiality and mediality of sugar by Muniz and Walker culminates into a richer tableaux of sugar body politics and speaks to how the transformation of sugar children shape up in unexpected ways, opening up interpretation in ways that are also unexpected.

Sugarcane is the most popular source of sucrose as a refined carbohydrate. It is propagated asexually and lives in tropical and subtropical climates, requiring lots of water and labor for production. Sixteenth-century Spain pioneered this process of producing sugar in the Americas through technology, African slave labor, and the plantation system. Originally considered a luxury food product in Europe and used mainly medicinally and as a condiment or spice, sugar became more democratized as the sweet tooth of Europe grew, creating global competition. At the forefront of this global trade competition was England. As Sidney Mintz points out, "England fought the most, conquered the most colonies, imported the most slaves (to her own colonies and, in absolute numbers, in her own bottoms), and went furthest and fastest in creating a plantation system. The most important product of that system was sugar."³

Sugarcane was introduced by the Portuguese in St. Kitts by way of Brazil in the 1640s. Shortly thereafter, thousands of Africans were captured and enslaved to power the European-controlled sugar plantations in what Cuban novelist and cultural historian Antonio Benítez-Rojo refers to as plantation machines, saying, “This family of machines almost always makes cane sugar, coffee, cacao, . . . bananas, pineapples, . . . and other goods whose cultivation is impossible or too expensive in the temperate zones; furthermore, it usually produces the Plantation, capitalized to indicate not just the presence of plantations but also the type of society that results from their use and abuse.”⁴

The Brazilian-born, Brooklyn-based artist Vik Muniz was vacationing on the Caribbean island of St. Kitts when he was introduced to a group of children who were the offspring of sugarcane workers. Impressed with their carefree attitudes, Muniz began taking Polaroid photographs of the children. Muniz’s *Portraits of the Sugar Children* (1996) were created by starting with black paper and then “drawing” a portrait by sprinkling sugar until forming an image. Once complete, he captures the skillfully rendered portrait in a photograph, pours the sugar in a glass jar, and begins a new portrait. There are a total of six portraits belonging to this series of gelatin-silver prints, each approximately twenty by sixteen inches. Later, the children introduced Muniz to their parents, who worked in the sugarcane fields performing a treacherous labor that generations prior have toiled with since the seventeenth century.

This was the first time Muniz worked with the medium of food—a material format that would become a hallmark of his work. For example, in 1997, Muniz re-created a famous Hans Namuth action portrait of the artist Jackson Pollock at work on one of his large drip paintings. Using chocolate syrup as his “paint,” Muniz rearticulated the Hans Namuth portrait solely in chocolate syrup. The syrupy concoction that worked as the medium of this portrait also was a reflection of the viscous paints that Pollock dripped like syrup on his canvases. Muniz further tested his fluency in chocolate syrup, creating glutinous portraits of Marilyn Monroe, Bella Lugosi as Dracula biting a woman, and a three-panel re-creation of Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*. It is noteworthy to mention that Muniz uses an edible medium to paint Dracula in the action of “eating” as well as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* being focused on an epochal moment of communal eating, thereby creating layers of consumption through medium and context.

Muniz’s *Double Mona Lisa* (1999) was made from peanut butter and jelly. It was fashioned after Andy Warhol’s *Double Mona Lisa* (1963), which, of course, was fashioned after Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* (1503–1517). The *Double Mona Lisa* portrait was painted with one jelly Mona Lisa and one peanut butter Mona Lisa. In 2004, he painted a series called *Caviar Monsters*, where he rendered images of Dracula, Frankenstein, the Mummy, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, and other characters from the horror genre exclusively in black caviar on white paper. He photographed the painted portraits, creating chromogenic prints, and then mounted them on aluminum. During an interview



Figure 1: Vik Muniz, *Valicia Bathes in Sunday Clothes*, 1996. Courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins & Co. Gallery, New York. © 2018 Vik Muniz / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

with *DROME* magazine in 2012, Muniz was asked *why* he chose to paint with food, and in his response, he clarifies,

Paint is just made out of different components, like food, it only has a different consistency. When you work with something that has a taste, immediately you evoke a different sense and it is interesting to create pictures that work in many sensory levels. Generally, I'm more concerned with taste, rather than food. In fact, I don't really use food, but I use things that spoil, because that justifies the photographic act.⁵

Muniz's disavowal of not using food—even though his paintings were created using chocolate syrup, caviar, black bean soup, coffee beans, or peanut butter and jelly—can be read as a clear assertion of wanting to separate his practice from the association of painting with food, which may allude to the kitschy and crafty. Rather, the disassociation from the food medium that catapulted his artistic success can be interpreted as matter of strategy for an artist yearning to being taken seriously as a legitimate, creative force. However, by 2012, Muniz had already achieved immense success as an international artist. Ultimately,

Muniz painted with an edible medium. Although Muniz describes his approach using food as being concerned more with taste, his portraits are not eaten—they are photographed and consumed by collectors and the public. Likewise, his *Double Mona Lisa* is not for eating, nor are his sugar children.

Muniz titled the sugar portraits according to some notable physical quality of each child. For example, some of the portraits are titled *Big James Sweats Buckets*, *Valicia Bathes in Sunday Clothes*, or *Ten Ten's Weed Necklace*. Muniz “paints” texture in the portraits by ascribing indentations of layers of sugar with his fingers. These “fingerprints” are usually more apparent when viewing the large photographs in person. When viewed in person, each sugar granule is afforded its own spatial significance, whereas any small restructuring of any granule could drastically change the portrait. There is a seductive quality in the puffy whiteness of sugar crystals that halos each child in a billowy poof of snowy clouds. The sugar clouds suggest a fleeting quality of youth that fades and blurs into the edges of the portraits. However, closer inspection betrays the clouds with the finger of the artist as you notice that each child is covered with the impressions of someone’s fingers undercutting the youthful innocence with the possible threat of physical violence. At this point, on closer inspection, you realize that someone’s hands have been all over these children. What at first may appear as dreamy portraits in something sweet turns sour at the impressions of many fingers handling and shaping the children’s bodies.

After each portrait is drawn with sugar, Muniz photographs the drawing and then places all of the sugar in a small glass jar that he refers to as an “urn” and affixes the original snapshot on the jar. The correlative body of sugar ashes in the “urns” is reflected in the seasonal burning of the sugarcane fields. Like the ashes of a dearly departed family member, the sugar urns are a kind of memorial for the once effervescent portrait of a soon-to-be-departed carefree and jovial child who would shortly join the ranks of their parents in the sugar fields. The laboring bodies that would produce the sugarcane are drawn with the sugar and returned to their sugar grave. The conflation of sugar and the black body refers to the terrible colonial histories of slaves working over sixteen hours a day cutting, hauling, crushing, boiling, milling, and packaging sugarcane. Often compared to resembling a factory, the boiling house was “where the juice from the crushed cane was transferred for reduction, clarification, and crystallization.”⁶ This process was fraught with accidents resulting in the dismemberment and mauling of bodies, even death.

It is the trope of the consumable black body that is at stake here in Muniz’s *Portraits of the Sugar Children*. “I use things that spoil,” Muniz offers, “because that justifies the photographic act” as it relates to the sugar children as an artistic project.⁷ This raises the question as to what extent the bodies of the children he uses can be read as despoiling fodder for consumption.⁸ The sugar children portraits raise interpretive questions as to how Muniz’s photographic process challenges consumptive tourism notions of pleasure. Muniz is quoted earlier mentioning that he is interested in how working with an edible medium

conjures taste and the senses at many levels. There is a sybaritic, or pleasure-seeking, enjoyment of the senses and the transitory pleasures of sweetness in the material and visual realm in a way that furthers the artist's own genre and success. The artist as tourist in St. Kitts creates sugar portraits and then returns home. Once the tourist returns to one's homeland, a certain critical distance is created through physical and socioeconomical detachment. In other words, a particular use value is applied to the black children photographed by Muniz, whose premature symbolic deaths are buried in sugar urns and thereby packaged and available for consumption. The processing of the sugar children for consumption is a manifestation of the trope of the consumable black body. The black body is consumed by the tourist before "it spoils" as part of the touristic experience of pleasure and enjoyment. It is also a manifestation of the aesthetics of taste that creates critical distance between the consumer and consumed through class distinctions.

The intersections of colonial desire, appetite, and consumption of vulnerable black bodies are explored throughout art and literature. For example, both Carlyle Van Thompson's *Eating the Black Body: Miscegenation as Sexual Consumption in African American Literature and Culture* and Vincent Woodard's *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism with U.S. Slave Culture* discuss the desire and consumption of subjugating black bodies through sexual violence. Woodard buttresses his argument with words like "taste," "appetite," and "delectable" in order to draw attention to how the desire for the enslaved African or black American had epicurean implications. He says, "The desire was less about literal consumption and more about the cultivated taste the white person developed for the African."⁹ Likewise, Kyla Wazana Tompkins focuses on nineteenth-century literature, the literary function of the kitchen, the mouth as a site of political intensity, and the occasional black caricature. Tompkins closely explores the dialectic of the eaters and the eaten. She interrogates the consumption of black bodies in three antebellum novels: Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig*. She concludes,

If Stowe's representation of blackness as food serves to develop the metaphor of objectification, like Hawthorne's it also renders the black body appetizing to her readers. And while the invitation to consume blackness is not explicit, the extensive food metaphors would seem to indicate that the desire to commune with and consume blackness is latent in the text.¹⁰

Although Tompkins's studies are relegated to the nineteenth century and my images reach into the contemporary period, the same tropes and aesthetics appear in the works of Muniz and Walker. Rendering the black body appetizing to not only readers but also viewers, as in the case of visual art and culture,

gains a precise specificity when thinking about the vulnerability of children's bodies. Karen Sánchez-Eppler looks at the role of children in nineteenth-century American culture and suggests that Hawthorne's association with children functions as a sign of commodity capitalism.¹¹ Muniz's photographs of black children rendered in an edible substance that embodies layers of commodity fetishism become closely associated with both the art market and the sugarcane industry.

However, we do not have to look to eighteenth-century plantation images to find tropes of the laboring black body in the sugarcane field. Although slavery was abolished in St. Kitts in 1834, the sugarcane workforce comprised approximately one-third of the island's labor force thereafter. However, in 2005, the government of St. Kitts closed the sugarcane industry in favor of developing the island's tourism industry. Many of the former sugar-field laborers were able to secure employment cultivating various fruits and vegetables.¹² Some might suggest a hopeful shift of the narrative that celebrates the escapement of Muniz's *Sugar Children* from the fate of the sugar fields. Nevertheless, I do not want to oversimplify the exchange of one industry (sugarcane) for another (tourism) as if the latter is not fraught with its own endangerments. I believe the transition of colonial island economies from agroindustrial plantation systems to contemporary tourist industries is a complicated and difficult adjustment. There is a dissolving of time and space between the colonial and the present as seen through the history of sugar plantations and contemporary sugar portraits/sugar urns. The same distinctions that appear in Muniz's work addressing the presentation of the physical body/ethereal body find habitation in the work of Kara Walker's *Sugar Baby*.

Kara Walker's *The Marvelous Sugar Baby*

While Muniz gravitated toward individualized portraits of children, Walker created a singular "type" of child that stood as representative of all enslaved children engaged in the production of sugar. Walker's sugar resin boys stood approximately four feet high and took on the countenance of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century black caricature. They are portrayed with an oversized head and sheepish grin and as bare chested with bottoms covered unceremoniously with a loincloth. The small boys carry oversized baskets containing sugar crystals, powdered sugar, and orange resin-colored sugar rocks. They appear incapable of lifting such heavy burdens with such undeveloped arms. Walker may be commenting on the ridiculousness of these mammoth tasks in satisfying western Europe's growing sweet tooth. She reminds the viewer of colonial slavery where the blackamoor appears in paintings or, in the eighteenth century, the decorative arts as ornamental reflections of the wealth of the patron. Each young sugar boy holding a basket functions in a similar fashion in the manner of porcelain decorative blackamoors that held sugar or cream or sweetmeat bowls or salt cellars in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. Theoretically, sociologist



Figure 2: Kara Walker, *African Boy Attendant Curio with Molasses and Brown Sugar* from “The Marvelous Sugar Baby,” Installation at the Old Domino Sugar Factory Warehouse, 2014. Courtesy of author Tashima Thomas, PhD.

Pierre Bourdieu reminds us in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* that the bourgeoisie observe a strict sequence of food consumption as an “expression of habitus of order, restraint and propriety which may not be abdicated.”¹³ He identifies the bourgeois social relationship to food as a disciplined behavior concerned with the social ceremony of the sequence of dishes, attention to different utensils, a hierarchical seating plan, and an etiquette that not only involves an invisible censorship of bodily pleasure but also could be extended to the observation of the aesthetic refinement of the porcelain object such as the decorative blackamoors. I refer again to Creative Time’s curatorial summary, which suggests that:

the heart of her title, *A Subtlety*, refers to sugar sculptures that adorned aristocratic banquets in England and France [during] the Middle Ages, when sugar was strictly a luxury commodity. These subtleties, which frequently represented people and events that sent political messages, were admired and then eaten by the guests.

Walker’s sugar boys are then a play on exploitative decorative arts of the slaveholding past. Mintz acknowledges, “As a decoration, sugar was obviously important in ceremonial contexts, such as weddings, birthday parties, and funerals, where sculptured sugar could serve to memorialize.”¹⁴ In this respect, Walker’s use of sugar sculptures is an extension of these ceremonial traditions. In the title of her confection, she memorializes the unpaid skilled laborers of the sugarcane fields as well as the kitchens in the installation at the Domino Sugar Factory. She also memorialized the end of an era in sugar production in Brooklyn. It is also important to note that while Muniz’s sugar children and Walker’s sugar sculptures were not devoured, the sugar sculptures at the aristocratic banquets were. However, in function and aesthetics, I believe Walker’s sugar sculptures are more closely aligned with the decorative porcelain blackamoors. European porcelain makers in the eighteenth century created prototypical examples of the blackamoor decorative figures.

Adrienne L. Childs’s chapter, “Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain,” looks at exoticized figures of the blackamoor popularized in Meissen porcelain beginning in the early eighteenth century. In 1710, the Meissen manufactory was first opened in Dresden and became the first major European producer of “hard-paste white porcelain that approximated the popular Chinese prototype.”¹⁵ Developing from a fascination with the exotic Other and the colonial project, Meissen popularized the motif of the decorative blackamoor. Childs describes how the black figures often represented allegories of Africa or the Americas and were usually restricted to the role of servant. Childs describes one such sugar bowl, *Negress with Basket*, which she attributes to Kändler and Johann Friedrich Eberlin, who created it for Meissen in 1741, as being in a typical Rococo style that emphasizes the black

female's dark skin coloring, red lips, and white eyes.¹⁶ However, much like Walker's sugar boys who are in the gesture of offering, *Negress with Basket* can be interpreted as in a gesture of offering. The decorative figure therefore functions in the manner of a servant.

Childs's also describes in her essay another piece that closely resembles Walker's sugar boys in function and likeness. *Moor with Emerald Cluster* (ca. 1724), sculpted by Balthasar Permoser (1651–1732), from the Dresden collection, features a smiling black male figure whose crowned head is tilted up and his nude body dripping in gold jewelry, including elaborate bracelets, necklaces, and cuffs attached to all of his limbs and torso. Childs identifies the motif of "African Exoticism" that appears in Permoser's work as a conflation of African bodies and American Indian bodies, which she classifies as characteristic of eighteenth-century exoticism. *Moor with Emerald Cluster* holds an emerald step that was presented to August of Saxony by Emperor Rudolf II in 1581 and was a part of a series of four moors altogether; the second and third held trays of pearls, while the fourth held a tray of crystals.¹⁷ Childs goes on to contextualize the social functions of these objects, saying, "These moors are the ultimate in ornamental blackness, encrusted with jewels and precious metals, their bodies both display and deliver the wealth of distant lands and embody the unabashed accumulation and consumption of exotic luxury goods by European elites."¹⁸ The social function of the decorative blackamoor was also extended into the public sphere and can be traced to a time when "in England, it was fashionable for aristocratic women to be accompanied by a black boy, who was treated as a sort of toy (when he outgrew this role, he was usually sent to the Caribbean)."¹⁹ This extension of the young black boy as an expensive trinket that would reflect the owner's wealth and status to a public audience is a colonial tradition that Walker may also be addressing. By quoting the decorative blackamoor figure within a postmodern context, Walker constructs a clashing of colonial/postcolonial sensibilities. Through interaction with a public audience, the artist is able to observe the legacy of the exoticized Other in a theater of sugar fantasy.

Therefore, these ornamentalized black figures that Childs identifies as displaying the wealth of distant lands function in a similar fashion to Walker's young boys as the very embodiment of the wealth of the sugar plantations through their constitution of sugar flesh. Furthermore, the accumulation and consumption of exotic luxury goods by European elites is also represented in the literal consumption of sugar by European and American elites. British consumption of sugar increased by 2,500 percent in 1800, while thirty years later, total production (including beet sugar) included 572,000 tons of sugar to an almost exclusive European market. Within sixty years, by 1890, 6 million tons of sugar was exported. However, with emancipation forces at work, the profitability of sugarcane began to wane with the increase of sugar beet production, emerging Asian markets, the Sugar Duties Act of 1846, and the increase of international free trade. The democratization of sugar led to an increased supply and demand, especially among poorer Americans. Today, some have attributed



Figure 2: Kara Walker, *African Boy Attendant Curio with Molasses and Brown Sugar* from “The Marvelous Sugar Baby,” Installation at the Old Domino Sugar Factory Warehouse, 2014. Courtesy of author Tashima Thomas, PhD.

the obesity epidemic in the United States partially to an increased consumption of sugar. Unhealthy eating habits have destructive bodily consequences, including type 2 diabetes, which has affected many Americans, especially communities of color. The overconsumption of sugar can contribute to long-term complications that result from type 2 diabetes, such as amputations. This can be related to the dismembered sugar sculptures that melted by the end of the installation. Referring to the epigraph discussing subsisting on an exclusively treacle diet, "Alice gently remarked, 'They'd have been ill.' 'So they were,' said the Dormouse; 'very ill.'"²⁰ Walker's sugar sculptures can therefore function as a colonial and contemporary commentary on past and present sugar consumption. However, Walker's sugar boys are similar to *Moor with Emerald Cluster* not only in function but also in a shared aesthetics.

Although the moor is represented as an adult male, unlike Walker's much younger sugar children, the moor's skin glistens in a lacquered darkness, reflecting light in ways very similar to the reflection of light off the hard candied bodies of the young boys. Also, like Walker's sugar boys holding baskets of sweet rock crystals, the moor is also holding a basket filled with emerald crystals. These figures are also both in a position of serving, which is symbolic of maintaining a social hierarchy as well as referencing the luxury and wealth of the New World. In a quote that almost anticipates Walker's sugar children, Childs compares *Moor with Emerald Cluster* to *Negress with Basket*, saying, "Both substances being offered are rooted in the colonial encounter, the emerald from Colombia and the sugar from Brazil or the West Indies."²¹ The trope of the ornamentalized black as a colonial servant in the decorative arts has been popularized since the sixteenth century. Childs concludes, "The close association between sugar, slavery, and the Meissen object exemplify how material culture celebrated black slavery in a manner that recast human degradation and exploitation into exotic vignettes."²² It is this ornamentalization of the black subject as sugar bowl and intercessor that is reflected in Walker's sugar boys in the tradition of material sumptuousness, exploitation of the black body, and consumption of luxury goods by colonial elites.

Some of the young boys are carrying hands of bananas, drawing on the closely related histories of sugar and bananas. After the profitability of sugarcane began to subside, colonial investors wanted to sustain market share and increase their business. They looked to the new industry of bananas. Sugarcane stalks were uprooted, and bananas were planted in the same soil. Sugar plantations became banana republics. This may be a possible explanation for some of the young boys toting bananas as well as the oft-cited association between bananas and blackness.

The young boys wear the same mask of silent contentment as the eighteenth-century porcelain figures offering their sweet basket of goods to the audience. In this manner, I was confronted with a disturbing experience at the installation. As I stood viewing one of the sugar boy sculptures, a group of young men and women next to me were observing the same child whose "skin" glistened like

a melting sweet. One of the white men expressed his own hunger for the young boy's body, saying, "I want to lick him, but I can't." I was struck by this young man's at once public vocalization to lick the boy and at the same time his self-conscious negation of the pleasure principle. Conceptualized by psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud as the id's desire for immediate gratification through eating and drinking (or fantasy), the pleasure principle of the young man was suppressed mostly likely because of public disapproval. As if to publicly acknowledge that although licking the young boy would be pleasurable, he is willing to deny himself this pleasure as a kind of moral asceticism. This man's wish to lick the young boy catapulted my mind into the past when such behavior would have been routinely visited on the lives of the enslaved. Perhaps this is why Walker chose to create children sculptures of only boys, no girls, to emphasize the homoerotic dangers encountered during periods of enslavement. Saidya V. Hartman addresses a predilection for inappropriate behavior that violates vulnerable black bodies in the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave*.

In *State of Missouri v. Celia*, Celia was a slave who was purchased by her owner, Robert Newsome. Newsome had begun continuously raping Celia beginning the day she was purchased and ending when she killed him four years later. Hartman goes on to describe the efforts of Celia's attorney to prove that Celia was acting in self-defense against her attacker and should be protected by Missouri's laws regarding crimes of ravishment against women, which applied to white women and enslaved women alike. However, the courts disagreed, found Celia guilty, and sentenced her to death by hanging. Hartman goes on to say, "As *Missouri v. Celia* demonstrated, the enslaved could neither give nor refuse consent, nor offer reasonable resistance, yet they were criminally responsible and liable." Hartman quotes Leon Higginbotham's remarks regarding the case, saying Celia's guilt "held that the end of slavery is not merely 'the [economic] profit of the master' but also the joy of the master in the sexual conquest of the slave."²³ Likewise, under the threshold of slavery, the young boys could neither give nor refuse consent to be licked.

Artist Renée Green's work explores the relationship between the textile industry and the slave trade as located in the production of *toiles indiennes*, a fabric popularized by the French aristocratic classes during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Noted for their bright colors and tropical scenes, the *toiles indiennes* fabrics were used to create elaborate garments, upholstery, and curtains. In Green's 1994 installation *Taste Venue* in New York at the Pat Hearn Gallery, she upholstered an entire room, wall, chairs, chaise longue, pillows, and pajamas in the style of a mauve and white *toiles indiennes*. Green designed her own pattern to include eighteenth-century French aristocratic pastoral scenes, a black slave in chains, a hanged white Frenchman during the Haitian Revolution, and a Senegalese nun.²⁴ However, as the title *Taste Venue* suggests, behind a circular cutaway flap of the *toiles indiennes*, Green has included a reproduction of an image of a white eighteenth-century slave owner licking the face of one of his black slaves, tasting his sweat as a determinant of his health and

subsequent monetary value. The flap must be lifted by the viewer to witness this event emphasizing the surreptitious form of knowledge. An event that stands in contradistinction to Bourdieu's treatise on bourgeois taste whose social ceremony of the meal is committed to the denial of "the crudely material reality of the act of eating and of the things consumed, or, the basely material vulgarity of those who indulge in the immediate satisfactions of food and drink."²⁵

Bourdieu's analysis of taste as a principle of classification does not consider the literal manifestation of tasting the corporeal body, although he concludes that "it follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways."²⁶ Thinking about taste as a racialized and sexualized hierarchy of social behaviors complicates Bourdieu's location of the body as site of materialized class taste. Rather, Green's and Walker's works expose the contemporary desire of the white male observer to taste the candied body of the young black boy. Renée Green's cutaway flap when raised therefore responds in a similar fashion likened unto the lid of a covered dish revealing the desserts entrée of the consumable black body. At the same time, the flap, when unattended, conceals the underbelly of desire, offering instead a serene landscape of aristocratic taste. This contradicts Bourdieu's conception of the bourgeoisie's commitment to the meal as social ceremony and as "an affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic refinement."²⁷ To be clear, the act of tasting another human being's sweat to assess their health condition and monetary value is unethical and a form of savagery that is the antithesis of aesthetic refinement. Therefore, Bourdieu's theory of taste and the class body is limited when considering the physical manifestations of desire, appetite, and consumption. Imperative to a discussion of taste and the body is an understanding of colonialism and the history of the Black Atlantic. Jennifer A. González elaborates on Green's homology of taste and aesthetics of aristocratic habitus, saying,

Collapsing two notions of taste—the aesthetics of aristocratic décor and the nearly cannibalistic gesture of the slave trader—Green's installation also brought to mind the origin and etymology of the notion of taste as the primary eighteenth-century discourse on beauty in the arts.²⁸

My point here is to emphasize the comments made by the white man at Walker's installation. To lick the young black boy is a wish fulfillment embedded historically in a visual and literary archive. Whether it is the sugared-over body of a young boy or the tasting of a corporeal enslaved body, the construction of colonial appetites has an enduring menu of gastronomical favorites.

These reiterations of past and present turning and falling back on each other collapse the boundaries of time and space. One audience goer described her experience, saying, "I found the intensity of the exhibit, the space, and the smells propelled me both backward and forward."²⁹ Perhaps this backward motion in time/space and forward swoon into the present destabilizing our time/

space continuum is part of the artist's intention in this installation. What happens when certain audience members' appetites for colonial slavery imagery and unmitigated privilege, coupled with a sensorial explosion of the smell of warm baking sugar, confound present-day ethical judgments? Walker is able to conjure a variety of sensibilities in audiences through her use of aesthetics and veritable sweet battering of the senses.

While Muniz's sugar children portraits are dissolved and/or dismembered into urns, Walker's sugar boys could very well be dissolved by being "licked" to death. However, time and temperature dissolved the sugar boys and parts of the sphinx as well in Walker's installation. By the end of the installation, after a few weeks, the heat, sun, and bodily traffic had melted the sugar resin boys into various states of dematerialization. Some of their arms had completely melted off, their feet spilling into dark black pools of sugar blood. This also reenacts the destructive power of the sugar plantation over the black body. Their bodies fragmented, melted, and collapsed into chunks of candied sludge by the end of the engagement at the Domino Sugar Factory.

Historian Robin Bernstein observes the relationship between childhood and innocence beginning in the nineteenth century, a period of high sentimentalism. Bernstein states, "At the mid-nineteenth century, however, a romanticism sugared over into sentimentalism, writers began to polarize black and white childhood."³⁰ Bernstein's metaphor of a sugared-over romanticism is analogous to Walker's aesthetic that draws attention to the sugared-over bodies of children in bondage. However, it is Bernstein's attention to the stereotype of the insensate pickaninny in literature that most closely resembles the dismemberment of Walker's sugar children. Bernstein follows how the staged performances of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* eventually led to the characterization of the young black Topsy to become invulnerable to pain and suffering. To be able to experience pain was to be human, and the justification of slavery was embedded in a discourse that classified enslaved Africans as inhumane and therefore insensate. Bernstein writes,

Slavery had been legitimized in part by widespread claims that African Americans were impervious to pain. Thomas Jefferson, for example, wrote in 1781 in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that Negroes' "griefs are transient." Southern doctors claimed that people of African descent carried a hereditary disease called "dyaesthesia Aethiopsis," or an "obtuse sensibility of body" that supposedly rendered black people invulnerable to corporeal punishment.³¹

The disintegration of Walker's sugar children toward the final days of the installation is the visual depiction of Bernstein's written rendering. One by one, the boys lost hands, feet, arms, and various parts of their bodies. The dismembered sugar laborer was a common sighting during the colonial period because



Figure 2: Kara Walker, *African Boy Attendant Curio with Molasses and Brown Sugar* from “The Marvelous Sugar Baby,” Installation at the Old Domino Sugar Factory Warehouse, 2014. Courtesy of author Tashima Thomas, PhD.

of the hazardous nature of the work that caused many to lose their digits, limbs, and even their lives in the process of cutting, hauling, crushing, and boiling the sugarcane. The practice of disremembering or forgetting the violent tragedies of slavery effected on edible, saccharinized bodies is personified in the melting sugar children. In this respect, Walker's sugar children are sculptured struggles to remember a forgotten history that tethers them not only to labor but also to a place. Jason Young argues that "even when we forget the meaning of those times and that place; even when we have never known, the very landscape retains the memory of it."³² This is why it was important to host Walker's installation inside the sugar processing plant. The landscape of the Domino Sugar Factory is a reflection of the forgotten memories of sugar laborers. James Young quotes Hershini Bhana Young, who "argues that rememory, 'takes the form of shadows, images, and shapes that flicker by.'"³³ Walker's sugar children become memories tied to a sugar landscape, a specific place, a remembering through the shapes of children that flicker by through the slow dematerialization of their bodies.

Rememory is closely tied to the work of author Toni Morrison. Morrison's *Beloved* is a return, a reconciliation, and a "rememory" of the story of Margaret Garner and the haunting of her deceased child. Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw intertwines a reading of Morrison's work with Walker's and addresses the continuities of rememory. When discussing Walker's *The End of Uncle Tom and the Grand Allegorical Tableau of Eva in Heaven*, Shaw reads this as "an effort to 'rememory' the visual stories out of the mediated testimonials of the traumatic events and lingering repercussions of slavery that [Sojourner] Truth's slave narrative exemplifies."³⁴ Memories can be fleeting and haunting within themselves, and Walker's sugar children have the transitory quality of a dissolving medium and the haunting African American cultural ethos of terrorizing slave narratives. In an absence of full consciousness, the sugar children therefore become the dismembered disremembered.

Sugarcane had to be processed rather quickly because it starts to lose its sugar content once cut. Mintz notes that "once [sugarcane] is cut, the juice must be rapidly extracted to avoid rot, desiccation, inversion, or fermentation."³⁵ This reality caused the enslaved laborers to endure grueling and deadly physical, psychic, and sexual alienation of their bodies. The physical and sexual abuses of the enslaved are concomitant in any discussion of slavery. They are most profoundly recognized on the sugar plantation as the largest and most successful of New World industries. Both of these nuances of physical and sexual exploitation are present in Walker's installation.

It was in this moment of contemplating labor exploitation and rememory during the last weekend of the installation that I observed a young woman cry out to her male partner regarding one of the sugary boys' crumbling state as she exclaimed, "Look! Oh no. He's lost his arms!" Her apathetic partner shrugged his shoulders and without a word sauntered off. Walker's application of nineteenth-century aesthetics carries what Bernstein refers to as a system of signs,

or the scriptive thing that reveals a host of implied actions. The practices of scripted things enter our system of culture and are then performed. I believe that the mostly apathetic viewer witnessing the dismemberment of Walker's sugar boys reacted according to the scripted prompts that dictate the young black child as impervious to pain, like Topsy. Although this is a discussion regarding sugar sculptures, the children represented in these works whose bodies disintegrated into black puddles were often read according to the same script of one whose "griefs are transient." In Walker's previous works of black-and-white cutout silhouettes, she has referred to the paper as a kind of "script," saying,

I've been interested in the way in which black people (or commonly: "African Americans"), or the way at least I responded to, or ignored, or reaffirmed or reinforced certain stereotypes about myself, other blacks, or more interestingly—white people—who retain a sense of white supremacy blithely unaware of the power Black life has over them. The silhouette is the most concise way of summing up a number of interests. [It is a way] to try and uncover the often subtle and uncomfortable ways racism, and racist and sexist stereotypes influence and script our everyday lives.³⁶

This performance of the script is what I witnessed during the encounter of the passive viewer and the dismembered sugar child. As a three-dimensional live sequence of actors and witnesses, a living tableau of one of Walker's black-and-white silhouettes, the audience took part in a drama that was provoked by such encounters with scriptive things. As a result of the scriptive thing, that is, the insensate black child impervious to pain and suffering, the insouciant viewer performs by offering a dispassionate response. It is the response and interaction of the viewer that become increasingly central to Walker's work.

Conclusion

Sugar has a special talent for reigniting the existential trauma of colonialism. Through sweetness, it beguiles. Through whiteness, it obscures. Each tiny processed granule wields the power of subtlety. Sugar in its totality is an invitation of pleasure and pain that raptures the senses. The materiality of Muniz's sugar children unwittingly addresses the contentious and violent histories of sugar and the vulnerability of children's bodies. Walker conceptualizes the mediality of sugar to draw attention to the traumas of the history of sugarcane's cultivation, production, and commodity fetishism and how the act of consumption transforms the consumer/viewer. By way of comparative analysis, we are able to draw conclusions regarding how Muniz and Walker created sugar children whose images or bodies rapidly dissipated into piles of sweet goo or granules, and consider how these bodies were consumed by space, time, and audi-

ences. Throughout the Domino Sugar Factory and especially evident near the installation's exit, footprints can be seen tracking the sticky black sugar from the building into the outside world. Walker incriminates the audience in this installation. The tackiness of our sugar past is stuck to all of us in the present.

Notes

1. I use the term "treacle" at times when referring to Kara Walker's work because of the shared nineteenth-century aesthetic associations between this term and the visual and literary archive, such as can be found in Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Sidney W. Mintz adds that "molasses, or treacle, cannot be crystallized further by conventional methods. It is, of course, quite sweet, and can be used for sweetening food; in the English diet, it was for more than a century at least as important as any crystalline form of sugar; in refined forms, it remains important to this day." Sidney W. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), 22.

2. Deborah Gray White's book *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1999) is especially useful in comparing the lived day-to-day experiences of black women from slavery to the modern era. Her chapter "Jezebel and Mammy: The Mythology of Female Slavery" is a detailed exposé of these conditions.

3. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 38. Mintz's anthropological approach looks carefully at the production, consumption, and power of sugar. His focus on the Anglo-Caribbean sugar industry considers how the rise of sugar gave rise to cultural meanings. With a nod to visual culture, Mintz also included colonial illustrations of sugar harvesting, labor, and elegant sugar molds from a French cookbook of haute cuisine as part of his discussion in *Sweetness and Power*, acknowledging the importance of including images and the work they perform when included in an anthropological study of commodities.

4. Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.

5. Francesca Cogoni, "Vik Muniz: Food for the Soul," *DROME*, September 2012, <http://www.dromemagazine.com/vik-muniz-food-for-the-soul>.

6. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 47.

7. Cogoni, "Vik Muniz."

8. Another way of thinking about the term "spoil" is in regard to its popular usage referring to a "spoiled child," referencing the overindulged, privileged child. Again the association between Muniz's usages of spoil with children carries multiple layers of meaning. Further insight into the image of the colonial child is expanded on at length by Bill Ashcroft in *On Post-Colonial Futures: Writings Past Colonialism* (London: Continuum, 2001). Ashcroft states, "While transformations of those tropes, such as 'the child,' employed to 'other' colonized peoples, has been a widespread function of post-colonial discourse, the interrelation between the material economies of colonialism and the transformative dynamic of that discourse has been profoundly important" (67).

9. Vincent Woodard, *The Delectable Negro: Human Consumption and Homoeroticism with U.S. Slave Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 18.

10. Kyla Wazana Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 113.

11. Tompkins, *Racial Indigestion*, 95.

12. Silberman, 8.

13. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 196.

14. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 122.

15. Adrienne L. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors: Ornamental Blackness in Early Meissen Porcelain," in *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth Century Porcelain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 161.

16. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors," 161.

17. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors," 171.

18. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors," 171.

19. When the child outgrew his usefulness as a toy through the passing of his youth, being sent to the Caribbean was a sentence of hard labor and not a vacation. Matthew Parker, *The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies* (New York: Walker & Company, 2011), 299.

20. Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and through the Looking-Glass*. (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2004), 84.

21. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors," 173.

22. Childs, "Sugar Boxes and Blackamoors," 167.

23. Saidya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86. Hartman adds, “The black body was simply the site on which the “crimes” of the dominant class and of the state were externalized in the form of a threat” (82).
24. Matthew Parker discusses the entanglements of textile manufacturing and the many faces of the slave industries in his book *The Sugar Barons: Family, Corruption, Empire, and War in the West Indies* (New York: Walker & Company, 2011.) He states, “Banks, insurance companies, shipbuilders and brokers all participated in and benefited from the trade, and profits were invested in manufacturing. Manchester in particular, thrived, producing textiles that the Liverpool shippers took to Africa to pay for the slaves” (298).
25. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 196.
26. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 190.
27. Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 196.
28. Jennifer A. González, *Subject to Display: Reframing Race in Contemporary Installation Art* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 228.
29. Kimberly D. Nettles-Barcelon et al., “Black Women’s Food Work as Critical Space,” *Gastronomica*, Winter 2015, 45.
30. Bernstein, 43.
31. Bernstein, 50.
32. Jason Young, “Through the Prism of Slave Art: History, Literature, Memory, and the work of P. Sterling Stuckey,” *Journal of African American History* 91, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 395.
33. Young, “Through the Prism of Slave Art,” 395.
34. Shaw, 52.
35. Mintz, *Sweetness and Power*, 21.
36. Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 84–85.